

The Rhetorical Dimension in Douglas Walton's Studies of Argumentation  
---An Interview with Professor Douglas N. Walton  
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Feb. 1, 2018

**1. JF:** Hi, Professor Walton. Thanks very much for your time and willingness to take some questions from me. I feel greatly honored to be able to interview such an internationally well-known name in the field of argumentation studies. First of all, in terms of the scope covered by the topics your publications deal with, and in terms of prolificacy and productivity, you are said to be a genius in this field. To quote a Chinese expression, an incredibly prolific writer or scholar is labelled as a remarkable person whose own physical height is surpassed by one of his or her publications being piled up. You've truly lived up to your famous name. So, personally, to what a degree do you think your remarkable scholarly achievements will translate into an academic legacy in the field of argumentation studies?

**Douglas N. Walton** (hereafter **DNW**):

**DNW:** Personally I think it is an error to dwell too much on what an individual's academic legacy will be in his or her field. I just work on solving one problem at a time in the field of argumentation studies. My aim is to build useful methods and tools that can be applied to these problems. But many other people in the field are working on comparable tools and methods, and I am not unhappy if their methods turn out to be better than mine and are used and referred to by more scholars in the field. In fact I would regard this as a success. If they can improve my methods and they use them to find better ones I am quite happy. All I want to do is to see the field move forward as a whole, and become more successful in its main three aims of identifying, analyzing and evaluating arguments, especially arguments of the kind found in natural language texts. It is really up to the colleagues whether they find my results and methods useful. Whether or not my efforts are useful for others in the field is up to them, not to me. I am not trying to create a personal legacy. I want to see the field as a whole move forward, and that is what is important to me. Solving problems is interesting, and that is what motivates me.

**2. JF:** Now as a Distinguished Research Fellow of CRRAR since 2008, you are one of the most important witnesses and participants of the informal logic movement in North America, at least for some twenty years, as has been acknowledged by yourself that "[your] own previous research in the field of argumentation has been in the area of informal logic" (1996b, ix). Is it implicit here that from then on, your interest was no longer in informal logic? How would you like to define your own scholarly identity, as an informal logician?

**DNW:** I did not mean to imply by this remark that I had abandoned informal logic in any way. I only meant that for 39 years at the University of Winnipeg I was the professor of logic who had the task not only of teaching formal logic, but also of teaching informal logic, including tasks such as teaching the students argument diagramming, how to analyze fallacies, how to identify implicit premises in arguments, and so forth. These are the same tasks I am still working on here at University of Windsor where I am a member of CRRAR, a group of scholars whose work is centered in the tradition of informal logic. So I have in no way abandoned informal logic. I am merely one in a group who is working to improve methods of informal logic that can be applied to the tasks of, identifying, analyzing and evaluating arguments in natural language discourse. A hallmark of this school is to base all work on real examples of arguments, and other related speech acts such as explanations, taken from natural language discourse, such as arguments in newspapers, magazines, other media sources, and so forth. I have changed my directions somewhat however in that I now also study examples of arguments used in law, such as in transcripts of legal cases and commentaries set of judges and other legal professionals on such cases. My work, it is true, has also been taken up by computer science, a field that actually has found my research useful (so far). But the central goals of my research have not changed, other than being broadened by trying to take into account specific needs of other disciplines

**3. JF:** "Informal logic" seems to be an ambiguous term. In *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, you point out that the rejection of the "informal, practical, or applied manner" in evaluating argumentation by traditional

logicians has seemingly something to do with the informal logician's identification of informal logic with "strategies of persuasion" since this identification is judged to be "close to rhetoric and salesmanship" (1995, 4). Is it implicit here that "informal logic" is similar to "rhetoric"?

**DNW:** My aims have always been basically the same as those of the informal logic group working at the University of Windsor, but as might be expected, over the years my aims have broadened, and so have those at the University of Windsor as well. Our work began by carrying out our task of teaching logic in philosophy departments, and what led to our particular approach in this regard was that formal deductive logic could only be applied to the more practical areas of logic, such as the study of informal fallacies, with limited success. The task assigned to us, however, in our teaching duties was to teach the students practical skills, such as helping them to recognize and avoid common types of logical errors (fallacies). In the beginning, we were not concerned about rhetoric, at least for the most part. Over the years, however, it became apparent that there was a common interest between those studying rhetoric in the field of speech communication and ourselves, particularly as these people began attending the OSSA conferences and publishing papers in the journal *Informal Logic*. Also, it became apparent to all of us that logic, in the sense that we were using this term, is closely connected to rhetoric. This has been known for a long time, and is particularly evident in the writings of the ancients such as Aristotle. But for a long time as well, there has been conflict between logic and rhetoric, because the two subjects have quite different goals, and because historically, since the time of the Sophists in Plato, these goals have been taken to be antithetical with each other. According to Plato, the Sophists are exclusively interested in persuading audiences with arguments that might be logically correct or not, whereas logic has always had the object of normatively evaluating arguments by objective standards that are evidence-based. Rhetoric, in fact, has a bad reputation for those in the general population who discount it as merely self-interested slick salesmanship. But logic traditionally has also had a bad reputation as an overly abstract field that is not very useful in practical affairs of life. It has now become part of the objective of the field of argumentation to try to show how logic, especially informal logic, is properly related to rhetoric, the field including the study of argument invention. Since the early days of informal logic, our horizons have broadened to confront problems and study phenomena that are more general than our original aims of helping to improve teaching of logic in university courses on that subject by turning it in a more practical direction.

**4. JF:** Now, sir, how do you define "argument": as a logical product, a dialectical procedure, a rhetorical process, or a practice of argumentation? Or rather, would you like to advocate a definition which is a combination of the abovementioned four perspectives?

**DNW:** I have written a paper on this subject many years ago, a paper that is often cited in the argumentation literature. The best answer to this question is to point to the part of that paper where I made an attempt to offer a provisional definition of the concept of an argument relative to the state-of-the-art at that time. I still think this definition holds up fairly well, even though it could be improved in light of developments since then, but I won't try to do that here. Here is my definition on page 411 in this paper. [What is Reasoning? What is an Argument?](#) *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 1990, 399-419. You can click on to the above link to find it.

**5. JF:** If there are some key words for your decades-long studies of argumentation, what are they? Is Argumentation Scheme one of them? As an original idea put forward by Arthur Hastings, you interpret it as "a formal pragmatic structure of arguments that is the counterpart to logical forms of inference in semantics" (1996b, x). In what ways has this important concept been developed?

**DNW:** Here again I need to refer you to a paper of mine, this time a very recent paper written in collaboration with Fabrizio Macagno and Chris Reed. This paper is all about the development of the concept of the argumentation scheme, and it shows that this concept can be traced further back than Arthur Hastings. We argue that the so-called topics of Aristotle are essentially argumentation schemes of the kind that can be used for argument invention as well as for the purposes of informal logic. You can access this paper by clicking on to the link below:

[Argumentation Schemes, History, Classifications and Computational Applications](#)

*F. Macagno, D. Walton and C. Reed, IFColog Journal of Logics and Their Applications 4(8), 2017, 2493-2556.*

6. **JF:** *Ad Hominem Arguments* has been well-received by your North-American counterpart theorists of argumentation, in the sense that attention is paid to “the notion of person and the role character plays in practical reasoning” (Chris Tindale) and it represents Walton’s “quantum leap from Informal Logic to Rhetoric” (Henry W. Johnstone, Jr.). Can we say that this work marks your “rhetorical turn” in argumentation studies?

**DNW:** At the very beginning of my work where I had the task of teaching informal logic to undergraduates, I found it frustrating that although the logic textbooks I was using at the time included the *ad hominem* fallacy as one of the informal fallacies that the students needed to be taught to deal with, but did not go into much depth on how to analyze it. Of course this fallacy is all about character attack. It is about attacking somebody’s argument by claiming that the person who put forward the argument has a bad ethical character, particularly concerning character for truthfulness. Therefore, from the beginning, since I included this fallacy within the scope of the problems and informal logic has to deal with, I included the role character plays in practical reasoning as one of my topics for study. Therefore, from the beginning, I had made something of a rhetorical turn. Johnstone was certainly right that I had entered into the subject area of rhetoric as I explored the *ad hominem* argument more deeply in several books and papers.

7. **JF:** The rhetorical dimension in your studies of argumentation is mainly manifested in the discussion of fallacies. Ever since the beginning of the informal logic movement in the early 1970s, fallacious reasoning or argument has always been one of the central concerns for informal logicians. You are also deeply involved in the fallacy debates. In your *Arguments from Ignorance*, fallacy is defined as “a sequence of argumentation used in a context of dialogue (of which there can be many types) as a tactic of deception to trick a speech partner in an exchange, or as an underlying, systematic, and serious type of error of reasoning” (1996a:270). In *Fallacies Arising from Ambiguity*, it is pointed out that a rhetorical dimension is an additional one in which “matters of verbal emphasis, stress, and intonation” are brought in, and this means that “a rhetorical element of verbal presentation” is brought into “the task of evaluating an argument as fallacious or nonfallacious” (1996c:152). How do you evaluate the rhetorical dimension in your studies of argumentation?

**DNW:** As suggested by my remarks quoted above, a fallacy is not only to be associated with an argument that is an error that fails to meet some normative logical standard, but also often represents a clever tactic that can be used deceptively to persuade an audience to accept an incorrect argument. What this shows, I think, is that there is a rhetorical dimension to the concept of a fallacy. We need to teach students to be wary of certain kinds of arguments that can easily be used to deceive or entrap them. Hence the study of informal logic in argumentation generally needs to include clever strategies of argumentative persuasion. To accommodate the need to analyze this sophisticated tactics kind of fallacy the Walton theory uses the device of the different frameworks of dialogue. So a fallacy is seen not just as an argument that fails to meet the requirements of the argumentation scheme is supposed to fit. The sophisticated tactics type of fallacy needs to be defined within a framework of a communicative exchange between two parties who are not only putting forward arguments, but also responding to the arguments put forward by the other side. Viewed this way, a fallacy can be associated with the sequence of argumentation that is supposed to move towards fulfilling the ultimate goal of a particular type of dialogue but disguises its failure to do this by various means, which can be systematically studied and identified.

8. **JF:** In the process of globalization, as an internationally recognized theorist of argumentation studies, what do you think of the notion of “incommensurability”? Do you think it is and will be an unsurmountable obstacle for the cross-cultural practice of argumentation?

**DNW:** I have not thought deeply about the notion of incommensurability in relation to cross-cultural practices of argumentation, but I would accept the idea that there are different styles of argumentation in different cultures and different linguistic settings. This feature could certainly make bridging the gaps between cross-cultural practices of argumentation a formidable obstacle, because arguments depend on common knowledge on the way things can normally be expected to work (for example, in a cultural setting). I doubt whether it is an obstacle that cannot be overcome, but as I say I have not thought deeply about how to approach it.

9. **JF:** Since you've been a leading scholar in the field of argumentation in artificial intelligence, how do you think the discrepancy between designability of artificial intelligence and the volatility of particular contextuality will be overcome?

**DNW:** The Walton theory of argumentation is designed to cope with the volatility of particular contextuality by joining with the field of pragmatics in linguistics to recognize that the context of an argument needs to be taken into account. The basic idea is that the same argument can be used in different ways in different contexts of dialogue. The same argument might be acceptable as a move in the context of one type of dialogue, but fallacious when used as a move in a different type of dialogue. We could take the example of the use of argument from threat associated with the *ad baculum* fallacy. Threats are allowed in negotiation dialogue. For example unions will typically threaten to go on strike if their wage demands are not met, and management will threaten to lay off workers if they have to meet these wage demands they see as unreasonable. Making such threats is not inherently fallacious or unreasonable in negotiation dialogue. But making a threat is inappropriate, and is generally regarded as fallacious as an argument used in a critical discussion. As I recall there is some kind of rule to this effect in the rules for the critical discussion of the Amsterdam School.

10. **JF:** The topics you've touched upon cover such a wide range. Probably every scholar of argumentation studies will end up seeing you beckoning to him or her at the end of an alley by saying: "Hello. Nice to see you! I've been waiting here for a long time." He or she will probably respond: "Well, it's good to see you here, Doug. But, is there a corner where I can go without your being there taking care of it?" You continue the conversation: "Well, maybe. Try your luck and see what will happen." It still goes on: "Do you think that the 'Audience' Alley is dead-end one?" How would you like to continue this imagined conversation, sir?

**DNW:** I think that the commitments of the audience are a central feature of the Walton theory of argumentation, which is in turn based on Charles L. Hamblin's use of formal dialogue structures to study informal fallacies (*Fallacies*, 1970). In my opinion requiring that the premises of an argument be true in order for the argument to be a strong or reasonable one is not a useful standard with which to try to evaluate arguments. Nor do I think that requiring deductive validity for an argument to be strong or acceptable is an appropriate standard. Nor do I think it has to be required that the premises are known to be true, depending of course on what your theory of knowledge is. I think that the reasonableness of the broad majority of the kinds of arguments we are concerned with in argumentation studies need to be evaluated in a dialectical setting. So a, for example in a persuasion dialogue an argument is basically reasonable to be used to convince the agent to whom it was directed to accept the conclusion if that agent accepts the premises and the conclusion follows from these premises by an argumentation scheme that is appropriate for that type of dialogue. Under these conditions it is appropriate for the person to whom the argument was directed to accept the conclusion on this basis. However, such arguments are defeasible and open to critical questioning. This aspect is made clear by the use of the device of having a set of critical questions matching any particular scheme.

**JF:** Thanks very much, Professor Walton, for your time and excellent answers.

#### **List of References to Walton Writings:**

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