

Book Review

In Defense of Informal Logic

Don S. Levi

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Reviewed by Christopher W. Tindale

The collection of essays gathered here make two principal claims: that many logical analyses by both formal and informal logicians are inadequate because they ignore the rhetorical context (or are completely devoid of one); and that informal logic should be expanded to include rhetorical ploys. This latter claim derives from Don Levi's wider conception of argument than the logical one. The early chapters cohere around establishing these points; the latter ones stray to other grounds while still retaining the interest in rhetorical context.

Ignoring the rhetorical context is a fundamental concern; it gives rise to inadequate analyses and bad theory. Sometimes this is because what is at stake is only a rhetorical ploy like the *ad hominem* (Ch.1), which fails to be grasped by logical accounts because those accounts are not concerned with rhetoric. On other occasions, it gives rise to bad theories about so-called fallacies like begging the question (Ch.2) or the *ad baculum* (Ch.3). (These are not fallacies for Levi because he does not believe that they are arguments as this term is understood within logical theory.) Likewise, when the issue is not deriving arguments from real discourse but assuming that "classroom" logic, involving concepts like validity or truth-functionality, can be applied to actual discourse, the same concern arises. The special contexts of the classroom fail to accommodate the history, audience, etc. that are part of any actual discourse (Chs.10 & 11).

This focus gives rise to some insightful conclusions and interesting observations. For example, the dialogue approach to arguments, especially as this is developed by Walton, promises a renewed interest in rhetoric because of its dynamic conception of statements as responses to questions (26). But ultimately this is betrayed by a lingering commitment to formalization in the form of schema of artificial questions and answers. There follows the problem of getting the schema to fit actual discourse. Again, interesting observations are made about the failure of Western critics/logicians (really psychologists) to recognize the importance of context when applying tests intended to

ascertain the effects of illiteracy on the ability to make logical inferences (“In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North. What color are the bears there?” 112). The failure of the subject to give the “correct” answer is taken as a failure to reason logically. But as Levi points out, it can just as easily be explained by a refusal to give answers that are not based on what the respondent has experienced. The interviewer’s context is not the subject’s context, and each may interpret the question accordingly.

Levi has specific ideas as to what is to count as ‘context’. An appreciation of the rhetorical context involves “who the parties to the argument are and how they come to be on different sides; why they are arguing; their interests and concerns; and the insights or discoveries that inform what they have to say” (19). Perhaps we could add and subtract from this list, but it is pretty comprehensive and goes beyond the often-offered reference to ‘background’. Of greater importance is how Levi *uses* such a context in the method he advocates. As illustrated through an exchange over abortion (Ch.6), Levi draws on the context in exploring the argumentation and deciding whether something raised is the *real issue*, whether anything *really turns on* a particular contribution, or whether a point is *interesting* in light of what has been said (45). Other informal logicians might read Levi’s account and conclude that he is simply employing concepts of relevance and acceptability in a particularly idiosyncratic way. But I think it is important to observe that if this is what he is doing, he is certainly giving a vivid portrait of how such concepts work in application, and he is doing it in a way that thoroughly engages the exchange in its actual circumstances rather than abstracting from them.

Like ‘context’, ‘argument’ undergoes a transformation in Levi’s account. As he wants us to understand him (and there is another sense I will offer later), ‘argument’ is an engaged activity of constructively investigating an issue in dispute that involves both the presentation of positions and their analysis (Ch.5). Addressing an audience is thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for an argument to take place because a model requiring only this ignores the role of the analysis: “[T]he analyst also is an audience, and the questions the analyst raises about the argument reflect concerns of someone who knows certain things about the history of the controversy, who has certain ideas about what the controversy really is about, and who can anticipate objections or criticisms of the argument” (75). Levi’s model is thus quite dialectical and dispute-oriented. While it appears to shift attention away from things like inquiry or negotiation, it seems likely that Levi would understand these as what is at issue in a dispute. Earlier, he insists that if it is “hard to imagine anyone taking exception to what [someone] is saying”, then that person is not arguing (70).

These points give some insight into Levi’s methodology. His way of doing argument analysis involves focussing on what is at issue in a dispute.

Just as an argument addresses an audience, so too does its analysis. For Levi, then, the appraisal of an argument is also a contribution to the argument (45). And various concepts that have a common currency in informal logic are redeployed by Levi toward addressing this aim. 'Fallacy', for example, is not something to be used in judging an argument, but is something to help us understand how the arguer is thinking and should be a means for helping the participants in a dispute understand one another and achieve some resolution.

There is much to commend in Levi's rich and varied discussions, not least the importance of rhetorical considerations in argument analysis. But there are also things that will give some informal logicians pause. Because of his engaged, context-dependent approach, Levi eschews theory itself. There is no theory of fallacy (27), a claim for which he expects to be criticized. There is no theory of enthymeme (Ch.6). And, and this is a point on which we part company, while he offers rhetoric as an alternative to logic, he rejects the assumption that any alternative must take the form of a theory of argumentation (43). Yet it is the case that what he advocates is essentially case-by-case practice. This is not an 'anything goes' approach. His analyses involve addressing specific features of the context, understanding the issue at stake, and reconceptualizing things like the traditional fallacies as ways to explore issues. In short, there is a normative theory here. Future work is likely to clarify this.

Furthermore, there is an apparent (and it may be no more than this) gap between what Levi advocates as 'arguing' (the constructive exploring of issues), and what he actually *does* (the adversarial criticizing of other theorists). Many of Levi's chapters have a prime antagonist (Lambert & Ulrich, Wreen, Walton, Govier, Fogelin, anonymous logicians, Gettier) whose ideas and models he critiques and rejects while advancing his own. The constructiveness in this approach is not always evident.

Levi's book will repay serious study, and his is an important voice among those advocating for more rhetorical considerations to be brought into informal logic. Many of these chapters have been published before and there has been little revision to really facilitate a developing train of argument. Hence, some chapters fit better than others. But all have something worthwhile to say. A final chapter looks at disputation as it was understood in the work of the ancient Chinese philosophy, Zhuangzi. Many of his stories illustrate how insulated we are by our situation from realizing that things will look quite different to us in retrospect. I suspect that Levi would offer this sentiment to some of the entrenched thinking that still characterizes the work of some logicians.

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