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Reflections on Minimal Adversariality

Trudy Govier

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Article abstract

Beginning with my 1999 account in The Philosophy of Argument, this essay explores views about adversariality in argument. Although my distinction between minimal and ancillary adversariality is widely accepted, there are flaws in my defense of the claim that all arguments exhibit minimal adversariality and in a lack of sensitivity to aspects of gender and culture. Further discussions of minimal adversariality, including those of Scott Aikin, John Casey, Katharina Stevens and Daniel Cohen, are discussed. The claim that all argument are adversarial in at least a minimal sense is defended due to its connection with arguers' intent to support their conclusions.

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Reflections on Minimal Adversariality

TRUDY GOVIER

Department of Philosophy
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, AB
Canada
govier@shaw.ca

Abstract: Beginning with my 1999 account in The Philosophy of Argument, this essay explores views about adversariality in argument. Although my distinction between minimal and ancillary adversariality is widely accepted, there are flaws in my defense of the claim that all arguments exhibit minimal adversariality and in a lack of sensitivity to aspects of gender and culture. Further discussions of minimal adversariality, including those of Scott Aikin, John Casey, Katharina Stevens and Daniel Cohen, are discussed. The claim that all argument are adversarial in at least a minimal sense is defended due to its connection with arguers' intent to support their conclusions.

Résumé: À partir de mon compte rendu de 1999 dans The Philosophy of Argument, cet essai explore les points de vue sur l'opposition dans l'argumentation. Bien que ma distinction entre l'opposition minimale et auxiliaire soit largement acceptée, il y a des failles dans ma défense de l'affirmation selon laquelle tous les arguments présentent une opposition minimale et un manque de sensibilité aux aspects des rôles masculin et féminin et de culture. D'autres discussions sur l'opposition minimale, y compris celles de Scott Aikin, John Casey, Katharina Stevens et Daniel Cohen, sont discutées. L'affirmation selon laquelle tous les arguments sont oppositionnels au moins dans un sens minimal est défendue en raison de son lien avec l'intention de ceux qui argumentent de soutenir leurs conclusions.

Keywords: argument, adversariality, dialogue, feminism, politeness, culture

Two classic papers raised central questions about adversariality in philosophical discussions and arguments. Janice Moulton (1983) and Maryann Ayim (1988) both noted the harshly critical rhetoric and divisive practices common in professional philosophy, suspecting that their prevalence was an important factor limiting the participation of women. The nature of, and need or lack of need for, adversariality was at that point introduced as a topic for philosophical

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exploration but received relatively little attention in academic publications.

One exception was Dan Cohen's (1995) paper "Argument is war and war is hell." Cohen noted the prevalence in argument of war metaphors such as defense, tactics, strategy, and victory, calling for the development of alternative metaphors. Another exception was Michael Gilbert's (1995) account of coalescent argument. In his treatment of argument, Gilbert emphasized agreement, not disagreement, urging that communication be understood as situated and that personal considerations matter a great deal when people offer arguments to each other. He sought to embrace inclusion, agreement, and connectedness when teaching critical reasoning. For Gilbert, the argument as considered by formal and informal logicians, with its premises and conclusion, was the tip of the iceberg; physical and emotional factors, as well as instincts and intuition deserve attention when seeking agreement. Gilbert distinguished logical issues from emotional, visceral, and kisceral (regarding instincts and intuitions) ones. His interest was in how people could come to agree—not on more standard logical issues such as ambiguity, fallacies, background assumptions, or missing premises. Gilbert's model is interesting regarding conflict resolution, extending more broadly than considerations of informal logic would generally recommend.

Though academic exploration of issues of adversariality was rather slight through the nineties, the tone of philosophical discussions at conferences and meetings did moderate and (whether related to diminished adversariality or not) the participation of women in philosophy increased. In this writer's experience both shifts were welcome and useful.

In a 1999 book, *The philosophy of argument*, I offered some reflections on controversy and adversariality. These reflections received scant attention until recently, when they have received considerably more. It will be useful to revisit the 1999 account here as an introduction to some later work. I noted that there are "logical gaps between a difference of beliefs and a battle of the wits" (p. 54). You can oppose a claim in the sense of doubting or disputing it without opposing the person who is advancing that claim. Logical aspects of opposite claims are distinct from social aspects regarding opposition to persons. Considering the accounts of Moulton and

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Ayim, I argued that hostile adversariality could be eliminated from practices of argument without eliminating adversariality altogether. In the essay "Feminists, adversaries, and the integrity of argument," I placed considerable emphasis on disagreement or doubt in the context of argument but stopped short of stating that they are strictly necessary conditions for its existence. An arguer might express support for a conclusion or claim because he thought the audience disagreed, denying it; or he might think that some people could doubt it. On the other hand, he might think that the audience had never considered the claim, or he might be exploring how it could be rationally supported and articulate evidence or reasons as part of that exploration. In "The positive power of controversy," I offered a definition of an adversarial practice as one in which people occupy roles that set them against each other as opponents (p. 242). I maintained that to understand the point of an argument, we have to understand how its conclusion is contested or doubtful, or might seem so. (p. 243) Who would need this argument? Which people differ from the arguer and might disagree with the conclusion or have doubts about it?

One might say that arguing for X is by implication arguing against something else. If this is the case, arguing would be an inherently adversarial practice, one that could lead to the abrasive oppositionality decried by feminist authors such as Moulton and Ayim. Addressing this issue in 1999, I offered an account of minimal adversariality, indicating why it might seem intrinsic to argumentation. (p. 244). Allowing 'X' to stand for the conclusion claim, my account went like this:

1. I hold X.
2. I think that X is correct. (Follows from (1))
3. I think that not-X is not correct. (Follows from (2))
4. I think that those who hold not-X are wrong, or are making a mistake. (Follows from (3))
5. Should I need to argue for X, I will thereby be arguing against not-X. (?)
6. Those who hold not-X are, with regard to the correctness of X and my argument for X, my opponents. (?)

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We may infer from this model that in arguing for X, one will in the nature of the case have opponents, real or hypothetical. We can note here—as critics (Rooney 2003) have observed—that the account questions inferences from (4) to (5) and from (5) to (6). In fact, I could have raised questions earlier—from (3) to (4), certainly, and even from (2) to (3). In a context where an argument is offered to explore how a claim or theory *might be justified*, one might even question the starting point, (1), as was later noted by Catherine Hundleby (2013). The model is flawed. The insight underlying it is that if one is saying something, there will be claims logically incompatible with what one is saying, and one will be committed to the denial of those claims. This insight is relevant to considerations about adversariality and should be taken into account.

It was in this 1999 essay that I introduced a distinction between minimal and ancillary adversariality. Minimal adversariality is neutral and a matter of logic in the sense that a person committed to one claim is thereby committed to the denial of its contradictory and contraries. In offering and seeking support for X, an arguer is committed to rejecting other claims that are logically incompatible with X. Minimal adversariality in this sense does not require hostility, enmity, or any form of social opposition, and may be intrinsic to argumentation. Ancillary adversariality is something else: it includes such features as opposition to persons, hostility, name-calling, belligerence, dogmatism, lack of empathy, and intolerance and will often extend to such fallacies as *ad hominem* and straw man. Ancillary adversariality is generally negative. With minimal adversariality, the arguer for X explicitly or implicitly denies not-X as a claim and rebuts challenges to the premises offered in support of X and the conclusion X. But the arguer need not express hostility or oppositionality to persons who disagree and would believe not-X. The distinction between minimal and ancillary adversariality has met with approval of late, even by those (Hundleby 2013; Rooney 2003, 2010; Yap 2020) who have questioned other aspects of my 1999 account.

I noted that if criticisms help an arguer develop her account more accurately and effectively, it is inappropriate to think of her critic as an opponent: the critic in such a case is more like an aide. Hundleby (2013) agrees also with the claim that controversy is often necessary

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and productive. She notes its need in contexts where supporting women requires opposing patriarchal institutions and their practices. She states "Adversarial structures of controversy may allow space for the development of non-coercive standards for persuasion that involve a negotiable rationality" (p. 247). Yet Hundleby finds my 1999 account too abstract and idealized: she maintains that it assumes idealized situations and capacities and ignores the forms of oppression relevant to many argumentative situations. I recommended politeness on the part of arguers. Hundleby argues that politeness will hardly suffice to eliminate unnecessary aggressiveness in contexts of argument. My recommendation of politeness might appear uncontroversial, but it turns out not to be so. Standards of politeness are gendered in the sense that strong objections launched by women are unacceptable in ways specific to them and not men. Feminists have noted that women will be restricted and handicapped if they abide by social norms that disadvantage them, and some such norms are norms of politeness (Rooney 2003, 2010; Hundleby 2013; Yap 2020). It is unclear just what should be pragmatically recommended for women arguers functioning in a gender-biased context (it seems rather implausible to recommend rudeness, which could be counter-productive to say the least). Nevertheless, the criticism by feminists stands: due to double standards on gender, politeness according to prevailing social norms cannot always be recommended as norms for arguers.

An arguer will put forward considerations within a culture, and cultural norms may vary. Further qualifications regarding my 1999 account are needed for cultural reasons, as pointed out by Audrey Yap (2020) and Tempest Henning (2021). I maintained that being open and direct was a way of showing respect. According to Henning, that stance indicates a western bias. How respect is shown in argumentation will vary culturally. In some cultures and contexts, indirectness may be valued, as illustrated vividly by Henning. Generally, it will make sense for an arguer to put forward her considerations in ways that are understandable and acceptable in her own culture. So, my 1999 account needs qualification with regard to culture as well as to gender.

Several recent accounts consider the notion of minimal adversariality (Rooney 2003, 2010; Cohen 2020; Hundleby 2013). One

concern is that of slippage. Rooney echoes the view that oppositionality should not shift from a *claim* to a *person.*[1] And yet from minimal adversariality, an arguer might slide into various more strident forms. Indeed, I anticipated this possibility, which is elaborated in my later paper on dichotomy, opposition and polarization (Govier 2020). But the possibility of slippage can be acknowledged while upholding the distinction between minimal and ancillary adversariality: one can slip from A to B even though A and B are distinct.

Several recent accounts broadly agree with my claim that minimal adversariality is a necessary feature of argument, though they offer slightly different versions of it. One such is that of Scott Aikin (2011). Aikin states that adversariality is intrinsic to all argumentative contexts on the grounds that they all involve efforts to support a claim that is denied or is viewed as doubtful. He states that in supporting a claim, one is committed to rebutting or undercutting all challenges to it. Aikin maintains that such adversariality can be minimal and need not involve hostility. To offer arguments on behalf of a claim, in discussions, debates, need not be a belligerent or aggressive activity. Indeed, Aikin states, such an approach can be understood as pacifist, given that disagreements and disputes are addressed with words, not weapons.[2]

John Casey (2020) is another who broadly supports minimal adversariality. Casey maintains that an arguer seeks to change the beliefs or commitments of his or her audience. Casey submits that belief is an involuntary matter: when an arguer offers argument to change the beliefs of another, he or she is attempting to influence that person in a way that the other cannot voluntarily control. If the evidence or reasons offered by the arguer bring about a change in the other's beliefs, that change will result independently of that person's will. Casey defines an adversarial interaction as one with two participants, one of whom tries to impede or compel the other. Suppose, for example, that Fred is arguing with Bill as to whether climate change is due to human activity, and Bill doubts or denies that claim. When Fred states evidence or reasons for his position, he is seeking to cause Bill to change his mind, and any change on the

[1] See also Dutilh Novaes (2020)
[2] See also Cohen and Stevens (2019); Dutilh Novaes (2020)

basis of the argument will come about involuntarily because it will be independent of Bill's will. Fred will have influenced Bill in a way Bill cannot control. The argumentative exchange between Fred and Bill will necessarily be an adversarial one, in Casey's sense. There really is a necessary opposition between people in this engagement, despite the fact that Bill may have consented to interact argumentatively with Fred, realizing that he needs to expose his beliefs to challenge to improve their epistemic character. Because of the involuntariness of belief, on this account there is at least minimal adversariality in an argumentative interaction.

Casey urges that we distinguish in discussions of adversariality between argument as product and the process of arguing, and make it clear which is being considered so far as adversariality is concerned. This distinction seems important and promising. Adversarial aspects would appear most readily in processes. We can imagine two persons arguing back and forth, and we can consider their body language, tone of voice, expressions, and apparent degree of opposition to each other. If they display considerable hostility, we have an adversarial process characterized by ancillary adversariality in my original sense; if they disagree and argue back and forth but display respect and moderation, we have minimal adversariality. It is less straightforward to apply these distinctions to argumentative texts in which arguers are not engaging with each other. It is, however, possible to do so, making inferences from context, most obviously from the language used. Suppose, for instance, that an arguer writes 'only an idiot could say such and such.' From the language, we infer hostile opposition.

Questioning even minimal adversariality, several recent accounts contest the need for disagreement or doubt, maintaining that not all arguing occurs in such contexts. We may argue to consider things, to deliberate, to explore ideas, or even simply in conversation. When we argue we put forward evidence or reasons (premises) to support a conclusion, and we may do this in a variety of contexts, of which countering an opposite claim is only one. Douglas Walton and Erik Krabbe (1995) developed the notion of various types of argumentative dialogue: they maintain that the persuasion dialogue, wherein A and B disagree and A uses argument to try to persuade B

to change her mind, is only one type of dialogue.[3] On their analysis, other dialogue types are inquiry (find and verify evidence); deliberation (make a choice); discovery (information seeking); negotiation (get what you want) and eristic (the quarrel). Walton and Krabbe's account has had considerable influence.

It can be plausibly argued that some of the dialogue types put forward by Walton and Krabbe as alternatives to the persuasion dialogue will include efforts at persuasion. One can certainly make this claim with regard to inquiry, discovery, deliberation, and negotiation. One may inquire into the truth or plausibility of X by seeking reasons or evidence for X and exploring the strength of that support, doing that by considering objections and alternative positions. One may discover a claim Y by examining the implications of accepted evidence or reasons for Y and related claims. One may deliberate by considering pros and cons of several alternative choices and the cumulative significance or 'weight' of these pros and cons, as in conductive arguments (a solo person may do these things, or two or more people may do it). As for negotiation, one may pursue one's interests by making a claim and then seeking to support it with reasons. It is by no means clear, then, that the dialogue types distinguished by Walton and Krabbe in 1995 should be understood as precluding the argumentative norms of the persuasion dialogue, which can plausibly be argued to be fundamental. Thus, a plausible case can be made that the other types of dialogue necessarily include key elements of the persuasive one.

In any event, I do not accept a dialogue model of argument. I would not accept that reflections on different types of argumentative dialogues and roles that arguers may take in them provide the best route to a resolution of questions of adversariality. In my essay "When they can't talk back," in *The philosophy of argument* (1999), I pointed out that many arguments are put forward in contexts in which there is no audience interacting with the arguer. Consider, for instance, a letter to the editor, written for a mass circulation newspaper in which it is eventually published. Often such letters comment on an event or situation and are not written to address the views of particular persons. When someone writes such a letter, its

[3] Walton and Krabbe wrote of *persuasion*, not of seeking to compel people.

eventual audience is not present and not known to her. Its size is indeterminate, potentially large. Persons in that audience are likely to have different interests, beliefs, values, and levels of confidence. This is the audience that can't talk back. Although a few readers may write to the arguer or to the paper supporting or questioning her argument, most—and we do not know how many or who they might be—will necessarily remain silent. Such an arguer might fruitfully consider herself to be in 'dialogue' with potential members of that audience and would be advised to consider possible objections to her account. She could, while reasoning or writing, consider amendments or denials that some of these remote and hypothetical persons might raise against her case. It is often instructive to think in such a way. But that would be an imagined dialogue, a hypothetical one. Hers would remain a solo argument.[4] Theorists of argument reflecting on how to resolve disputes may construct rules and strategies specifying norms for such 'dialogues.' But the relevance of such theorist-constructed rules intended for imagined dialogues to the real situations of dialogue is questionable at best.

We may think of a dialogue between two people, together and responding to each other, as a kind of Primary Case of argument and arguing. But it is by no means the only case, as the issue of the non-interactive audience reveals. My 1999 account could be updated with reference to such technological developments as Zoom, Google Meet, Twitter, and Facebook, which allow more ready interaction between physically distant people. But the points about diversity, lack of knowledge, and lack of response by many in a mass audience will remain.

Given that disagreement, doubt, and possible doubt are extremely common in contexts where arguments are offered, we can understand the appeal of the idea that arguments must be adversarial in at least a minimal sense. To accept one claim (the conclusion) logically requires rejecting some other claims (the contradictory and contraries of that conclusion). But elementary reasoning about this point may be over-simplified, as it was in my 1999 model. And if there are different dialogue types in which arguments are used, minimal adversariality may not fit all of them. To further explore these

[4] See also Blair (1998); Johnson (2013)

considerations, we can reflect on refinements urged by Katharina Stevens and Daniel Cohen (Stevens 2016, 2018; Stevens and Cohen 2019, 2020).

In their discussions of roles in dialogue, Stevens and Cohen (2019) do not consider all the types noted by Walton and Krabbe. Rather they concentrate on two contrasting attitudinal aspects of these roles: adversariality and cooperativeness. In this paper they maintain that adversariality would fit a context characterized by difference and disagreement; whereas cooperativeness would characterize one of deliberation or inquiry. Assuming that these are dialogues types, in a dialogue featuring difference, person A would try to persuade person B of a claim; A would be a proponent and B an opponent in that dialogue. A would be seeking to support a claim and would seek to respond to B's challenges about it or argument for it. According to Stevens and Cohen (2019), in this context A's goal is self-interested in the sense that he wants to 'win' and the roles of A and B in this persuasion dialogue would be adversarial in at least a minimal sense (the proceedings would not need to be characterized by any expression of personal opposition). The matter of adversariality is otherwise in a context of inquiry or deliberation. Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby (2017) maintain that if A and B are deliberating together, pursuing truth as distinct from victory, they will be cooperating to recall and address reasons supporting a decision. If they are inquiring together, the same point can be made. In their account Bailin and Battersby urge that adversariality and cooperativeness are not both required when we argue; we only need cooperativeness. If, in some dialogue types, adversariality is not needed, then contrary to myself and some others, minimal adversariality is not a necessary feature of all arguments.

Stevens and Cohen (2018) argue against Bailin and Battersby regarding adversariality and cooperativeness. They maintain that both self-interested (aspiring to win) goals and epistemic goals are key to understanding the processes and goals of argumentation. Stevens and Cohen acknowledge that cooperativeness is often important and adversariality can go too far. They emphasize that the overall goal of arguing is epistemic betterment. But they contend that to utterly dispense with adversariality, as Bailin and Battersby sought to do, would be to deny to arguers a legitimate role in pursuing their

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formally self-interested goal of winning. They urge that norms of argumentation should not be formulated in the abstract, and we are not ideal people. Argumentative partners, situations, and contexts vary; the need for and contribution of adversarial stances will do so likewise. An arguer could be, in their sense, virtuous, while supporting and defending her claims in a (minimally) adversarial context. What is a problem is not adversariality itself but rather "vicious" adversariality, where selfish concerns completely outweigh epistemic ones.

Stevens and Cohen note a lack of fit between my 1999 account and my later paper on opposition and polarization (Govier 2020). Indeed, the fit between these papers is not entirely clear, a fact that is understandable given that they are separated by a twenty-year period. In the later paper, I was primarily concerned with opposites and dichotomies. I emphasized the distinction between logical opposites, which I maintained are relevant to all inquiry and debate, and social opposites, which are not. I urged that logical opposition is often over-simplified when it is understood in terms of contradictories only, and contraries are not considered. In that paper I used the term "restrained partisanship" (Brockreide 1972) instead of minimal adversariality. I emphasized that animosity need not be present, noting that when persons are arguing for claims and against their logical opposites (whether contradictory or contrary), social opposition need not be present. However, slippage is possible, I allowed. One may move from difference to distinction, to exclusive disjunction, competition, polarization, demonization, and even destruction, such that disagreement about a claim expands to hatred between people on opposing sides. The shift from logical to social opposites begins here at the stage of competition and, according to my 2020 account, is not desirable.

In a 2020 paper, Stevens and Cohen distinguish three different respects in which adversariality might be essential to argument: descriptive, normative and conceptual. They point out that when adversariality appears, it can be in the *attitudes* of persons arguing; the *stance* such persons take—for example proponent and opponent on the one hand or fellow inquirers on the other; the *function* of their arguments in meeting challenges; and the *persuasive effects* of those arguments. They state that the persuasive adversarial effect is

conceptually necessary, and the adversarial function is normatively essential in contexts of argument.

Qualifications are required with regard to conceptual, descriptive, and normative features. If, as a conceptual matter, argument were to be necessarily adversarial (at least in a minimal sense), then any supposed argument that was not adversarial would not qualify as an argument at all. If a feature is conceptually necessary to a phenomenon, then, we need not consider whether it is descriptively characteristic of that phenomenon: it will always be present. The relevant norms can, of course, be developed and articulated, as Stevens and Cohen do.

Stevens and Cohen (2020) introduce the intriguing notion of an angelic devil's advocate, a figure needed to introduce objections and difficulties, thereby serving to protect arguers from my side bias and self-deception as to the merits of their own case. The angelic devil's advocate is a restrained being who is judicious and careful and never goes too far.

> We need angelic devil's advocates when we argue but cannot have them. They are necessary because without opposition, we deceive ourselves into thinking that our conclusions really are the ones best supported by the balance of reasons–when we have not in fact fairly balanced the reasons. We need them because none of us can simply stop being closed-minded, susceptible to bias, and adversarial in attitude (2020, p. 910).

These are flaws of the human mind. The adversarial function, aided by the angelic devil's advocate, includes probing tasks, formulating objections, and raising questions.

There is, after all, some confrontation of ideas needed in argumentation, state Stevens and Cohen. If the confrontation is not explicit, it is implicit and easily shown to be so. Why? Their argument is quick at this point and relies on Aikin (2017). They state that the 'adversarial function' must be fulfilled in all argumentative contexts—whether with actual or hypothetical opponents, whether explicitly or implicitly. They maintain that the adversarial function is so pervasive that it is always at least implicit and must be included in any adequate account of argument. Again, why?

At this point, I return to the fundamental idea of an argument with premises and conclusion such that the premises are put forward in an effort to support the conclusion. In putting forward an argument, the arguer seeks to support the conclusion. If there are objections that would challenge the premises, reasoning, or conclusion, then the arguer seeking to support that conclusion must address these as part of the effort to support it (Aikin 2017, Johnson 2000). I suggest this insertion in Stevens and Cohen's account. Trying to give support with evidence or reasons is a necessary feature of argument and from this feature, we can see that it is normatively necessary to address objections that oppose the argument. The insight behind my 1999 account, that in supporting a claim, one is committed to denying some others (contradictories, contraries and rivals in context) should also be considered. In seeking to support a claim with evidence or reasons we are denying other claims. We have, then, necessary oppositional elements in argument, which is to say that we have a necessarily adversarial element. This adversariality can be minimal, as urged in my 1999 account.

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