Informal logic 25 years later

The First International Symposium on Informal Logic, held on this campus on June 26 to 28, 1978, was a rise to self-consciousness of a newly distinguished sub-field of philosophy. This sub-field differentiated itself through the belief of some philosophy instructors in North American colleges and universities that the traditional introductory logic course was not much good at helping to improve students' abilities to deal with the arguments they encountered in everyday life and in academic contexts. Courses centred on formal systems–whether the systems of categorical syllogistic and propositional logic done by truth tables or the more comprehensive and up-to-date system of first-order logic–had no relevance to the highly charged debates of the late 1960s and early 1970s about such issues as American military action in Vietnam and the position of women in society. In response, a new kind of textbook began to emerge, often focussed on the informal fallacies, which had been a neglected backwater of the traditional introductory logic course. A pioneer among these textbooks was Howard Kahane's *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*, subtitled "The Use of Reason in Everyday Life", the first edition of which was published in 1971 (Kahane 1971); it is now in its ninth edition. Kahane, who gave a paper at the First International Symposium on Informal Logic entitled "The Nature and Classification of Fallacies" (Kahane 1980), died two years ago, on May 2, 2001. The notice of his death in the *Proceedings And Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (Hausman et al. 2002) includes a nice characterization of the purpose of Kahane's textbook, a characterization which fits quite well the motivation of the informal logic movement. The authors write:

> [Kahane's *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*] ..., a text in informal logic, was
> intended to enable students to cope with the misleading rhetoric one frequently finds
> in the media and in political discourse. It was organized around a discussion of

fallacies, and was meant to be a practical instrument for dealing with the problems

of everyday life. [It has] ... gone through many editions; [it is] ... still in print; and the

thousands upon thousands of students who have taken courses in which his text [was]

... used can thank Howard for contributing to their ability to dissect arguments and

avoid the deceptions of deceitful rhetoric. He tried to put into practice the ideal of

discourse that aims at truth rather than merely at persuasion. (Hausman et al. 2002)

Other early textbooks in the same vein were Michael Scriven's *Reasoning* (Edgepress, 1976), which

broke new ground by eschewing both formal logic and a fallacies framework; and *Logical Self-*

Defense by Ralph H. Johnson and J. Anthony Blair, first published in 1977 (Johnson and Blair

1977).

Although motivated by pedagogical considerations and manifested initially in a new type of

undergraduate textbook, informal logic conceived of itself as a theoretical sub-discipline within

philosophy. Its scope is well defined by a list of problems and issues which Blair and Johnson

included as an appendix to their keynote address to the First International Symposium which they

organized, an address entitled "The Recent Development of Informal Logic" (Johnson and Blair

1980). They organized these questions under 13 areas: the theory of logical criticism, the theory of

argument, the theory of fallacy, the fallacy approach vs. the critical thinking approach, the viability

of the inductive/deductive dichotomy, the ethics of argumentation and logical criticism, the problem

of assumptions and missing premises, the problem of context, methods of extracting arguments from

context, methods of displaying arguments, the problem of pedagogy, the nature, division and scope

of informal logic, and the relationship of informal logic to other inquiries. These 13 areas and the

questions under each of them characterize remarkably well the sub-discipline of informal logic. If

one were to encapsulate them in a single phrase, one might define informal logic as the philosophical

study of arguments. Trudy Govier has aptly labelled this sub-field, in the title of a recently published collection of her papers (Govier 1999), "the philosophy of argument".

The label "informal logic" was in many ways an unfortunate one for the new sub-discipline. Combined with the dissatisfaction with formal logic as a means of teaching students to deal with the arguments of everyday life, it suggested an ambition to displace formal logic, a claim to do the same thing as formal logic but to do it better. In fact, the scope of formal logic is quite distinct from that of informal logic, or what might better be called the philosophy of argument. The sub-discipline of formal logic does not include among the questions it discusses the nature of argument, ways of extracting arguments from texts, criteria for the evaluation of arguments, or fallacies–as can be verified by consulting the standard references and journals in the field. To take one example, *The Development of Logic* by William and Martha Kneale (Kneale and Kneale 1962), a magisterial history of the development of formal logic from the ancient Greeks to the present, does not include the word "argument" in its index, nor as far as I can see is there any mention of arguments in the 751 densely packed pages of this book. Likewise, the standard references and journals in the field of informal logic do not discuss such topics as formal rules of inference, valuation structures, graphs of sequent calculus proofs, embedding of lattices, or the formalization of feasible arithmetic–to mention just the first few topics which showed up in a search of recent entries in *The Philosopher's Index* which include the words *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, the premier journal in the field of formal logic. In fact, it is a matter of debate within the informal logic community to what extent formal tools and formal considerations are helpful in addresses issues in the philosophy of argument. One is not required to take the vow: I shall never let another symbol pass my lips.

At the outset of my remarks, I described informal logic as a newly distinguished sub-field of philosophy. Quite deliberately, I did not say that it was a new sub-field of philosophy. The

questions which constitute this sub-field have been addressed by philosophers since the time of Plato and Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle has a quite sophisticated theory of argument types, and of criteria of evaluation and criticism relative to each type, as well as a theory of fallacies found in the various types of argument. What is new is the self-conscious recognition of inquiry in these areas as a distinct sub-field of philosophy.

Looking back over the past 25 years, it is obvious that informal logic, or the philosophy of argument, is now a mature, developed discipline. Its premier journal, *Informal Logic*, founded at the First International Symposium, contains within the pages of its 21 volumes a record of, or reference to, the principal contributions and discussions. The papers by Blair and Johnson at the Second and Third International Symposia on Informal Logic, held in 1983 and 1989 respectively, provide a nice review of developments over the first 11 years in the monographs, textbooks and journal articles published in the field (Johnson and Blair 1985, 1994). I had hoped that Blair and Johnson could repeat the exercise for the 14 years between 1989 and 2003. It is a sign of the explosion of published work in this field that they evidently felt it impossible to undertake such a gargantuan task. Since its founding in 1983 at the Second International Symposium on Informal Logic, the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking has sponsored a session in conjunction with the annual meetings of each of the three divisions of the American Philosophical Association, representing a total of more than 100 papers in the field. In Canada, the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation has sponsored a conference every two years since 1995, a conference which has attracted contributors from all the inhabited continents, and of which the present conference is the most recent example; the CD-ROM proceedings of the 1999 conference entitled "Argumentation at the Century's Turn" includes 63 papers, each with a commentary. There are collections of theoretical papers in the field by such luminaries as Trudy Govier (1999), Ralph Johnson and Robert Pinto.

Douglas Walton produces more than one monograph a year in the field; when visited on May 12, 2003, the list at

http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/~walton/books.htm included 31 titles, mostly of books in informal logic. Papers in informal logic have appeared in such prestigious general journals in philosophy as *The Journal of Philosophy* and *Synthese.*

A notable feature of the last 25 years of work in the informal logic community has been the establishment of links to other disciplines interested in argumentation and reasoning: speech communication, linguistics, rhetoric, communication, psychology, computer science, artificial intelligence. A major factor in this cross-disciplinary contact has been the effort of Frans van Eemeren and the late Rob Grootendorst to bring together research communities from around the world in their quadrennial conferences in Amsterdam of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation. Also, the informal logic symposia and the OSSA conferences have systematically incorporated contributions from researchers on argumentation in disciplines other than philosophy.

Despite this quantitative success, and the qualitative improvement which generally ensues from an open exchange of ideas and arguments, the philosophy of argument is not yet an established and accepted sub-field within philosophy. The 21st World Congress of Philosophy, to be held in August 2003 in Istanbul, Turkey, includes 51 sections for contributed papers, not one of which is a section for informal logic or the philosophy of argument. This is an ironic omission from a conference whose theme is "philosophy facing world problems": one of the greatest problems in the world today is irrationality in various forms, ranging from ideological fanaticism to culpable ignorance, and informal logic squarely faces this problem. Further, more undergraduate students in North America study informal logic than any other branch of

philosophy; arguably informal logic courses help students address world problems more than any other type of philosophy course. Because of the lack of a section dedicated to the philosophy of argument, a philosopher who wanted to contribute a paper in this field to this congress, a quinquennial event which brings together philosophers from all over the world, would have to submit it either to the section on logic and philosophical logic or to that on philosophy of communication and information or to that on theory of knowledge; in each case, her paper would be outside the mainstream of those considered by referees for that particular section. It is a scandal that the organizers of the World Congress of Philosophy can include sections on such fields as persons and identity, time and memory, and philosophy of sport, but have not got around to including a section on philosophy of argument.

     Likewise, the teaching of informal logic in undergraduate philosophy courses in North America remains mired in antiquated theoretical conceptions, long disproved or at least questioned in the theoretical literature of the discipline. Introductory philosophy textbooks and encyclopedia articles still proclaim as a universally accepted norm that a good argument is a sound argument, one with true premisses and a deductively valid inference. Sometimes allowance is made for probabilistic inference, usually confined to inductive generalization and extrapolation. The soundness criterion for the evaluation of arguments has been repeatedly and decisively refuted within the informal logic literature; to my knowledge, no philosopher who publishes in this field accepts it. Nor, I might add, is it endorsed within formal logic, which in fact does not concern itself with criteria for the evaluation of arguments. The continued promotion in introductory philosophy courses of soundness as a criterion for evaluating arguments is another scandal of contemporary philosophy. So is the habitual unthinking division of all arguments into deductive and inductive arguments, a division whose exhaustiveness and

mutual exclusiveness have been repeatedly and plausibly questioned in the informal logic

literature. So is the ignoring of other forms of "duction" than de- and in-, for example the relation

of conduction characterized by Carl Wellman (1971) or the relation of *a priori* analogical

inference explored at length by John Wisdom (1991) or the forms of plausible reasoning listed in

writings on argumentation schemes and their critical questions which stem from the pioneering

work of Hastings (1963).

Predictions of the future are dangerous. With some trepidation, therefore, I predict that

the questions which constitute the field of informal logic will continue to be investigated by

philosophers, and that the investigation of such questions will be recognized as having an

integrity which constitutes it as a distinct sub-discipline which is given some label or other. I

hope that the established institutions of philosophy will recognize the existence of this sub-

discipline, and that this recognition will prompt the writers of textbooks in introductory

philosophy, not to mention textbooks in informal logic, to appropriate the established results in

the field and acknowledge the ongoing debates. I encourage the younger members of the present

audience to repeat the present exercise in a panel discussion at the IL@50 conference entitled

"Informal logic: 50 years later".

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