

THE PRACTICE OF ARGUMENTATION IN SOCIETY:

"Ehninger's Paradigm and Religious Controversy"

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Douglas Ehninger, in 1970, presented his conception of "Argument As Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations And Its Uses."¹ His conception, as he duly noted, was "Paradigmatic rather than descriptive." His concern was with the defining "characteristics of argument . . . with those abstract conditions or presuppositions upon which 'acts' of argument are predicated."² In short, Ehninger built a rational or formally logical model of argument which, insofar as possible, was uncorrupted by empirical or existential conditions.

To any student of argument interested in both in theory and practice, however, one question concerning Ehninger's paradigm must inevitably arise: "To what degree does, or should, Ehninger's conception represent reality?"³ It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to answer that question by measuring Ehninger's paradigm against the practice or argumentation in a selected segment of society. In so doing, not only will Ehninger's theory be tested, though, but the structure and function of specific argumentative practices clarified.

To measure the paradigm against the practice of argumentation in the courtroom, the campaign, labor negotiations or even the family would be, perhaps, to confound the issues rather than to clarify them. In each of these cases, the process or argumentation has been contaminated, altered from its natural course by factors extrinsic to the

process itself. Courtroom arguments are generally limited to propositions of fact and limited by traditional procedures as well.⁴ Campaign arguments deal primarily with policy and have been greatly affected by the media.⁵ Labor negotiations are often constrained by contracts; and family controversies by the "game playing" nature of people.⁶ One must, therefore, select instances of argumentation which appear to have evolved as naturally as possible; for only if the practice is relatively free from contamination will it provide an adequate test of the paradigm.

Several instances of such basically uncontaminated argumentation have occurred during key moments in the historical development of the Christian church. One such moment was the point at which the church became aligned with the Roman state during the reign of Constantine. The Reformation provided a second, extended period of religious controversy. A final period emerged in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Insofar as can be determined, none of these periods were regulated by any preconceived notions of proper argumentative behavior; thus, they provide good test cases for Ehninger's theory.

In the following paragraphs, then, key points of Enginger's paradigm will be outlined briefly and, subsequently, tested against the practice of religious controversy.

Ehninger constructs his paradigm on the premise that A argues with B "not to add to B's repertory of facts or data, but to reshape a belief or alter an attitude which B already entertains."⁷ Two critical aspects of this premise need to be noted: first, that

Ehninger appears to believe that argument is two-sided, with A and B trying to convince each other; second, that argument is not informative nor instructive, but merely corrective. The historical evidence drawn from the practice of religious controversy does not support the first aspect of Ehninger's premise, but tends to support the second.

The religious controversies tended to be three-sided. In most cases, opponents recognized that they could not persuade each other but chose public debate anyway, in order to win the assent of an audience. During the reign of Constantine, for example, Arius debated the religious leaders of Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea and Nicomedia not to persuade them of his beliefs, but to persuade the people of those cities. His strategy was, in fact, so effective that Constantine was forced to call the Council of Nicaea to settle the issues raised by Arius.⁸ Similarly, Martin Luther debated Eck, and Zwingli debated the anabaptists to strengthen their respective positions among the people rather than to change their opponents' minds. Only in the debate in which Luther and Zwingli confronted each other was there a case of two-sided argumentation. Of course, the unhappy and very unsuccessful results of that debate establish even more strongly the proposition that argument should be three-sided.⁹ Alexander Campbell, in the introduction of his famous debate with Robert Owen, gives an excellent summation of this point.

When we agreed to meet Mr. Owen in public debate, it was not with any expectation that he was to be convinced of the error of his system . . . nor . . . that I was in the least to be shaken in my faith . . . But the public, the wavering, doubting, and unsettled public are those for whose benefit this discussion has . . . been undertaken. They are not beyond the reach of conviction, correction, and reformation.¹⁰

Campbell's statement, even as it supports the conclusion that argument is three-sided, also illustrates the attitude that argumentation is primarily corrective rather than instructive. In each of the instances of religious controversy cited above, the goals of the disputants were to reform attitudes or beliefs thought to be already held by the members of the various audiences. In every case, the controversies rested on the interpretation of data generally accepted by both sides. The men battled over what the scriptures meant rather than over the authority or truth of the scriptures.

The practice of religious controversy, therefore, appears to support the contention that argumentation is more corrective than instructive. At the same time, however, the preponderance of evidence suggests that argumentation has been, and ought to be, three-sided; for head-to-head disputes seem to have been significantly less effective in reforming beliefs than those encounters in which the decision-making powers resided in a third party.

II

Following the exposition of the premise on which he based his paradigm, Ehninger begins to develop his conception of the nature of argumentation. By comparing it with other modes of correction or decision-making, he arrives at the conclusion that argumentation is fundamentally antithetical to coercion, that its purpose is more to expose choices for the participants than to eliminate choice. From this essential nature, then Ehninger derives several attributes.

Argumentation is "bilateral and non-enforceable, permits of various levels and kinds of success, demands a posture of restrained partisanship, and places the 'person' in a position of genuine existential 'risk.'" ¹¹ This entire conception is at odds with the evidence provided by the chosen historical cases.

The essential nature of religious controversies seems to have come not from the fact that the participants were opposed to coercion but from the fact that they chose to interact symbolically rather than directly. First of all, it appears clear that many of the religious combatants did attempt to coerce their opponents. Excommunication, threats of damnation, loss of citizenship, and book-burning all characterized Luther's struggle with the Roman Catholic Church. ¹² Similar attitudes existed among church controversialists on the American frontier. In the words of Methodist William Burke, "the Baptists did all they could to draw off our members and get them into the water." ¹³ In short, the motives of the religious disputants appeared quite coercive and, hence, could not have provided the essentially non-coercive nature which Ehninger attributes to argumentation.

The fundamental ingredient, however, which was shared by most of the religious controversialists was the choice of interacting indirectly or symbolically rather than directly upon one another. The Catholic Church could have silenced Luther a great deal more quickly and completely than it chose to do. The tragic history of the Mormons in America, the deaths and tar-and-featherings, indicates that churchmen actually did take direct action upon occasion in order to silence opposing points of view. ¹⁴ Yet in the vast majority of cases, religious disputants advanced or defended their cases symbolically.

In choosing symbolic interaction as the primary mode of problem-solving, it is probable that the religious leaders were moved at least as much by the political and social setting of the arguments as they were by any desire to avoid direct coercion. When Constantine became the Emperor of Rome, for example, the majority of his people were well aware of his sympathy for Christians and of the apparent power of that faith in battle. Thus, to have ended the issue of Arianism militarily was out of the question.¹⁵ Luther and Zwingli, as well, were protected by the strongly favorable and quite nationalistic attitudes of the people of their respective locales.¹⁶ In neither case could the Catholic churchmen have physically silenced their opponents without simultaneously causing a rebellion or revolution. Thus it would appear that the essential nature of religious arguments was rooted in the setting from which the controversy emerged and not in the desires of the disputants to remain non-coercive.

Because the nature of the religious argumentation was rooted in its setting, many of the attributes ascribed to it by Ehninger's theory in fact did not exist. Specifically, while the historical controversies were bilateral and not self-enforcing, they did not permit of various levels or kinds of success, did not require a posture of restrained partisanship, and often did not place the participants in positions of existential risk. First, victory or defeat was the typical conclusion of church combat, with the decision being made either by a town council as in the case of the Zwingli debates, or by the people as in Arius's first four debates and in most of the American controversies. Second,

the actions of many of the participants, notably Luther and Eck, were anything but those of a restrained partisan.¹⁷ Finally, it did not appear that most of participants were placed in any position of existential risk precisely because the results of many of the controversies were not enforceable. When Arius lost a debate, he simply moved to another city and began again. Certainly, the fact that Robert Owen lost his debate to Alexander Campbell by a vote of nearly 1200 to 3 did not in the least convince him that he was wrong nor deter him from subsequently promoting his utopian schemem.¹⁸

In examining religious controversy, therefore, one is moved by the evidence to conclude that Ehninger's paradigm does not offer an accurate description of the nature of argumentation. Arguments, it seems, arise not from any motivation to avoid coercion but from the recognition that the setting for the confrontation requires symbolic interaction rather than the application of direct force. Furthermore, because it is essentially symbolic, the disputants can avoid most existential risk. In short, the nature of religious controversy tends to be in direct opposition to most of the points derived from Ehninger's paradigm.

III

Turning from his discussion of the nature of argumentation, Ehninger focuses, in turn, upon its limitations and its uses. In regard to its limitations, he suggests that argumentation is indecisive, restricted to a single pair of mutually exclusive alternatives, applicable only to topics which can be treated symbolically, and capable of dealing solely with issues of means, and not those

of ends.¹⁸ The test of these limits by historical evidence, however, appears to establish that Ehninger's list is partially incorrect and incomplete.

On the one hand, the last three limitations he posed are substantiated by the evidence. Almost all of the religious argumentation, for example, did resolve itself into one set of mutually exclusive alternatives. Interestingly, these alternatives were usually symbolized in terms of the men who advocated them. The popular choices, then, were those of Luther or Eck, Luther or Zwingli, and Campbell or Owen, rather than of the acceptance or rejection of the doctrines of transubstantiation, adult immersion, or the coming millennium.

On the other hand, Ehninger's proposed limitation of indecisiveness was not supported by historical fact. As has been previously noted, in most of the religious controversies the decision-making power lay not with the disputants but with a third party. In these cases, there was a strong element of decisiveness at the conclusion of the arguments; for even though the arguers themselves might not have achieved a resolution of the issues, the judge usually had. Thus, Arius was banished from his country and the antibaptists ordered to stop the practice of adult immersion in Switzerland.

Furthermore, to the degree that the setting of a controversy does indeed determine whether it will be settled symbolically or coercively, as history suggests, then argumentation has a limit which Ehninger fails to point out. If it is true that the nature of controversy is a product of its setting, argumentation therefore is also limited by its setting.

It is limited to those settings in which there is a third party with interest both in the issues involved and in its own well-being sufficient to promote symbolic interaction and to prevent direct coercion. From this analysis and discussion of the historical evidence, thus, it can be seen that Ehninger's list of limitations is both incorrect and incomplete.

Finally, in regard to the uses of argument, Ehninger proposes that it may be, and ought to be, used in the resolution of problems because it is both more reliable and more humane than other methods of decision-making. He concludes:

The ultimate justification of argument as method, therefore lies . . . in the fact that by introducing the arguer "into a situation of risk in which openmindedness and toleration are possible," it paves the way toward "personhood" for the disputants, and through them and millions like them opens the way to a society in which the values and commitments requisite to "personhood" may some day replace the exploitation and strife which now separate man from man and nation from nation.¹⁹

With this vision of a peaceful and humane society one should have no quarrel. But to suggest that argumentation, per se, is the path by which one can attain that goal is to neglect the lessons of history. For it has been established, at least within the history of religious controversy, that argumentation has been successfully pursued only when the society in which the controversy is set, itself is willing to listen to reason, to be moved by logic and evidence, and to abstain from violence. Thus, it is the nature of society itself, and not the nature of argumentation, which provides the key to a peaceful and humane existence. In sum, while one can acknowledge the validity of

the use Ehninger posits for argumentation, one is nevertheless constrained by the weight of historical evidence from putting too much faith in the effectiveness of the method itself.

IV

In conclusion, from the practice of argumentation in religious controversies one can draw two tentative conclusions: first, that argumentation requires at least three participants -- the arguers and a third party to make the decision; and second, that argument derives its essential nature from the fact that it is symbolic rather than direct interaction. To the extent that these two conclusions are valid, one can begin to derive from them principles of argumentative behavior which will, indeed, make the practice of this method of decision-making reliable and humane. One cannot, however, place his faith for achieving a peaceful or happy existence solely in this method or process; for the lessons of history suggest that unless mankind is willing to listen to reason, argument can have little effect.

FOOTNOTES

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¹Douglas Ehninger, "Argument As Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations And Its Uses," SM, 37 (June, 1970), 101-110.

²Ibid., 101.

³For a good definition of a "paradigm" and a solid justification for testing them against reality see Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 10-18.

⁴Abraham L. Freedman, "On Advocacy," Villanova Law Review, I (May, 1956), 293-309. See also Francis X. Busch, Law Tactics in Jury Trials (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950).

⁵Howard H. Martin, "Effects of Increased Use of TV Spot Announcements on the Level of Public Political Debate," (unpublished paper read before the Central States Speech Association in April, 1975). See also Stephen C. Shadegg, How To Win An Election (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1964).

⁶For a discussion of negotiations see Lowell Laporte, "Labor Relations, Unions, and Strikes," (New York: National Industrial Conference Board, Inc., 1968), 3-10. On the topic of family games see Eric Berne, Games People Play (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 92-109.

⁷Ehninger, 101.

⁸Philip Hughes, The Church In Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325-1870. (Garden City, New York: Hanover House, 1961), 11-36.

⁹Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. VII: Modern Christianity: The German Reformation (2nd ed., rev.: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 620-653. See especially, pp. 637-50. The work cited is a photolithoprint of the original second edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1910.

¹⁰Alexander Campbell, The Evidences of Christianity (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Company, 1957), 6-7. The work cited is a photolithoprint of the original work published by Alexander Campbell at Bethany, Virginia (West Virginia), 1829.

¹¹Ehninger, 102-105. See especially the summation of Section II on page 105. In this passage Ehninger is quoting from Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., "Some Reflections on Argumentation," Philosophy Rhetoric, and Argumentation, ed. Maurice Natanson and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. (University Park, Pa., 1965), 1-9.

¹²Schaff, 565.

¹³James B. Finley, Sketches of Western Methodism (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall Publishers, 1855), p. 54.

¹⁴Emilius O. Randall and Daniel J. Ryan, History of Ohio (6 vols.; New York, 1912), III, 414-415.

¹⁵B. J. Kidd, A History of the Church to A. D. 461 (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), II, 28-34.

¹⁶Carlton J. H. Hayes, Marshall Whithed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, History of Europe (rev. ed.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 469.

¹⁷Schaff, 178-179.

¹⁸Ehninger, 105-108.

¹⁹Ehninger, 110. Here again Ehninger is quoting from Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation, 3.