

Critical Study

Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent edited by David Cratis Williams & Michael David Hazen

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Williams, David Cratis & Hazen, Michael David, eds. (1990). *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

"It is not surprising," Wayne Booth writes in the Introduction to *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, "that rhetoric has always had an uneasy relationship with other disciplines, particularly philosophy."¹ "The philosophers worry me most," he (a Professor of English) goes on to say, since "part of my point is that philosophy – at least until the last two decades – has saddled us with standards of truth under which no man can live":

If philosophy is defined as inquiry into certain truth, then what I pursue here is not philosophy but rhetoric: the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse. But the differences are not sharply definable ... To talk of improving beliefs implies that we are seeking truth, since some beliefs are 'truer' than others ... My business is largely with what they ["the philosophers"] left out – with what might be called the origin, *likelihoods*, and extent of human *convictions*, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent ... (Booth, xii-xiii; emphases in original).

The business of informal logic also has largely to do with that "left out" territory that overlaps both of these "not sharply definable" disciplines. Insofar as there is some tendency among informal logicians to emphasize the "grounds," rather than "origins," of warranted assent, the attention given by the essays in this collection to "the

relation between 'assent' and social practices"² (as J. Robert Cox writes in his introductory essay) may enable us to discover unsuspected dangers in accustomed ways of delineating "origins" from "grounds." If it does that, one value of this book to readers of *Informal Logic* would be the challenges it raises for any argumentation theorist who would rely upon that delineation for the separation of philosophy and rhetoric.

The book is a collection of eleven papers which, as the editors tell us in their Preface, "grew out of the Biennial Wake Forest University Argumentation Conference" (vii). More specifically, we have here a group of essays, much revised from their presentation at the 1982 and 1984 conferences, and all of which take up the question implied in Booth's 1971 lectures, which were published in much revised form in 1974: "When, if ever, is assent justified?" The question may be more pressing now than at the time of Booth's lectures, for the currently vociferous postmodern challenge to all modes of assent-giving (systems of legitimization) was then still in formation. Following the Preface by the editors, David Cratis Williams and Michael Hazen, and the Introduction by Cox, the essays are grouped in four parts.

The first part, "Rationality and Assent," is comprised of essays by Raymie E. McKerrow ("The Centrality of Justification: Principles of Warranted Assertability") and Earl Croasmun ("Realism and the Rhetoric of Assent"). The second and third parts

address "Form and Function in Assent." Part Two, subtitled "Descriptive Approaches," has four essays: James Jasinski on "An Exploration of Form and Force in Rhetoric and Argumentation," Randall A. Lake on "The Implied Arguer," Charles Kauffman and Donn W. Parson on "Metaphor and Presence in Argument," and Michael Weiler on "Arguments in Fiction." Part Three, subtitled "Field Studies," focuses on one especially problematic field, the public sphere, through essays by Robert C. Rowland ("Purpose, Argument Evaluation, and the Crisis in the Public Sphere") and Charles Arthur Willard ("The Problem of the Public Sphere: Three Diagnoses"). The last part of the book considers "The Turn to Critical Advocacy" by way of two essays: James Arnt Aune on "Cultures of Discourse: Marxism and Rhetorical Theory" and G. Thomas Goodnight on "The Rhetorical Tradition, Modern Communication, and the Grounds of Justified Assent."

The breath of detailed analysis and provocative illustrations provided by these eleven theorists resists portrayal here. However, I will attempt to present the thread of an argument that I find taken up in diverse ways in each of the essays, and which serves to weave them into a coherent response to the question inspired by Booth and taken up by this group of communication scholars. In doing so, I will follow the order of the essays in the volume, which moves from concern with certain conditions for the possibility of argumentation to the nature of argument's form and function, and then to the prospects for an examined (in argumentative discourse) public sphere.

Cox's essay introduces the thread I discern within the essays as one of concern for both articulating a normative theory as a theoretical grounding for justified assent, and connecting that theory to actual argument practices in which assent is sought. This attention to theory in conjunction with practice has arisen as confidence in *a priori*

norms, which were purported to be universally applicable, dissipated; i.e. as the intellectual climate now summarized in the phrase "postmodernism" came to dominate our thinking about theory and problematize our assumptions about justification. Describing argument practices, Cox notes, raises "questions about the social assumptions and conditions for the occurrence of argument" that can only be answered in a "more reflective stance" that identifies an implicit transformative dynamic as operative along with the more evident concern for "certifying truth" (6-7). His succinct summaries of the themes of the ten essays that follow focuses on their diverse ways of making the turn from formalism and taking up the concomitant need to identify and justify the particular goals of arguments within, and perhaps across, fields. In each case, he finds, "the critic struggles to define a space in which argument is again competent to address social ends or moral purpose" (13).

Raymie McKerrow takes up Booth's interest in "systematic assent" as replacement for "the traditional systematic doubt of Cartesian rationality" (17). He proposes "six principles of pragmatic justification" (18) that jointly comprise a theoretical grounding for assent in both practical and theoretical reasoning. It is important to emphasize that these are not epistemic requirements that rely on a foundation in "truth" or "knowledge." Rather, they are principles for a pervasively critical and process-oriented defense of claims that are fitting, in their contexts.

The first three principles articulate the nature of "pragmatic justification" as a domain which "encompasses both beliefs and values" (18) and is distinct from both "mere belief" and "epistemic justification" (20). Its "nonfoundationalist" character allows for an "evolutionary" or "spiral," rather than "linear," understanding of justification (22). The fourth and fifth principles relate to how we assess arguments: rather than impose purportedly neutral standards, we

look for those of the contextualizing audience and evaluate their coherence. Three “corollaries” specify that assessment: “plausibility analysis ... assesses the quality of the source that vouches for the claim” (25); inductive reasoning, following Nicholas Rescher’s distinction, “serves a regulative function rather than a constitutive one” and “is used to assess the ‘fit’ between what is known and what may be the case” (28); and evidence (again following Rescher’s distinction) is assessed in terms of “use-conditions” rather than “truth-conditions” – which is to say, in terms of the relatively immediate “circumstances in which a sentence is warrantably assertable” rather than in terms of the more general “ontological (world oriented) circumstances that must obtain for a sentence to be true” (28). The sixth principle returns to the nature of pragmatic justification as a “rational concept” that includes methodological, moral, and prudential modes of rationality, all of which are “grounded in cultural perceptions of what constitutes appropriate standards of individual and community conduct” (29).

These six principles comprise a clear alternative to thinking about rationality from a starting point in Cartesian criteria and “aimed at producing apodictic claims,” or from within “the dictates of technical reason” (31). They delineate a rhetorical, rather than philosophical, theoretical grounding for reasoning in that they enable the claim that “one has sufficient warrant or grounds to assert,” or, that one has “reasons why assent is problematic” (32). Thus while clearly focusing on the circumstantial, situational, or contextual origins of assent-giving, they “function as the grounding for a reasonable approach to everyday decision-making” (32).

McKerrow’s approach clearly is non-ontological and even anti-epistemological, and thus would not provide the “criterion” that Earl Croasmun maintains is needed if we are to go “beyond examining the beliefs” available within any particular

situation (39). In Croasmun’s terms, McKerrow’s principles only delineate the requirements for justifying assent to claims that could comprise the consensus of a community. As such, they would contribute to a “consensus theory,” which Croasmun equates with “rhetorical relativism” (33). This is a problematic equation, or even, association – particularly in contrast to the effort throughout this volume to articulate standards, grounds, and good reasons (e.g. McKerrow’s six principles) that would justify any community’s consensus. I would want to argue that to pose the question, “When, if ever, is assent justified?” is to argue, at least implicitly, for withholding assent unless and until evaluative grounds are brought to bear upon the process of coming to consensus. That these are to be relatively local grounds, developed and displayed in the community’s practice, rather than purportedly universal grounds, imposed upon that practice, need not mean that decisions are “relativistic” in the sense of dependent upon the persons reaching them.

A theory of justified consensus does cohabit with pluralism. In other words, appreciation of the position at issue’s being the most plausible in a particular situation (and thus, being the one to which we give justified assent; the one we use in decision making) does not thereby mean either granting or denying that status to “the same” position in any and every other situation. For pluralism becomes relativism only under the aegis of a standpoint that purports to be everywhere (or, nowhere). As that very concept is denied as relevant to everyday argumentation and decision-making, a correlative concept is affirmed: the grounds for justification must be fitting for a particular situation; none are presumed fitting for all; individual, situated human beings cannot arbitrarily alter their situations and thus, cannot arbitrarily trade grounds for justification (so to speak) with other individuals. In other words: not all possible standpoints are actually (bodily,

socially, politically) accessible to all individuals faced with the exigencies of argumentation and decision. We can entertain (abstractly; in thought; symbolically) far more than we can enact (bodily exemplify), and a rhetoric of assent takes that latter situation as the one in which deliberation (argumentation) and decision (assent, and even tentative consensus) is practiced.

Without recognizing this difference between relativistic and consensus (pluralistic) theories, Croasmun's "essay argues that consensus theory should be rejected" along with "the most sharply drawn alternative, rhetorical objectivism" – since neither can provide that "criterion" which, he suggests, is offered by "rhetorical realism" (33). The latter, he asserts, would "shun foundationalism in favor of criticism and inquiry" (48). Although he discusses several problems inherent in "relativism" at some length, he simply dismisses "objectivism" as an "overreaction," and stops short of any specifics in regard to how "rhetorical realism" would avoid the "direct realism" which he aligns with "objectivism" (47). Thus, the concern for both identifying normative theory and connecting it to actual argument practices in which assent is sought – the concern which is manifest in all of the other essays in this collection – is neglected in this essay.

In his essay, James Jasinski does delineate an understanding of rhetoric that is neither relativistic ("irrationalist" in his and Booth's terms) or objectivistic ("scientismic") (53). Rather than theorizing the "transformative, or assent-producing, capacity of rhetorical and argumentative practice" (53) within either of those orientations, Jasinski would "elaborate and extend Kenneth Burke's conception of form in order to reveal 'inferencing' as the central feature of rhetorical and argumentative form" (54). This "point of departure," he notes, leads him to follow Booth and several contemporary theorists in both taking "inspiration from Aristotle's original formulation of the rhetorical enterprise"

and finding "certain limitations in the traditional view of rhetoric" (54). Perhaps most provocatively, the "limitations" lead him to recast the place of material validity and performative legitimacy in a "grammar of rhetorical and argumentative form" (58).

Jasinski goes on to develop a typography of the inferential forms that function as the "deep structure" of "rhetorical anticipation" (55). The potential force of these forms is actualized "when audiences participate" in them (59); which is to say that anticipations transform (not, compel) assent in accord with the *topoi* of the argument. The six types of form that he discerns range from the impersonal and even universal, to the individual; from the generally-, to the situationally-effective. Or, I would suggest, they span a continuum from the "objectivistic" to the "relativistic." If that interpretation is apt, Jasinski's typology suggests that assent is instigated by inferential anticipations that invoke a continuum of conditions under which assent is justified, rather than (as for Croasmun) illustrate a dichotomy that encourages dogmatism or skepticism. Thus, I offer this reading as something of a friendly amendment to Jasinski's assessment of his typology as reinforcing the evidence for "rhetorical literacy" in mundane argumentation (65). That is to say that "the force or power of rhetorical or argumentative discourse is predicated, at least in part, on the successful implementation of inferential form" (55).

The practice of argumentation reveals, then, that arguers choose from a spectrum of forms that they anticipate will move their discourse partners to assent – that is, transform their belief and/or action – under any conditions ("universal forms"), or even only under conditions of their particular interests ("motivational forms"). Lest this analysis be read as Platonistic, Jasinski reminds us that "form is an active process that comes into existence as advocates symbolically engage audiences" in particular,

and importantly temporal, ways (66). His brief but provocative comments on rhetorical “syntax” – the “critical factors that are implicated in the instantiation of rhetorical form,” including and especially “power and time” (65) – further extend his theorizing of actual choosing of justificatory strategies from the spectrum of forms that emerge in symbolic engagement.

Randall A. Lake’s essay suggests one framework that would enable the accessibility of Jasinski’s spectrum of forms. His topic is the relationship of ritual and argumentation, and he elucidates these (to some, antithetical) forms of symbolic action as “rhetorical acts that invite assent” through the medium of a “persona, that is, the implied actor that both argues for a claim and enacts a role” (70). Lake’s illustration is the warrior persona in contemporary Native American protest rhetoric. This figure employs a panoply of strategies that invite assent both discursively (propositionally) and presentationally (enactively). In showing how the warrior persona employs these strategies, Lake reconceptualizes yet another dichotomy as a continuum. For rhetoric traditionally has been seen as “instrumental” – as means to an end – while ritual has been seen as “consummatory” – as accomplishing its end in its performance. But Lake adopts, and wants to strengthen, Burke’s (and others’) advocacy of a continuum as the more fitting conceptualization. He argues for ritual’s instrumental (and thus, rational) status and proposes that “both [ritual and rhetoric] are symbolic and ... can be instrumentally persuasive in moving an audience or consummatorily able to transform participants” (73).

Lake presents this reconceptualization by arguing “that the ‘warrior’ personifies culturally vital traits and roles and that, in enacting the persona, activists become ... the kind of people they wish others to be” (76). The basic discursive strategy in his example seems to be presentation of contemporary protest activity as a continuation of “the ‘Indian Wars’” as well as analo-

gous to the Vietnam war (77-8). The correlative basic enactive strategy is performance that “makes one’s self over in the image of the persona” (81); that assents through bodily practice rather than through serial predication.

The implication that Lake draws from this melding is that syllogistic argument “invites assent to and participation in the persona that is Reason itself” (82) – and that all argument enacts variations on that persona: “implied arguers will be ... shaped by the ethoi” of their “real counterparts” (82). What is constructed in argumentation, in brief, is not so much a proposition (or series of them) as a persona. To ask if assent is justified, then, is to ask: “Is the persona ‘sound’ ... are the stated claim and the enacted claim mutually reinforcing?” (83). The further implication is that “argumentation theory can and should conjoin Reason (the rhetorical ... argument) and the Advocate (the ritualistic ... arguer) in the concept of the persona” (88).

The enactment of persona in Lake’s analysis of Native American protest rhetoric centered on the figure of the warrior may be understood, from the perspective of Charles Kauffman and Donn W. Parson’s essay, as achieving through analogy the “presence” that, they propose, metaphor also evokes. “We believe,” they write, “that metaphor in argument draws conclusions and attracts attention through the juxtaposition of ideas ... [It] can be a powerful tool to induce or hinder assent because of its ability to make the abstract concrete and the concrete abstract” (93).

In order to show how metaphor evokes or suppresses “presence,” despite empiricism’s “distrust” of argument by analogy, Kauffman and Parson rely on Aristotle’s, Ricoeur’s, and Langer’s recognition of metaphor’s capacity to evoke new insight through its “fusion of forms” (94). Correlatively, familiar “faded” metaphors serve all too easily as “fundamental premises ... helping to perpetuate the status quo”; they

“avoid the quality of presence” (96). Kauffman and Parson analyze the metaphors of “escalation” and “spectrum of violence” to illustrate their thesis. Both support one another in suggesting that “violence can be chosen rationally, produced and controlled by strategic planners” (98). The degree to which they “hinder thought is revealed by a single change ... to the ‘specter of violence,’” thus replacing the “imagery of optical physics” by “the imagery of death” (98). “Presence” would thereby be increased, rather than suppressed; assent to particular policies might well be withheld and transferred to others. The choice of alternate metaphors, however, could “distance argument from broad public audiences” (99). Through their analysis of these and other metaphors, Kauffman and Parson argue that suppression of presence is as powerful a tool as its “selective evocation” (100). “Awareness” is a “precondition for assent,” they hold, and the use of “faded metaphors” is one indication that arguers are suppressing that precondition.

Fiction offers many examples of metaphors used to argumentative effect, but Michael Weiler’s essay focuses instead on authors’ “use of argument forms as such” – i.e. on arguments presented when a character “has made a causal claim that is controversial and has given a reason for” assenting to that claim (104). By analyzing several examples from well-known novels that vary in complexity from an explicit and relatively simple argument in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* to an extraordinarily implicit and complex one in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, Weiler “suggest[s] tentatively ... ways in which novels and their arguments as a formal combination may reflect and contribute to ideological tendencies of a particular historical period” (105). He uses Daniel O’Keefe’s categorization of arguments that individuals “make” as “unrejoined advocates” in contrast to the arguments they “have” with others, and finds that the first group displays considerable correlation be-

tween complexity of argument form and context: simple arguments are presented explicitly, and complex arguments are presented implicitly, in monologic (“unrejoined”) arguments.

Dialogical arguments (those that characters “have” with discourse partners) display “considerably greater formal complexity” and “have greater analytical significance” (111) than monological arguments. Weiler analyzes Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* as a novel in which “dialectical forms” are used in a “supremely appropriate” manner to portray a society that Mann understood as essentially dialectical in its nature (112-3). “*The Magic Mountain*,” Weiler concludes, “argues as much by form as [by] substance” (114). It thus provides an extreme example of narrative arguments that require interpretation in light of the entire novel’s meaning: “it became clear that ... they meant more than they said” (115).

Although the relation between naturally-occurring argumentation and scripted argumentation (including the examples from novels that Lake analyzes) is a problematic one, this focus on arguments in fiction as reflecting and contributing to the “ideological tendencies of a particular historical period” (105) can encourage us to look for parallel correlations in everyday argumentation. Lake is quite clear as to the modest reach of his hypothesis: “I offer this analytical scheme as simply one way of approaching the question of the relationship between argument form and argument content” (105). Yet, his conclusion offers a theoretical clue that may extend to non-scripted argument interpretation: may it be, at least in some types of argumentation, that assent is a response as much to the form of an argument as to its content?

Especially if we discern instances of form functioning in that manner, Robert C. Rowland’s claim that dialectic provides no standard for evaluation would constitute a rejection of that purported ground for assent. Although dialectical form, as well as

reliance upon a rhetorical community and upon argument within fields that avoid closure, have been proposed by various theorists as warrants for assent, Rowland argues in his essay that none of these forms can function as standards for evaluation. "The historical tie between argumentation and pedagogy and decision-making would seem to be threatened," he warns, if no such standards can be found (120-1). His proposal for countering that threat would seem particularly appealing to readers of *Informal Logic*, since he argues, in the course of "defend[ing] the position that the study and practice of argumentation, via traditional standards for evaluating ordinary logic, has much to offer both argument pedagogy and critical decision-making, ... that there is an important role to be played by argument evaluation based on traditional tests of informal logic" (121).

In order to avoid the infinite regress problem that would arise if he were to attempt to justify that basis, Rowland relies upon "pragmatic utility. The critic," he goes on to say, "does not attempt to justify the evaluative standards as a form of knowledge but uses them because they serve his or her needs" (126). Standards, then, are to be evaluated by their success in relation to "the general purpose of all argument," which is "to solve problems" (126). Although he affirms that there are no "universally applicable standards," and notes that most work on standards has been concerned with "field dependent criteria," Rowland does identify "three sets of field invariant standards": "tests of evidence, tests of formal coherence, and comparisons to expert knowledge" (127).

There are two objections that could be raised to this approach. First, the claim that all argumentation is for the purpose of problem-solving is problematic. Argument can also be in the interest of opening problems; i.e. can be for the purpose of discerning and developing alternatives in what might appear to be closed situations. Also, what remains neglected in this discussion are issues of institutional and individual power. Deci-

sions as to what sort of evidence is relevant, which claims must cohere, and which experts to consult are made by those who claim authority – which is to say, within a context constituted by the explicit and implicit exercise of power.

If we do accept Rowland's neglect of alternate purposes and debate over ends (in contrast to means) we can agree that "standards [of informal logic] can be used to test particular means to those ends" (134) – in that they can verify use of (at least some of the) evidence, formal coherence (of at least some of the claims arguing for particular means) and response to (at least some of the) expert knowledge. The question then is: is this limited, but essential, function (the testing of means) equivalent to all that Booth discusses under the topic of "warranting assent"? In other words, are we to re-state the question of this book as "When, if ever, is assent justified once the ends (goals, purposes) have been specified?" If not – and most argumentation theorists would, I believe, say that such a circumscribed space for assent is not implied in Booth's work, and thus is an insufficient question for these essays and the conferences from which they derive – then Rowland's defense of the value of informal logic standards would seem less than adequate.

If we were to specify the question in its more encompassing – and, I would argue, more appropriate and exigent – form, we might have this: "When, if ever, is assent to particular ends (goals; purposes; objectives; designs) justified?" Charles Arthur Willard seems to have this larger question in mind. "Modernity's answer," he observes at the start of his essay, "is that assent is justified when it comports with the prevailing consensus in a relevant expert community" (135). But he goes on to say that "the postmodern answer is the modernist's answer in determinist drag: 'Unfortunately, assent is always justified (legitimized)'" (135). Although both answers may occasion "qualms" and "seem extravagant," (135) they do serve to direct attention to "practices that yield claims and buttress

institutions," which is to say that both encourage us to address "the problem of the public sphere" in which both means and ends are disputed (136).

Willard discusses three diagnoses of that problem in his essay. He finds that "the epistemological view is largely irrelevant ... and the pedagogical diagnosis is exaggerated," although the "epistemic diagnosis" can offer some insight in regard to questions of relativity. The differentiation between "epistemological" and "epistemic," which Willard has made in earlier work, is crucial here. Briefly, epistemology "stems from a philosophical impulse to find universally valid veridical and judgmental principles" (137). Insofar as "the public" – or perhaps, more significantly, "a public" – is not "the universe," Willard's diagnosis ("largely irrelevant") has considerable appeal. Epistemics, in contrast, focuses on disputes between decision-makers and experts, or among experts, within a field. Pedagogy is relevant to such disputes, in that it is motivated by the conviction that "truth has a natural tendency to triumph over its opposite" and strives "to equip advocates to assist truth in its natural course," i.e. to cultivate *phronesis* (141). But Willard finds that basic conviction "dubious" (142). Even if pedagogy does succeed (perhaps along the lines delineated by Rowland's defense of informal logic standards) in improving arguers' ability to negotiate among diverse means, "public actors are also divided by substantive differences" and so public discourse "may still find itself beset with epistemic problems" (144).

Willard's "epistemic" diagnosis thus re-focuses dialectic within the public sphere – away from "commensurating discourse" and the elimination of mistakes in reasoning, and toward "ways of managing these problems" (152). This diagnosis reminds us that "surely it matters how the conversation goes" (153) and that issues of authority and power are of at least as much importance as those of fact for justifying assent.

Some of the most influential analyses of authority have come from Marx and schol-

ars influenced by Marxian themes such as ideology critique. Yet James Arnt Aune notes in the beginning of his essay that "if Marxism has been silent about the rhetorical tradition, the rhetorical tradition has been almost equally silent about Marxism" (158). Aune's discussion of both silences "is intended to be an invitation to dialogue, not the raising of a dogmatic flag" (159). That invitation has three aspects: appreciating a "communicative dilemma" in classical Marxism, recognizing later Marxism's responses to that dilemma, and proposing a "re-reading of the history of rhetorical theory in Marxist terms" (159).

The "communicative dilemma" is this: "either the classless society is inevitable and scientifically grounded with individual choice being irrelevant, or ... [it] comes about through the persuasion of individuals and thus ceases to be grounded in scientific laws of history" (161). Aune then considers a variety of later Marxist responses: reliance upon the party, or on spontaneous mass revolution; critical theory based in the Frankfurt School's analysis of advanced capitalist society; counter-hegemonic strategies based in Gramsci's analysis of consent-formation; Eagleton's rhetorical theory. His re-reading of rhetorical theory uses elements in the latter three responses, but begins from the contemporary "conviction that the transcendental signifiers of God, Truth, and the Classless Society have failed us" (167).

In place of those failed conventions, Aune finds that "three cultures of discourse are currently competing for the allegiance of rhetorical scholars": traditional rhetoric, "critical discourse," and "the new rhetoric" or "poststructuralism" (167-8). His analysis of the first identifies its practice "as a useful tool for a propertied elite" with its decline and the concurrent "decline of public involvement in politics" (168). There is a suggestion here that those of us concerned with furthering argumentation in a non-elite public sphere would not find much benefit in simply reviving traditional

rhetoric (or, philosophy). The second culture, “a type of speech about speech that replaced rhetoric in intellectual circles” may have “reached its finest expression in Habermas’s notion of the ideal speech situation” (170). It is, Aune notes, “tied to print” and “has been replaced in the political realm by the politics of pure image” (168, 170). Accompanying this politics is the third culture, which, in offering a “new orthodoxy that there is nothing outside the text, nothing outside of rhetoric itself, is the perfect ideological representation of life under late capitalism” (170).

Aune proposes another alternative: “a revitalized conception of traditional rhetoric, one informed by Marxist theory and practice, may be of some use in advancing ... a more humane practice of public argument” (170). That practice would be justified not by any of the discredited “transcendental signifiers,” but by this observation: “audiences, when presented with the contradictions inherent in their social systems, have a choice about the ideological narratives to which they will subscribe of which they will create” (171-2). If that choice is not to be “limited to the banal,” we must “extend our imaginative range” (172) – beyond, I would argue, the images provided to the public sphere by what some theorists call the “communications industry.” Thus Aune’s analysis suggests a way of countering Willard’s characterization of the “pedagogic diagnosis” as “exaggerated”: one aspect of justifying assent is exploration of a wide variety of options, and argumentation informed by Aune’s “revitalized conception” can develop those options.³

An interest in furthering “more vital and human communication practices” (175) also motivates G. Thomas Goodnight’s essay, which concludes this collection. Our “traditional understanding of the public,” Goodnight holds, “imparted impetus to its own erosion,” and so we must “take up the question of the rhetorical tradition” if we would “understand the problems of justified assent” (175). This tradition, Goodnight reminds us in what I find is an

insightful expansion upon Aune’s characterization of “traditional rhetoric,” has been a conflicted one. Its complexity is suggested by recalling that the Sophists, Socrates, Isocrates, and Aristotle gave us a “heritage” comprised of “a constellation of unresolved discursive problems bearing upon ethics and politics rather than a unified body of cultural truths” (176). As this tradition developed in the United States it “preserved a broad domain for individual choice, initiative, and decision. Thus was the public sphere protected from domination by social institutions” (177).

The growth of the “communications industry” and its creation of a mass audience for “commodified” communication “delivered without the intervention of traditional publics,” however, curtailed that public sphere as “mass media began to build social cohesion on unprecedented scales” (181). This commodification of public communication within an “industrial vision of communication” takes “the modeled psyches of human beings” as “its raw resources,” to be formed into “a parody of a perfect political democracy” with “regularized habits of consumption” (182). The resultant “homogenization of the mass media continues to erode the public sphere” as the “community of discourse is transformed from an arena of advocate and audience to a market of salespersons and customers” (183). Mass mediated communication, Goodnight concludes, is “parasitic” upon human communication; it “creates symbolic habits that indifferently absorb all public discourse” (185). As public discourse shrinks, little space is available for crafting alternative cultural discourses that enable critically justified assent.

Goodnight’s alternative depends upon countering the materiality of communication by recalling its self-constituting character. Specifically, he contrasts the mass-media view of public opinion as “an index of individual beliefs that can be aggregated to define public sentiment” to an earlier view of “human opinion” as

itself a “convergence of personal and public truth” (186). Opinion polls, he argues, serve to “disintegrate what they purport merely to measure,” since “the public itself comes to see the survey as a lever for pushing requests” (187-8). As a means for subverting that subversion, Goodnight directs us toward the importance of “last words”: not only in the ultimate words of one’s life, he observes, but also in the multiple occasions when we “discover that there is nothing more to be said, that for some odd reason ‘last words’ have been spoken” we may find a handhold for recovering the “personal elements of a communication” which the “industrial model” has “reduced” to “a uniform sameness” (191). “Just as rhetoric enables each person to share a personal world,” he reminds us, “so it contains the possibility of a viable public sphere” by developing “telling visions of what audiences are, enabling and constraining what they may become” (192). A likely source for this possibility, Goodnight concludes, may be new communications technologies. “So long as industrial values dominate orientations to human communication,” however, “technology remains the master and not the servant of personal and public discourse” (194) and so that likelihood remains in the “may be” rather than “will be” category.

For Goodnight as for Aune, then, the “pedagogic diagnosis” of the role of argumentation in justifying assent could be developed through acknowledging the crucial role of discovering and developing options, in dialogical (even, multilogical) argumentation. “All people – theorists and technicians, politicians and citizens – speak from the limited perspective of a time and place” (194). Within a modernist perspective, “assent” most often means “consensus”; that is, the homogenization of those perspectives into an encompassing one which purports to transcend those limited perspectives. But as almost all of the essays in this volume help us to see, behind that encompassing is power and authority.

That this message emerges in a variety of ways from the diverse interests of its authors seems to me the great value of this book. Within a postmodernist perspective, the justification of argumentation itself – and of the teaching of argumentation abilities in informal logic, critical thinking, and a variety of “literacy” courses – may be its contribution to revealing the workings of power. More specifically, argumentation’s contribution to a rhetoric of assent that subverts dogma may be in expanding, rather than reducing, possibilities for “the manner in which human communication evolves in dialogue with those forever silenced and those yet to speak” (194).

Notes

¹ Booth, Wayne C., *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), xii. Further quotation from this work is cited in the text as (Booth), followed by the page number for the quotation.

² J. Robert Cox, “Introduction: Argumentation Theory as Critical Practice,” in *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 1. Further quotations from this work will be identified by page numbers following the quotation in the text of this essay.

³ I explore this function of argumentation in “Argument as Inquiry in a Postmodern Context,” forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Argumentation* (International Society for the Study of Argumentation, Amsterdam, 1994).

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