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ABSTRACT

In "The Uses of Argument" Stephen Toulmin developed a method for analyzing arguments that calls attention to the reasoning processes that undergird a speaker's claims. By changing three terms used in Toulmin's methods it can be applied to interpersonal communication to analyze the speaker's perspective on an issue. The term "argument" is changed to "perspective" in order to accentuate the shared relationship that is involved in interpersonal communication. "It seems to me" is substituted for "presumably" to focus on the individual as having responsibility for his or her own perceptions. "Claim" is changed to "assertion," which implies a more interpretive response to an individual's perception. A case study of a boy in Florida demonstrates the importance of discovering the values underlying the assertions the other makes. The boy's family and counselors considered him disturbed since his values differed from theirs. At no time did they seek to discover the boy's values, nor did they ask themselves to evaluate their own judgements. The application of this revised Toulmin model to interpersonal relationships can be a helpful procedure toward achieving understanding and mutual growth. (DF)

TOULMIN, VALUES, AND THE RHETORIC OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

by
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Stephen Toulmin developed a method for analyzing arguments which calls attention to the reasoning processes that undergird a speaker's claims.[1] I'd like to look at this method not as a public rhetorician, a debator, or as a rhetorical critic, but rather as a counselor and general interpersonal communicator. (I hope the reader will concede that rhetoric can include interpersonal communication. Though Aristotle seems to identify rhetoric with persuasion, rhetoric being to him "the faculty of discovering in any given case all the available means of persuasion,"[2] other theoreticians have chosen to broaden rhetoric's scope into "the art of using language in such a way as to produce a desired impression upon the hearer,"[3] and "the human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols,"[4] and even "the science and art of communication in language."[5] With all due respect for Aristotle, I prefer the latter broader definitions, particularly the Scott and Brock definition, which, according to them,[6] sets less precise limits and allows for rhetoric to be studied as either process or product. Therefore, it seems to me, interpersonal communication, with this definition, can be included legitimately within the study of rhetoric.)

I should like to begin by acknowledging what to some persons might seem only a personal bias in word usage. Though Toulmin structured his analytical model for the purpose of dissecting and building arguments, I perfer not to use the term "argument." Why? (You wish to hear my warrant?) As one who has become increasingly absorbed in the sub-discipline

of interpersonal communication, I tend to shy away from rhetoric which in its very nature, or by common acceptance and usage, tends to drive people apart--particularly when I think other words might serve to bring people together even as they describe my meaning. "Argument" has long been an honorable term in our discipline, and we know what we mean by it when we speak in jargonistic terminology. However, in common-everyday-ordinary conversation, "argument" is most often understood as "disagreement, verbal opposition or contention, altercation."[7] This, in and of itself, may not be problematical, except that it establishes in the mind's eye one person's position over against another person's position, with each attempting to win the point while discrediting the other point of view. "Argument" is one of those words that seems to promote defensiveness in human interaction. It seems to be a well-used "red-flag" word; therefore, a word I'd prefer not to use in the promotion of effective and sustained interpersonal communication.

What might we use as a substitute and still retain what I presume to be the original and/or present core meaning of the word, "reasoned proof?" In suggesting an alternative, I would insist on a "reasoned proof" that does not encourage defensiveness, what I understand to be the major barrier to effective interpersonal communication. I should like to suggest "perspective" as my substitute for "argument," particularly when discussing this sub-discipline of interpersonal communication. What other sub-disciplines use and the reasons for such use can be "argued" in other papers by other writers.

Such a substitution, that is "perspective" for "argument," and especially making such a point of it, may seem to some rather picayunish. I would disagree. I think it strikes at the very heart of the matter and

serves as an opportune illustration on this subject of "value."

Whereas, in the large arenas of public discourse over issues whose outcome can determine the fate of nations and cultures, the struggle for prominance and dominance of one idea over another might justify the use of argument as verbal opposition and contention, in personal one-to-one interaction where the goal is understanding, appreciation, even cooperation in the development of a mutually beneficial relationship, a non-defense-causing behavior is much more valuable. That is why (my warrant) I suggest "perspective" as a viable substitution for "argument" in an analysis of interpersonal communication--"perspective," which is to me a person's individual "point-of-view" based on his own perception of things, events, and people which leads him to his conclusions through his own system of interpretation (warrant). Whereas a goal of <u>public</u> discourse may be to set in contrast to one another competing voices, a primary goal of interpersonal discourse is to share perspectives, and to sustain a relationship. The focus of "argument" is the competing idea or principle. The focus of "perspective" is a shared relationship between people built on understanding. (It should be noted that these foci are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather matters of emphasis and direction in their application.)

With this as background, we turn more specifically to Toulmin's model itself. With three changes in wording, two necessitated by the foregoing discussion and the third a personal preference, yet not without some reasoned support, I think the model can be applied helpfully to an analysis of interpersonal communication, particularly with reference to the discovery of values. The first change is more of a peculiar understanding of "Data," which becomes, instead of "facts," a series of

"perceptions"--a change prompted by an acknowledgment that any data is in reality only a person's perception of the "facts," that the thing, event, or person "out there" to an individual is not the data on which conclusions are made, but rather are the personal and individual perceptions of those particular data. Therefore, it would seem to be more accurate to use "perception" in place of "data."

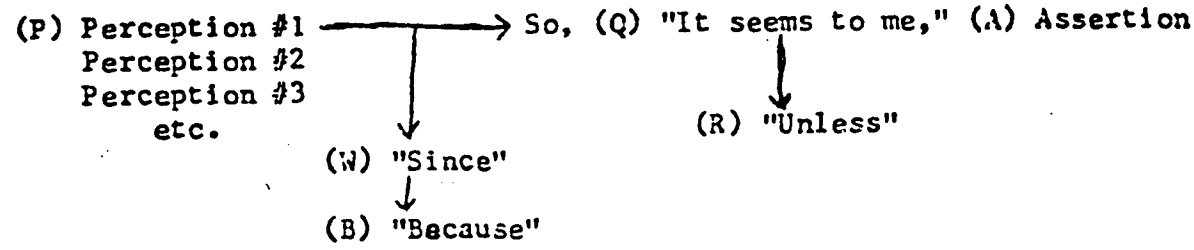
The second change involves the wording of the "Qualifier." "Presumably," the word Toulmin uses, would become "It seems to me." Whether or not the speaker used the phrase itself in his statement(s), or even meant to use it (anymore than arguers use or mean to use "presumably"), should make little difference to the person listening and analyzing. The word "presumably" seems tied more to a thought/idea structure disembodied from the person, as if taking for granted that everyone views data similarly and therefore has no alternative but to arrive at the same conclusion. "It seems to me," as a substitute wording of the "qualifier," focuses on the individual as having or taking responsibility for his own perceptions.

The third change is to substitute "Assertion" for "Claim." Though, at first glance, this might seem to be nothing more than a synonymic change, I think it goes deeper than that. "To claim" is "to maintain as a fact,"[8] even to demand (in rhetorical terms) the person's "right" to arrive at that particular conclusion, which, given that data, is a "claim" any intelligent person must make. Again, it almost seems that the "truth" ("claim") is outside the person making it, rather than part and parcel of the individual. "Assertion," on the other hand, seems more of a simple, interpretive response to an individual's perceptions. There is no "staking public claim" to a position that must be recognized and recorded as accurate by anyone else using the same data, but rather the making of a positive statement or

declaration, with or without support, reason, or the necessity of agreement.

Thus--

PERSPECTIVE



I do not think these changes, in any way, destroy Toulmin's basic model. On the other hand, I believe they make it helpfully adaptable to understanding and analyzing interpersonal communication.

As in Toulmin's unaltered model, in his emphasis upon the warrant as the usually unstated bridge between data and claim, so this adaptation can likewise remind us of the importance of the warrant and its backing--the bridge between perceptions and assertion. But knowing that a warrant exists as justification for making an assertion from a myriad of perceptions is one thing; discovering what that warrant is specifically is quite another thing. How, and I'm limiting myself to the sub-discipline of interpersonal communication now, in one to one, or even one to a few, interaction, can a warrant be discovered--for the benefit of both the listener and the speaker, and ultimately of the relationship? Risking sounding overly simplistic, I suggest the frequent asking of a favorite question of pre-school youngsters, "Why?" "Why do you interpret those perceptions in that manner?" "Why do those perceptions lead you to that assertion?" The quest for that answer will lead to the warrant, and from the warrant to the backing, and to its backing--as far as the communicators mutually wish to go. I say "mutually wish to go," for

without that mutuality, the conversation will promote defensiveness and dwindle into an "attack and defend" verbal skirmish for winners and losers, something which happens periodically in counseling situations even as it occurs in informal conversations between friends. And, as stated earlier, defensiveness is disaster for interpersonal communication.

What has all this to do with values? As has been stated by some rhetorical critics, among them being Julie Belle White in her unpublished dissertation, ". . . it seems to me that warrants usually can be translated into values."[9] I would quickly add that if one would explore every warrant and its backing far enough, it would result in a value sooner or later. And since values are interpretors of perceptions and stimulators of behavior, it is important, even crucial, to discover the values underlying the assertions (behavior) in order to understand the other as a person and to sustain a growth-relationship. Thus, this revised Toulmin model, when applied to interpersonal communication, unlike its application to argument, is not concerned with reliability of reasoning, but rather with the discovery of values that can lead to understanding.

I should like to attempt a kind of application of this revised Toulmin model to a particular situation. In the September/October 1977 issue of Today's Education, in a special section on "Values," is an article by Robert Coles, a Research Psychiatrist at Harvard University, titled "What About Moral Sensibility?"[10] The article is primarily a story about a ten year old boy in Florida, the son of a wealthy food grower. In English class one day, the boy had said he was upset with the growers of the county because they were mean to the migrants. The teacher was surprised and took issue with the boy. She then shared this experience with the principal who shared it with the father who, in turn,

defended his employment of the migrants to his son. A month later the boy made an even stronger statement on the issue, saying that the migrants were getting a raw deal and that there was blood on the hands of many of the growers. The teacher again spoke to the principal who then recommended to the parents that the school psychologist be involved. Then the parents consulted their own doctor, too, who counseled the parents not to react, this behavior being only a stage of adolescent development. The father, however, could not do this. He forbade his son to see his migrant friends. However, that order was quickly disobeyed, and the boy was caught in the act. The doctor again; then, after a superficial "why," with no further probing, a psychiatrist was recommended. The boy promptly ran away from home, only to be forcibly returned soon after. Now he was considered clearly "distrubed," having run away from home, and psychiatric treatment was absolutely necessary. The boy was analyzed in somewhat Freudian terms--rebelling against his father by not wanting to carry on his father's business but rather opting for a more feminine "helping vocation," working among the poor in Vietnam. After two years, at the age of twelve, he no longer needed psychiatric treatment. As a college student, some years later, this same young man was discovered working for the election of one of the most socially conservative presidential aspirants.

Nowhere along the line was this boy seriously asked "Why?"--"Why do your experiences (perceptions) lead you to say (assert) what you do about migrants and growers?" Nowhere along the line, according to this article, did anyone attempt to understand where the young man was coming from, what were his values which prompted his communication behavior. Nowhere along the line did any of these helpers ask of himself why his own assertions followed from his own perceptions. Each of these helpers

was more concerned with winning over another adherent to his own point of view, with winning an argument--which, after two years of psychiatry and no doubt another six years of reinforcement, they did.

The inability to understand each other through those years of mental anguish and relational tension was grounded in a basic difference in value, in warrant. But they didn't take time nor make the effort to discover this difference. Their sensation/perceptions were quite similar, probably, in most cases. However, their assertions were radically different. And that was frustrating and damaging to their ongoing relationship. So, in an attempt to solve this problem, instead of looking for the underlying values (warrant), they concentrated their energies on the assertion. Each, from teacher, to parent, to psychiatrist, was more interested in winning a point. Understanding, relationship, mutual growth was secondary to the idea they wished to promote. Had they asked "Why?" more frequently and seriously, of both the boy and of themselves, they might have discovered the values that stimulated the boy's behavior, contrasting those values to their own, helping the boy to see that contrast, and to decide for himself which values were more important to him and the society in which he lived. On the other hand, maybe they were justifiably fearful that such a contrast, were it brought to light, might make their own values seem less honorable and less desirable. But that's the risk one assumes when understanding takes precedence over winning a point in interpersonal communication. Some of us feel very strongly that its worth the risk.

In conclusion, the sharing and applying of this revised Toulmin model to our interpersonal relationships, be it in or after a more formalized counseling session, or in a non-therapeutic, non-manipulative

informal conversation, can be a helpful procedure toward achieving this desired understanding and mutual growth.

ENDNOTES

1 Stephen Toulmin, The Uses of Argument (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

2 Rhetoric, ii, 2, tr. W. Rhys Roberts in The Works of Aristotle, XI, Oxford, 1924.

3 Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed. (1910-11), s.v. "Rhetoric," by Jebb.

4 Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p.6.

5 New International Encyclopedia, s.v. "Rhetoric," by J.L. Gerig and F.N. Scott.

6 Scott and Brock, op. cit., p. 6,7.

7 Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition (1968), s.v. "argument."

8 Ibid.

9 Julie Belle White, "A Rhetorical Criticism of Moby-Dick: The Persuasive Campaigns of Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael According to their Substances, Dynamics, and Strategies" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1975).

10 Robert Coles, "What About Moral Sensibility?" Today's Education, September/October 1977, pp. 40-41.