

Rhetoric in Scandinavia

Retoryka w Skandynawii

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

JOHN MAGNUS R. DAHL

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1167-9632>

John.dahl@uib.no

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JOHN MAGNUS R. DAHL

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1167-9632>

John.dahl@uib.no

Review/recenzja: Christian Kock and Marcus Lantz (eds.). *Rhetorical Argumentation: The Copenhagen School*. Windsor, Ontario: Windsor Studies in Argumentation 2023¹

The field of argumentation theory is a rich field, with rather deep divisions. In addition to the perhaps most important distinction between formal logic and practical argumentation, that is, between the study of logical-mathematical inferences and how people actually argue within different domains, there are several “schools” that study practical argumentation. One could say (as argumentation theorists like) that the various schools are based on three different perspectives on argumentation in Western thinking, inherited from classical times: logic, dialectic, and rhetoric.

The title of this fine anthology, edited by Christian Kock and Marcus Lantz, reveals that it is concerned with a rhetorical look at argumentation. More specifically, the book presents insights into the work on argumentation theory from the Copenhagen milieu in rhetoric. This builds on the seminal work of Merete Jørgensen, Charlotte Onsberg, Christian Kock, and Lone Rørbech, consisting of both a textbook (Jørgensen & Onsberg 1987) and an empirical research project – “Rhetoric that moves votes”. These have been the cornerstone of the Copenhagen research into and teaching of argumentation, and the background for their particular rhetorical perspective.

How does a rhetorical perspective on argumentation differ from the others, such as informal logic (based in Windsor, Canada) or pragma-dialectics (based in Amsterdam)? The distinctive character, and advantages, of the Copenhagen school are clearly highlighted in the book’s introduction: A rhetorical perspective on argumentation takes the functions argumentation has in a democratic society as its starting point – always from a normative angle. What does it take for argumentation to serve (deliberative) democracy? In this sense, the Copenhagen

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School's theory of argumentation is both descriptive and normative, to borrow a self-description from the pragma-dialectical research program. The key difference between the Copenhagen School and argumentation theorists in Amsterdam and Windsor is that the rhetoricians emphasize the value of debate and dispute: You normally do not reach agreement when arguing. Often, reaching agreement is simply not possible, because practical argumentation is about choices and values – questions where it is not possible to reach common ground. Good argumentation is argumentation that sheds the best possible light on the options at hand. That is why political debate is the prototype of practical-rhetorical argumentation: Two or more parties argue, but it is of course the audience, or the voters, who are meant to be convinced. According to the editors, this is where the Copenhagen School's special perspective and contribution lies.

In addition to an extensive introductory chapter, which sets the stage by explaining the Copenhagen School's perspective on argumentation very well, historically as well as theoretically, and gives a good overview of the various contributions, the anthology has three sections: conceptual cornerstones, empirical studies, and newly written contributions. The latter reveals that this anthology mainly consists of reprints – which should not be seen as a shortcoming: Firstly, this is an anthology which, thanks to careful editing and a good introduction, appears as a unified whole, not as a random collection of texts. Secondly, many of the articles were originally published in Danish, and can thus be introduced to an Anglophone audience – which most of them deserve.

In the first section, conceptual cornerstones, Charlotte Jørgensen discusses the genre of political debate, a conceptual contribution that originates from the empirical project “Rhetoric that moves votes,” Christian Kock contributes with two articles originally aimed at a philosophical audience where he, through slightly different angles, highlights the particularities of a rhetorical perspective on argumentation, and Christina Pontoppidan revives the old *topos* doctrine as a special rhetorical tool, both for crafting and for analysing argumentation.

In the second section, empirical studies, Merete Onsberg analyzes the Danish debate on prostitution (from the time around 2010, when the neighboring Scandinavian countries had or were in the process of introducing legislation criminalising the purchase of sex), Rasmus Rønlev provides an analysis of online newspapers' comment section, Marcus Lanz links together *logos* and *pathos* in an article about affect, temporality, and argumentation that leads to action; Sine Nørholm Just and Jonas Gabrielsen demonstrate the usefulness of the ancient *stasis* theory by analysing the debate about Danish corona measures, and Mette Bengtsson analyses the second persona (Black 1970) in a large selection of Danish commentary articles.

In the last section, newly written contributions, young academics enter centre stage: Frederik Appel Olsen studies a famous debate on philosophy of science as a rhetorical event characterized by polemics, David R. Gruber discusses how the Copenhagen School's perspective on argumentation can be used to understand the rhetorical effectiveness of *bullshit*, Mathias Møllebæk examines the connection between argumentation and the practical implementation of health policy, while, finally, Pamela Pietrucci discusses the connection between science scepticism and science communication in a highly politicized context: the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy.

I will not go into detail about all these 13 contributions – an interested reader can consult the introductory chapter (published open access) to get thematic details. Instead, I will use the rest of the book review to look at what qualities the collection has *as a tool for school building*: For making the Copenhagen school of argumentation into something distinctive in the field. It is therefore worth mentioning the role that anthologies play in the field of practical argumentation. The Copenhagen School is, as suggested in the introduction, perhaps the most loosely composed and least clearly defined of the various schools, where both informal logic, with headquarters in Windsor, Canada, and especially the pragma-dialectics, with Amsterdam as the undisputed capital, appear as welded units. The pragma-dialecticians stick to a unified and explicit research program, have an undisputed research leader (professor emeritus Frans van Eemeren), and almost constantly publish anthologies and special issues about the latest developments in their research program – where they also often translate previously printed contributions from Dutch. The Windsor community as well publishes anthologies, journals, and organizes conferences. An anthology is thus a clear demonstration of strength from the Copenhagen School.

Nevertheless, the most important display of strength such a book can offer, in an anthology-rich landscape, is to demonstrate that a rhetorical perspective on argumentation is valuable – perhaps even that it is better than other schools of thought in the field. Does *Rhetorical Argumentation: The Copenhagen School* manage this?

It does. I have already emphasised the introductory chapter, but it is worth mentioning again, since it makes it exemplarily clear how the Copenhagen School, according to themselves, differs from other schools. However, I believe that for example the pragma-dialecticians would agree with the goal that the editors on p. 14 highlight as particularly suitable for a rhetorical perspective: that argumentation theory should be suitable for understanding and evaluating “decisions facing citizens in a polity.” They probably also objected to being characterised as philosophers

(and thus *implicitly* as Platonists primarily concerned with “definite” truth): It is a school that grew out of Dutch studies and from pragmatics, and much of the theory is based on linguistic insights into how people actually communicate. The point of this is not to defend the Amsterdam School (they manage that themselves), but to show that the anthology’s claim that a rhetorical perspective has a unique affinity for understanding deliberative democracy is perhaps too strong. If I read the editors and the contributions a bit more generously, their claim is perhaps rather that the rhetorical perspective is best suited to assessing practical argumentation in political-democratic contexts.

This leads us to the question of normativity, which must be central to all argumentation theory. Unfortunately, I do not think that the older contributions are particularly strong in this regard, neither when they try to counter other argumentation theories nor when they analyse and evaluate actual debates. I miss Kock’s (2009) article “Choice is not True or False,” which I see as the strongest Copenhagen text when it comes to presenting a clear alternative to established argumentation theories, and that would have strengthened the book. Looking at the texts at hand, I think that Charlotte Jørgensen’s otherwise good paper, “Debate for Better or Worse,” illustrates the normative problem well. This paper’s qualities lie in how it will rehabilitate the debate genre, clearly showing the rhetorical and democratic value of disagreement. At the same time, Jørgensen introduces something that (until now?) might be the central problem with the Copenhagen School’s rhetorical argumentation theory: The rather strong claim that argumentation can only be considered domain specific. In the domain of deliberative democracy, debate between political candidates will therefore be a kind of prototype of an argumentative genre, and one must here assess the quality of the argument based on whether the voters have been given *enough weighty* arguments to be convinced.

The problem is: *when do we have enough weighty arguments?* If the criterion is that the audience is convinced, we end up in Plato’s caricature of sophism. If the criterion is based on that weighty argumentation should have democratic value – which I am quite sure is what all the contributors, and especially the pioneers like Kock, Jørgensen, and Onsberg actually agree with – the question will potentially lead us astray in a perpetual regression, perhaps also into a positivist pitfall (“now we have so much information that we know this for sure”) – something rhetoricians hardly want to admit. With some reluctance, I have to admit that the pragma-dialecticians solve this better by starting from the fact that even debaters who never want to resolve their disagreement play a language game where they – ideally – relate to the rules as if they want to reach an agreement. In this language game, the counterargument and the defence against it are absolutely central, in a way

that should be understood quite literally as Popperian falsification (“have we eliminated all *existing* doubts about this being true?”). This way, one avoids eternal regress, and one has a universally valid principle that can be used to derive various argumentative fallacies.

The value of such domain-wide principles becomes clear when looking at Merete Onsberg’s article “The Danish Debate About Prostitution,” an article I must say is somewhat disappointing. Here we are first told that “Rhetorical discourse must, moreover, communicate the necessary knowledge about the issue, given the situation” (p. 183), but what “necessary knowledge” is – theoretically speaking, but also in this concrete debate – we never get to know. Furthermore, the chapter is full of statements like “As a whole, Reinicke’s contributions to the debate are of a rare well-balanced quality” – without telling us what kind of quality criteria the author adheres to, or how they have been applied here. The article ends with a formulation that is surprisingly similar to something one could have read in an article from the Amsterdam school: “(...) a deliberative balancing of points of view is hampered, depriving citizens of the basis they need for deciding in an informed way for or against a ban on prostitution” (p. 195). My point with this criticism is that Onsberg starts her paper by claiming that the participants in the Danish prostitution debate cannot, or do not want to, agree. Therefore, she argues, it is how the debate forms the basis for action which must be the starting point for normative assessments. However, this axiom of the Copenhagen rhetorical argumentation theory is simply not used in a transparent or convincing way in her normative analysis. Thus, she ends up with a sentence that could have been written by the pragma-dialecticians, or Jürgen Habermas, or Arne Næss (1944).

On a more enthusiastic note, it is great to see that several of the newly written works more clearly are able to show the unique contribution of the Copenhagen School to rhetorical argumentation – also normatively. This is of course easier for the academically younger scholars who have had the privilege of taking a step away from the most heated debates where their predecessors had to legitimize the very existence of rhetorical perspectives, and how they can stand on the shoulders of the pioneers, like Jørgensen, Onsberg, and Kock’s important work on political debate. What is particularly exciting, and highly original in the last section of the collection, is how these four articles deal with argumentation in the scientific field – both taking an interest in “pure” science and in when science plays a political and societal role. I would particularly like to draw attention to the chapters by Frederik Appel Olsen and David R. Gruber, respectively.

In “Arguing Against Argumentation in Science,” Olsen analyses philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend’s infamous work *Against Method* as a *rhetorical event*. He uses several interesting concepts and methods from contemporary rhetorical

theory to examine both the book as text, and its reception the first years after its publication. He concludes that it had “queer effects” in the field of philosophy of science, where “queer” should be understood as “remarkable” or “unpredictable,” or perhaps both at the same time. This happened precisely because the book was a polemic: Feyerabend ferociously attacked (a straw man of?) contemporary scientists and philosophers of science; and his critics took the bait, responding with even more aggression. Although Feyerabend’s methodological anarchism has convinced few and has neither invited, nor led to, a kind of “agreement in the middle,” his book has nevertheless become a classic and very important in the philosophy of science, precisely because its publication created a space for dissent which was productive to think in. This is a very exciting and thought-provoking way of using a basic axiom of the Copenhagen School: argumentation primarily has value as a way of showing disagreement. According to the biographical notes, Olsen’s chapter is also his first scientific publication, and the text is so mature, original, and well-written that it should make all the rest of us think a bit about what we were doing when we were PhD students.

Gruber’s chapter, “Sniff the Air and Settle In: Bullshit, Rhetorical Listening, and the Copenhagen School’s Approach to Despicable Nonsense,” should also be honoured for its use of insights from contemporary rhetorical theory – especially the concept of “rhetorical listening.” In the analyses of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’ attack on the US federal administration’s policy on Covid-19, especially on masks in schools, Gruber argues well how what he abbreviates CS (Copenhagen School) is a theory with room for rhetorical listening, room for real listening to the other side, room for disagreement, and why this is important rather than dismissing or ignoring a rhetor who engages in what often is considered rhetorical fallacies – for example *bullshit*. Gruber does a solid job in highlighting the democratic and theoretical value of what is specifically rhetorical: It is important to take arguments that are normatively bad, but rhetorically effective, serious. However, I have a few objections to Gruber’s use of the term “bullshit.” He should have used the original text more – Harry Frankfurt’s sparkling pamphlet *On Bullshit* (2005). Frankfurt explains what separates bullshit from a lie: bullshit simply has no relation to the truth. Gruber includes this definition, but in his analyses, he often refers to what is outright lying. This is, however, of minor importance since his point really would be valid for most rhetorical fallacies. On another note, I would like to point out that the neo-materialist Gruber dives too deeply into the eschatological metaphor when he refers to smell at least 5 times, but reveals himself as the urban academic he is: Bull excrement does not smell particularly bad.

To conclude: This anthology is also a rhetorical event. It showcases the strengths of the Copenhagen School, drawing lines back to its start in the study of televised

debate in the late 80s, and showing promising steps forward by demonstrating how rhetorical argumentation theory can develop further to include domains other than the narrowly political. All the chapters are well written, and together they form a unified whole that clarifies what a rhetorical perspective on argumentation is and how it can contribute. Last but not least: the combination of older and newer papers constitutes a good and encouraging example of how rhetorical and humanistic research can be cumulative: How we really can build on previous work and move scholarship forward.

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