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# Argumentation, Arguing, and Arguments: Comments on *Giving Reasons*

John BIRO & Harvey SIEGEL

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ABSTRACT: While we applaud several aspects of Lilian Bermejo-Luque's novel theory of argumentation and especially welcome its epistemological dimensions, in this discussion we raise doubts about her conception of argumentation, her account of argumentative goodness, and her treatments of the notion of "giving reasons" and of justification.

Keywords: arguments; argumentation; argumentative goodness; epistemic approach; instrumentalism; justification; linguistic-pragmatic approach; rational belief.

RESUMEN: Aunque aprobamos varios aspectos de la nueva teoría de la argumentación propuesta por Lilian Bermejo Luque y, en particular, su dimensión epistemológica, en este debate planteamos algunas dudas sobre su concepción de la argumentación, su análisis de la bondad argumentativa y su tratamiento de la noción de "dar razones" y de justificación.

Palabras clave: argumentos; argumentación; bondad argumentativa; enfoque epistémico; instrumentalismo; justificación; enfoque lingüístico-pragmático; creencia racional.

## 1. Introduction

In her impressive new book, Lilian Bermejo-Luque offers a novel theory of argumentation, one that emphasizes its pragmatic, communicative functions as well as its epistemic dimensions. We are sympathetic to much of her discussion, in particular to her conception of argumentative goodness in epistemic terms and her critiques of instrumentalism and of specific instrumentalist accounts of argument assessment. We do, however, have serious misgivings about the overall theory she advances. The most important of these is our doubt that a theory of argumentation as an activity and a theory of the evaluation of arguments as abstract objects can be combined in the way she proposes.

Bermejo-Luque describes her project as falling within "the normative study of argumentation." She labels such study *Argumentation Theory*, a "discipline" within the broader field of *Argumentation Studies*. Argumentation Theory "can be characterized as an attempt to address the following four questions: 'What is argumentation?', 'How should we interpret and analyze argumentative practices?', 'What is good argumentation?' and 'How can we determine argumentative goodness?'" She distinguishes different "approaches" in Argumentation Theory: "the logical, the dialectical, the rhetorical, the epistemological, etc." An approach is "a set of theories having in common 1) a certain conception of its object of study: i.e., the logical product of argumentation, a dialectical argumentative procedure, a rhetorical argumentative process, an epistemological device, etc., and 2) a related conception of the sources of argumentative normativity: i.e., logical or dialectical rules, rules for achieving certain type of persuasion



or for achieving rational beliefs, etc” (Bermejo-Luque 2011, 8; all page references below are to this book).

Bermejo-Luque sees these different approaches as stemming from placing too much emphasis on one or another of what are merely aspects or dimensions of the single, though complex, activity she calls *argumentation*, and she seeks to “integrate” them in a theory that recognizes that unity. She proposes that this be done by adopting a “linguistic-pragmatic approach.” This involves “the integration of argumentation’s logical, dialectical, rhetorical and epistemic dimensions” (p. viii) and conceiving of acts of arguing as “complex speech-acts whose illocutionary force is that of an attempt at showing a target-claim to be correct” (p. 58).

In what follows, we voice some doubts about the viability and, indeed, desirability of such integration. First, we raise some questions about the notion of argumentation as Bermejo-Luque appears to understand it and suggest that there is no single coherent notion on offer. That is, there is no single thing, argumentation, that can have the different sorts of property the various approaches Bermejo-Luque distinguishes focus on. In fact, as she herself allows, these different approaches take their objects of study to be different. No doubt, there are interesting relations among these objects, relations worth studying. But that is not enough for thinking that there is a single object to be studied, of which there can be a single theory. Second, we point to an ambiguity in the notion of giving a reason, one present in the very title of Bermejo-Luque’s book. Taken together, these considerations show that while Argumentation Studies may be eclectic and ecumenical, Argumentation Theory should not be. Instead, it should be clear about what – which of the ‘objects of study’ Bermejo-Luque lists – it is intended to be a theory of. Along the way, we dispute Bermejo-Luque’s charge that our version of the epistemic approach is instrumentalist. We then suggest some reasons for thinking that what Bermejo-Luque offers should be seen as a version of the epistemic approach but note some difficulties with that version, in particular, with the notion of justification central to it.

## 2. *Argumentation and arguments*

What is ‘argumentation’? Bermejo-Luque is certainly right that in ‘argumentation studies’ the term is used to refer to a hotch-potch of inquiries into matters that have little in common. But is she right in thinking that her use of the term is univocal? When she is explicit about what she means by it, she tells us (following van Eemeren and Grootendorst) that argumentation is an activity, “specifically, the speech-act complex of arguing” (p. 9). We agree that *arguing* is an activity, but we are unsure what could be meant by saying that *argumentation* is. This is not just a quibble about style. The question is, what sense can we give to the term in constructions such as ‘good argumentation,’ if we take ‘argumentation’ to denote an activity? It is one thing to say that an activity is good, in the sense that it is one it is (when appropriate) desirable to engage in (and Bermejo-Luque has some interesting things to say about *this*), another to say that one engaging in the activity is doing what she is doing well. It is clear that in the question ‘What is good argumentation?’ – one of the questions she says defines Argumentation Theory – it is the latter that is at stake.

Since arguing can be done well or badly, a theory about what it is to engage in it is necessarily silent about Bermejo-Luque's third and fourth questions for Argumentation Theory. On the face of it, a speech-act analysis can tell us only whether someone is arguing, not whether she is arguing well, by whatever criterion.<sup>1</sup> Bermejo-Luque thinks, however, that we can turn the trick if we build ("integrate") into our Theory of Argumentation "from the very beginning" (p. 9) dialectical and the rhetorical dimensions alongside a logical dimension (by which she means, following Toulmin in part, a mix of semantic and epistemic considerations). But if 'argumentation' really means 'arguing,' the objects with which the theory deals (acts) do not have logical properties. And if it means 'arguments' (structured sets of propositions purporting to provide support for beliefs), a theory of how to tell when those do what they purport to do has no room for dialectical or rhetorical considerations.

What we need, if the third and fourth questions in Argumentation Theory are to make sense, is an object which can be said to be good or bad. Can an act of arguing be thought of as such an object? We can ask of an act of arguing whether it leads to some independently desired end, as in the case of a legal argument, say, the acquittal of one's client. But, first, that would be to focus on a merely instrumental property of the act, something Bermejo-Luque thinks is a mistake. (We, no instrumentalists, agree, of course.) Second, and more important, the relation between the act and the outcome is a causal one, one that need not mirror any logical, semantic or epistemic relations among the propositions constituting the argument given. An attorney can secure the acquittal of the defendant by giving the jury a rotten argument. That could not be if 'argumentation' in 'good argumentation' meant 'argument,' rather than 'arguing'.

Sometimes we say: "The style is good, but the argumentation is weak." This seems, at first sight, to be closer to what we want. But not quite. It is no contradiction to say that the arguments an author or speaker gives are good ones, even though his argumentation is weak – we mean the latter as a comment on how those, in themselves good, arguments are organized, presented, and the like. With such questions, dialectical and rhetorical considerations indeed enter. But while in this use of 'argumentation,' we have moved some distance from talking about something concrete (the act) to something abstract (a form or pattern) as the object of evaluation, we have still not moved far enough, to what is obviously the intended object of evaluation in asking the third question of Argumentation Theory: an argument, considered as a set of propositions some of which purport to support, justify, provide warrant for, count in favor of, another, the conclusion.

That, of course, is how the epistemic approach understands the third question of Argumentation Theory, and it gives a certain answer to it. Our goal here is not to defend that answer.<sup>2</sup> It is, rather, to emphasize that the third question, 'What is argumentative goodness?', must, if it is to be coherent, be understood in this way. That is why

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<sup>1</sup> 'Arguing' here means 'putting forward an argument.' There is, of course, a sense of 'arguing' that is even broader, in which two people hurling insults at each other are sometimes said to be arguing.

<sup>2</sup> We have done that elsewhere, most recently, in Biro and Siegel (2006a) and Siegel and Biro (2008).

we never speak of the epistemic approach as a theory of *argumentation* or as a theory of the evaluation of argumentation. We speak only of *arguments* and the evaluation of arguments. By contrast, for Bermelo-Luque “arguments are representations of acts of arguing” and “for an act of arguing to be a good one ... it will have to fulfill both semantic and pragmatic conditions that... are related not only to the logical, but also to the dialectical and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation” (pp. 115-6). We think that this has things backwards. An argument is not “a representation of the semantic and syntactic properties of an act of arguing” (p. 57). (Strictly speaking, acts do not have such properties.) It is, rather, the other way around: an act of arguing is the deployment of an abstract object with semantic and syntactic properties. To ask whether that object is a good one of its kind is, in the case of arguments, to ask whether it can be used to lead to justified belief.<sup>3</sup>

We have another worry about Bermejo-Luque’s talk of “the normative conditions of argumentation” (p. viii). It is not clear in what sense a theory of what it is to be engaging in the activity of arguing is supposed to be normative. There is, of course, a weak sense: the sense in which failing to do some things amounts to failing to argue.<sup>4</sup> But, surely, the third question should be understood as presupposing that the criteria for *arguing* are met.

Another way to see that an account of what it is to argue differs from an account of what it is to argue well is to focus on the very title of Bermelo-Luque’s book. One of the ambiguities in that title to which we alluded earlier is that between giving a reason in the sense of offering a putative, but possibly bad, reason and giving a reason that is in fact a good reason. Consider, again, a defense attorney. His primary obligation is to defend his client. If he thinks that he can do so most effectively by giving a bad argument, because he has good reason for believing that the judge or the jury will think the argument a good one and will thus be persuaded by it, he will do so. And we may allow that there *is* a sense in which he would be giving a good argument. In such a situation, the same argument can be said to be both good and bad, but, of course, not in the same sense.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Instrumentalism

Bermejo-Luque criticizes “the pragmatic account of argumentative value” (p. 22), which is embraced, she suggests, by the major rhetorical, dialectical, and pragmatic theories of argumentation, for being *instrumentalist*: they hold that “good argumentation [is] a matter of its ability to achieve the typical ends which those engaged in the practice of arguing were aiming at” (p. 23). We agree with her criticisms and

<sup>3</sup> For more on our view of the relation between arguing and arguments, see Biro and Siegel 2006b.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps performing speech acts (that is, linguistic acts) is a necessary condition for arguing. Perhaps not, if propositions can be put forward, or drawn attention to, as some think, in other ways.

<sup>5</sup> Another ambiguity in ‘giving reasons’ is that between an epistemic sense and a practical/prudential sense of having or giving a reason. The former has to do with what one bases a belief on, the latter with what motivates one to act. There are deep connections between these two notions, of course, but exploring them is another enterprise.

have, indeed, made parallel ones ourselves. Surprisingly, however, she alleges that the epistemic approach we defend, in spite of our insistence to the contrary, is also, at bottom, instrumentalist, because it portrays arguments as aiming to be *means* to justified belief (and a good argument as succeeding in this aim). She argues that to say, as we do, that the fact that having this aim is an *intrinsic* property of arguments is not sufficient to avoid instrumentalism in the way that thinking of the aim as *constitutive* of arguments is (p. 47, cf. pp. 45–49).

We think that in the present context this is a distinction without a difference. Our view is that it is a conceptual truth that genuine arguments aim at justification. This is so even if those who use them can have, as we are happy to allow, any number of other aims. This may be helpfully expressed, as it is by Bermejo-Luque, in terms of constitutive properties, and we have no quarrel with saying that aiming at justification is constitutive of argumenthood in the relevant sense. Whether expressed in that way or in terms of conceptual truth, purporting to justify believing that *p* is what makes a set of propositions an argument *for p*, just as being able to cut is what makes something a knife. (Of course, just as there are pretend-knives – papier-mâché ones, say – so there are pretend-arguments.)

It may be asked, what does ‘purporting to justify’ come to? A tempting answer is that it is somehow constituted by certain actions of the speaker, such as Bermejo-Luque’s “adducing” and “concluding” (p. 9), and that these speech acts, in turn, are to be spelled out in terms of the speaker’s intentions. But this is looking for the answer in the wrong place. If arguments are really abstract objects, what relations obtain among their components cannot depend on the psychological states of their users. For this reason, it is somewhat misleading to speak, as we have, for the sake of brevity, of the *argument’s* purporting to aim at justification. It is, indeed, the user of the argument that purports to be offering justification. A more careful way of putting things would be to say that what makes a set of propositions an argument *for p* is its suitability to be deployed – whether or not it actually is – to justify someone in believing that *p*, and what makes such an argument a good one is that it does in fact provide good reason for believing that *p* – whether its target (or, indeed, anyone) actually comes to believe that *p* on its basis.

We also agree that it can be illuminating to put this in terms of speech-act notions and to insist, as Bermejo-Luque does against van Eemeren and Grootendorst, that being an argument *for p* (that is to say, an argument that can justify believing that *p*) is an illocutionary, rather than a perlocutionary, matter. Just as the fact that one is too clumsy to drive in the nail does not make the tool in one’s hand any the less a hammer or a child’s inability to ride his Christmas present make it any the less a bicycle, so its inability to persuade you because of your obtuseness does not make an argument any the less a good argument *for p*. Whether an argument is a good one does not depend on the contingent mental states of either its propounder or its recipient.

So, we plead not guilty to the charge of instrumentalism. Thus we need not embrace the other, no more palatable, horn of the dilemma Bermejo-Luque offers us. In commenting on our complaint against the pragma-dialectical approach that it allows the resolution of conflicts of opinion in irrational ways, she says that this “is begging

the question, unless we have an independent account of what it is to be rational, that is, an account able to distinguish between warranting rationality [= ‘rationally’?] and arguing well. But this is, precisely, what Biro and Siegel’s account does not do” (p. 48). The complaint seems to be that in saying that belief that  $p$  is rational just in case it is the result of an argument that justifies believing that  $p$ , we beg the question against one who says that belief that  $p$  is rational just in case it is the result of an argument that conforms to pragma-dialectical rules. We do not see any question being begged here. We are simply claiming that the first of these alternatives is closer to what we mean, pre-theoretically, by a belief’s being rational, and that, given that meaning, it is perfectly plain that a piece of argumentation can conform to pragma-dialectical rules, and so be ‘PD-rational,’ and yet result in belief that is not rational because the premises offered do not justify the conclusion drawn (Siegel and Biro 2010; cf. Siegel and Biro 1997; Biro and Siegel 1992, 2006b).

We draw the distinction Bermejo-Luque says we fail to draw, then, between “warranting rationality and arguing well,” as follows: a belief’s being rational is a matter of its being based on epistemically good reasons; arguing well is a matter of offering such reasons for the claim in question. We deny that this pair of explications begs the question against our pragma-dialectical (or other) opponents, absent some compelling reason to take ‘rational’ to mean something other than ‘based on epistemically good reasons.’ We do not know of any such compelling reason on offer in the pragma-dialectical (or other) literature.

Bermejo-Luque also accuses us of failing to distinguish justification and rationality (p. 46). Like most epistemologists, and like Bermejo-Luque herself (p. 48), we think that these notions are not identical, although they are clearly closely related. (Cf., e.g., Siegel 2005, 349). As we see it, to say that a belief is justified is to say something about the relation between the proposition believed and some other propositions, whereas to say that a belief is rational is also to say something about the relation between the belief and the believer, namely, that the believer *bases* his belief on such justifying, epistemically good, reasons. (The latter can be equally well expressed by saying that the believer is justified in adopting his belief.)

Note that we do not identify the rationality of the belief that  $p$  with that belief’s being the product of a particular argument. There could be, and usually is, more than one argument capable of justifying a given belief. But must it not be held on the basis of *some* argument capable of justifying one in holding it if it is to be rational? Put simply, we claim that to say that a belief is rational is to say that it is held for *good* reasons, where ‘good’ means that the reasons count in favor of, provide support for, the belief.

#### 4. *Epistemic Accounts and the Linguistic-Pragmatic Account*

We are struck by the degree to which the account Bermejo-Luque offers is in fact like the epistemic one we have defended. Indeed, she declares her account to *be* “an epistemic one... according to which good argumentation would be argumentation able to justify a target-claim, in the sense of showing it to be correct” (p. 23); “good argumentation is, in the end, argumentation providing justification” (p. 34). She is at pains to

distinguish her epistemic view from what she calls the deductivist account, one that couches argument value solely in semantic and syntactic terms:

The point of any epistemic conception of good argumentation is to take justification to be the proper outcome of good argumentation... My defense of an epistemic view should be seen as an attempt to avoid instrumentalism in dealing with the concept of argumentative value. But this refusal of instrumentalism is not a plea to return to a purely a [sic] semanticist conception. Actually, the main point of this work is to defend the view that justifying a claim is making a communicative move that involves pragmatic as well as semantic constraints. (p. 23)

While we welcome the emphasis on justification, we are not sure what to make of “justifying a claim is making a communicative move.” We can see that to be arguing may be thought to be making communicative moves.<sup>6</sup> Such moves are attempts to justify, indeed. But what matters in assessing arguments *qua* arguments is the support (or lack thereof) that premises provide their conclusion. Acts *qua* acts cannot stand in this relation to a proposition. We should not conflate the question whether someone is offering a claim *as* a justifier with whether the claim being offered *is* a justifier.

Bermejo-Luque’s treatment of ‘justification’ thus gives us pause. On her view, “the activity of arguing is, constitutively, an attempt at justifying a target-claim, so that whatever counts as an attempt at justifying a target-claim counts as argumentation, and *vice versa*” (p. 38). And, as we have seen, justifying a claim or a belief is, for her, a matter of “showing it to be correct” (p. 23). We agree that we “use arguments, i.e., certain abstract objects with semantic properties, for justifying; this is what we mainly use arguments for” (p. 38). When do we succeed in this? That is, what is required for an argument to succeed in justifying its target claim? To reiterate our view, the requirements are *epistemic*: the argument succeeds when its premises count in favor of, or provide support for, the conclusion. At times Bermejo-Luque seems to agree: “good argumentation is argumentation that actually achieves justification...arguing well *is* justifying” (p. 39, emphasis Bermejo-Luque’s). But in order to avoid instrumentalism, she emphasizes that her “account of argumentative value in terms of justification is meant to be completely empty. Justification is the only intrinsic argumentative value, merely because we are assuming that ‘arguing for *p*’ is equivalent to ‘trying to justify that *p*’ and, consequently, that ‘justifying that *p*’ is equivalent to ‘arguing well for *p*’” (p. 39). Supposing that this move indeed ensures that instrumentalism is avoided, we must still ask, as Bermejo-Luque does: “What does justification, so understood, consist in?” (p. 39). The answer she gives is that “the intrinsic value of a piece of argumentation, i.e., its justificatory power respecting a target-claim, will be a measure of its ability to *actually show this target-claim to be correct*” (pp. 39–40, our emphasis). She takes this answer to be “completely empty” because it assumes an analytic connection between “arguing for *p*” and “trying to justify that *p*”. From this assumption it follows that “justifying that *p*” is equivalent to “arguing well for *p*”. (We note in passing that the assumption does not carry over into an account of the goodness of *arguments*, since a proposition *qua* abstract object can justify another such object, and in that sense the complex will con-

<sup>6</sup> Though this does not seem to be the best model for understanding what I do when I ask myself whether there is an argument for believing something.



stitute a good argument independently of anyone's attempt or intention to do anything.)

However, if 'correct' means 'true,' arguing well for  $p$  and showing  $p$  to be correct cannot be the same thing, and if they are not, the answer is far from empty. On the contrary, it is obviously far too strong. As Bermejo-Luque would, we are sure, agree, a good argument can provide strong support for a false conclusion. So, how should "to show a target-claim to be correct" be understood in "Good argumentation is argumentation able to show a target-claim to be correct"? She says that doing so "requires the semantic conditions of argument goodness, but also the pragmatic conditions that make a speech-act a good act of 'showing correctness'" (p. 114) and that it is "acts of arguing, and not arguments, [that] provide justification" (p. 179). Such remarks suggest that she is concerned with more than just whether the arguments offered provide support for a (possibly false) claim. If so, arguing well for a claim means more than just offering good arguments for it. What can that be?<sup>7</sup>

As is usual in commentaries such as this, we have concentrated on our misgivings concerning Bermejo-Luque's theory. We want to close by emphasizing its strengths. Her criticisms of 'instrumentalism' are telling. So, too, are many of her criticisms of the various theories she treats on the way to developing her own. Her positive account is original, sophisticated, and in many respects illuminating. We especially like its epistemic character and are delighted to welcome her to the small but apparently growing community of epistemic theorists of argument/argumentation.

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<sup>7</sup> Presumably not succeeding in convincing one's audience, as that is a perlocutionary, rather than an illocutionary, matter, and Bermejo-Luque clearly intends her account to be understood in terms of illocutionary acts. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how emphasizing the pragmatic conditions of justification and, more generally, integrating the dialectical and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation, is compatible with that.

Bermejo-Luque's account of "correctness" in terms of "qualifiers" is interesting but too complex to take up here. However, we do not think that doing so would make a difference to the concerns voiced above.

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