DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 267 CS 500 432

AUTHOR Darnell, Donald K.
TITLE Confrontation and Knowledge.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Assn. (59th, New York City, Nov. 8-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Critical Thinking; *Evaluative Thinking; *Logical Thinking; *Persuasive Discourse; Philosophy; Productive Thinking; *Thought Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Principle of Confrontation

ABSTRACT

The "principle of confrontation," rather than traditional systems of logic (induction and deduction), should be employed to determine the reliability and utility of arguments. The principle of confrontation relies on the premise that the validity of any statement may be tested by subjecting it to the "risk of disconfirmation" (criticism by authorities which assesses the consistency of the proposition with previous evidence). Given the principle of seeking disconfirmation (confrontation) and the principle of corrigibility (the willingness to change when we find disconfirmation), it is apparent that speculative and untested "factual" beliefs will become accepted truths less frequently if examined by this method. Not only is the principle of confrontation applicable in the realm of factual knowledge, but it can be applied to value statements as well. Application of the logic of confrontation will provide a unique opportunity to test hypotheses presented by theorists at scholarly conventions and to add an increment of confidence to those hypotheses which survive the test. (EE)

Confrontation and Knowledge

Donald K. Darnell
University of Colorado

The object of this program, as I understand it, is to arrive at some understanding of the uses, misuses, and abuses of criticism on convention programs. Before I quit, a few short minutes from now, I will address myself to that specific issue. Before I can get to that, however, I must address myself to a fundamental question of epistemology. How do we know? What do we mean "know"?

Now, I will readily admit to being a naive philosopher. By that I mean that I have not read everything, or even very much, that has been written on the subject. I only just learned the word, "epistemology." But prior to that I had been concerned with it, even before I knew what to call it, and since then I have been doing some selective reading. SO FAR, I have not found any philosopher articulating precisely the claim I am going to make, nor have I or my friends been able to refute it. I can think of two good reasons why it might not have been articulated before: (1) It might be a ridiculous idea, and anyone less naive than myself would see that immediately. (2) It might be so obvious that we can act on the principle without articulating it. There is a third possibility, and the one which I hope is "true," that we have, indeed, articulated the principle in a variety of contexts and practiced it, but no one has before taken exactly my perspective, seen the interrelationships among these various contexts, and made the general claim that I am about to make.

I will not attempt to keep you in suspense any longer. The claim which I want to argue is simply this: THE WAY THAT WE ACQUIRE RELIABLE KNOWLEDGE IS BY FORMULATING PROPOSITIONS AND SUBJECTING THEM TO RISK OF DISCONFIRMATION. The greater the risk that is survived, the greater the confidence we have in the proposition or the greater the reliability we attribute to that proposition. There is an alternative way of stating this claim which might appeal to some of you more: TO ACCOUNT FOR WHAT WE KNOW AT THIS TIME REQUIRES MORE THAN DEDUCTION, REQUIRES MORE THAN INDUCTION, REQUIRES MORE THAN A COMBINATION OF THE TWO; IT REQUIRES A THIRD LOGIC WHICH I CALL A LOGIC OF CONFRONTATION.

Since I believe what I have just said, I will not attempt to construct for you a deductive argument which implies the conclusion that I have reached. Nor will I attempt to cite enough instances to give this claim a "high probability of truth" by some inductive reasoning process. Rather I will attempt to relate my claim to your experience (to explain what it means to me) and IF in the end I manage to convince you (assuming you are capable of critical thought and willing to tell me if you think I'm wrong) that in itself will give us a reason for some confidence in the claim, a justification for acting as if it is true until such a time and circumstance as it may be disconfirmed.

Now, let me argue a little bit by way of explanation and to give you time to think. Deductive logic cannot account for what we "know" about the real world, for deduction is a closed system. It does permit us to determine whether proposition A is derived from propositions B and C according to "the rules," to

test the VALIDITY of the derivation, but within the system of deductive logic a method is not provided for testing the "truth," reliability, or acceptability of any of those propositions. Like a computer, deduction operates on the principle of GARBAGE IN GARBAGE OUT. Deduction does allow us to move from a set of propositions to another proposition without a loss of confidence, but it does not generate any information or any justifiable confidence. If we had some small set of true statements, say the laws of the universe, to start with, we could perhaps deduce useful knowledge from them. But, unfortunately, we are still looking for those truths or laws.

Well, then, you may say, "let us rely on induction." BUT, the rules of induction (take lots of observations, do not disregard negative instances, etc.) are designed to minimize errors; they do not preclude error. One might, for instance, examine very carefully any finite number of representative cases and still formulate an incorrect generalization to which he had not found an exception. A prominent example of this kind of reasoning can be found right here at the convention on any floor any night, "I've had ten drinks and don't feel a thing, an eleventh can't hurt me." Induction contains no built-in process or mechanism for detecting such errors and correcting them. It is, therefore, inherently unreliable.

A combination of induction and deduction would seem to suffer from the weaknesses of both. Deduction allows us to transfer confidence from one proposition to another. Induction permits us to avoid making obviously incorrect generalizations and so avoid

the risk of confronting them. Together they do not give us the means of determining the reliability-utility of any particular proposition.

To make a long story shorter, the solution to this apparent dilemma seems to lie outside the logical systems we have so carefully formulated, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. It lies in the principle of confrontation. If I formulate a statement which I judge to be potentially useful, whether I have formed it out of a careful induction or unadulterated imagination, I test it by subjecting it to a risk of disconfirmation. I compare it to my own past experience to see if I can think of anything that would refute it. I may make an attempt to deduce it from other propositions that I have already tested to my satisfaction. I may look for instances that would give it inductive support, but ultimately in order to attain the highest confidence in it--the you bet your life kind of confidence--I look around for a situation or a person or a group of persons who, if it's seriously wrong, can tell me that it's wrong. I obtain the highest confidence, if and only if, it survives the most rigorous confrontation I can imagine.

Although I cannot claim this method would ever allow me to become <u>certain</u>, it does seem sufficient (and necessary) to account for the level of confidence that I (we) have attained in a number of propositions. Given this principle of seeking disconfirmation (confrontation) and the principle of corrigibility (the willingness to change when we find disconfirmation) we can be assured that the errors in our beliefs (knowledge) will tend to get

smaller and fewer as we find new ways of confronting or testing them.

Not only is the principle of confrontation applicable in the realm of factual knowledge but it can be applied to value statements as well. The nature of the optimal confrontation will be different, however, for different kinds of propositions. To test a proposition of fact, the ultimate confrontation would seem to come from an experiment or series of experiments, or at least, careful observation. To test a proposition of value, we would turn for confrontation to some person or persons whose judgment we respect. The principle is the same.

The principle of confrontation, I maintain, is the method of science, or the heart of it. This principle is the guiding principle of the law court, the legislative body, and the debate--the system of adversaries. This principle describes the way we "know" most of what we know. This principle is the reason for critics.

The principle of confrontation requires an active agent, a formulator of propositions, a risk taker. Except in those cases where the confrontation is with empirical observations (Mother Nature, if you will), it also requires a second risk taker, a confronter, a critic, who is capable and willing to meet the proposition fairly and, from this different perspective and different experience, attempt to disconfirm it.

Obviously the formulator of propositions does not perform his knowledge generation function well if he only tests his propositions against situations already examined, against friends

who share his experiences and biases, or against those who do not have the power (intellectual, experiential, or social) to confront him vigorously. Just as obviously, the critic does not perform his knowledge generation function well if he responds to the personal or social attributes of the advocate rather than the idea or proposition which he is asked to confront.

Application of all this to the issue of critics on convention programs is contingent on the answer to another question. Are the programs presented here at the convention intended to be transmissions of ideas or propositions already adequately confirmed in another context, or are they a unique opportunity for confrontation that can serve to disconfirm some of the propositions presented and add an increment of confidence to those that survive this test? I suspect that most of the people at this convention assume the transmission function, but I hope that this group is willing, at least, to entertain the confrontation function for the sake of discussion.

I assure you that I have been playing the confrontation "game" here today. I am not laying on you some "knowledge" which I expect you to accept passively and pass on to your students. I have acquired some confidence in my claim in preliminary tests, but I must admit that its very simplicity makes it suspect. I know, however, from your professional standings that you are capable of responding critically. I know that, collectively, you represent more experience than I will have time to acquire in my lifetime. I am also reasonably sure that some of you would delight in pointing out my error. So, since I'm seriously interested

in the claim I have made, I will be extremely interested in your responses to this presentation and to this program as a whole.