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Michael Gilbert, ***Arguing with People***. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014; 144 pp. ISBN 9781554811700, $19.95 (Paperback)

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1. Introduction

Professor Gilbert writes in the Introduction to *Arguing with People* that his "is *not* a Critical Reasoning textbook" (p. 14, original emphasis). Still, it may be the single most important *supplement* to such a textbook that an instructor could assign to her students. Gilbert is a philosopher, but his book does not fit into a disciplinary pigeonhole: it could very well be required reading in any introductory critical thinking class, regardless of the disciplinary orientation. For that matter, it would make informative and engaging reading, in or outside a formal classroom environment, for those who are interested in learning how to more competently offer reasons for their beliefs or actions in the context of their communicative interactions with others.

It is not that there is nothing controversial in this book: indeed, even a sympathetic critic could articulate many relevant critiques. And, being someone who fits the foregoing description, I will suggest some below, after my summary of the content. Notwithstanding those complaints, however, what Gilbert offers in this slim volume is an important alternative to the argument-as-abstract-object view that operates more (or less) explicitly in so many critical thinking pedagogies. Instead, Gilbert bucks the status quo of traditional instruction in critical reasoning, first, by trying not so

much to instruct but to invoke; second, by taking head-on the challenge that thinking critically is more than argument criticism, or even argument construction; and third, by affirming that when engaged in argumentation with others, especially with our "familiars"—those whom we argue with often, and whom we will argue with again (p. 51)—we have an obligation not just to seek the truth, but to strive for efficacious agreement, or what Gilbert calls "coalescence".

To be sure, for those familiar with Gilbert's work, this book could easily have been subtitled "Coalescent Argument Lite", as its set-up and follow-through cover similar, though not as detailed, ground as Gilbert (1997). The advantage of this book, however, is its more conversational tone, its more succinct presentation, and its intention to be used as a practical introduction into the field of argumentation theory for beginning students unfamiliar with the well-developed debates found in the circles of informal logicians, rhetoricians, and dialecticians.

Arguing with People proceeds on an important assumption, namely, "that dialogic arguments, that is, arguments that take place between people, is where most of our opinions are formed and molded" (p. 14). As such, the focus of Gilbert's book is not on "static and non-interactive arguments such as editorials, letters to the editor, and essays" (p. 14). This should be seen as a very good thing, considering that the textbook industry in critical thinking is glutted with choices, which often times offer no real choice at all due to a uniformity of approach and method (Hamby, 2013), tending to focus on decontextualized, solo arguments, to the neglect of contextually embedded and interactive argumentation that can feasibly be used in practice (Hamby, 2012). So if what readers are looking for is a well-informed, eminently accessible approach to argument theory, but more importantly argumentative practice, which in addition has the advantage of brevity, and that will also matter in real-life interpersonal communication, then Gilbert's book fits the bill.

2. Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 1, "All about arguments", Gilbert sets the stage by providing a summary and synthesis of some important views within argumentation

theory, regarding the ontological question of what arguments are. Here Gilbert distinguishes between argument-as-process and argument-as-product, citing both O'Keefe (1977) and Wenzel (1979), being clear that his book is a focus on the process of argumentation. While the ambiguity of the word "argument" can sometimes cause students and practitioners interpretive problems, and while Gilbert sometimes oscillates back and forth between meanings, given his caveat in the introduction about the purpose of the book, and the first pages of Chapter 1 where he explicitly prioritizes the argument-as-process view, students should have no problem disambiguating the meaning Gilbert intends throughout the remaining chapters.

Gilbert also dedicates some space (pp. 35-47) distinguishing between three main types of argumentative "situations": inquiry, persuasion, and negotiation. This is in effect a teleological taxonomy: he connects and explains "persuasion dialogues" by reference to Walton, who thinks of argumentation as aiming towards the changing of other people's beliefs, "resolution dialogues" by reference to Van Eemeren and the Pragma-Dialecticians, who think of argumentation as aiming towards the resolution of disagreement, and "inquiries" by reference to any argumentation that serves the purpose of finding the truth. Each of these kinds of argumentation he places along a potential continuum of being more or less confrontational, and more or less committed to prior conclusions (a commitment that Gilbert calls "eristic"). In addition, Gilbert says, argumentation can be more or less focused on accomplishing its argumentative ends, even granting a certain level of emotional attachment to the outcomes (when an argument is more focused on the ends it seeks, it is more "heuristic"). In effect, Gilbert provides a way of conceptualizing the starting point of interpersonal reason-giving and inference-inviting by offering a taxonomy that illustrates the many different purposes that might be pursued in communicative interactions with others.

An important portion of Chapter 1 (pp. 24-27) is dedicated to an elucidation of the role of emotion in argumentation. Unsurprisingly, for those familiar with Gilbert's work, emotion takes center stage in Gilbert's understanding of interpersonal argumentation. Here Gilbert makes a distinction between "clinical arguments", which have "a minimum of emotion" (p. 27) and more emotional arguments, which Gilbert admits "can make an argument difficult work" (p. 26). Gilbert also calls attention to the level of

"precision and comprehension" with which an emotional argument may be conducted. A more precisely conducted argument is "orderly", and one conducted less precisely is "chaotic" (p. 28). An argument conducted in an orderly way will go through the stages, well known to those familiar with the work of van Eemeren and Grootendorst, of "confrontation", "opening", "argumentation", and "concluding" (pp. 30-35).

Gilbert makes the important distinction in section 1.4 between polemics and argument. According to Gilbert, "[a] great deal of what you hear these days is not good argument, but what is called polemic: argument designed to make a point aggressively and without being open to disagreement" (p. 47). A (perhaps) startling conclusion that Gilbert infers from this is that *"[n]o one who believes it is impossible for them to be wrong is worth arguing with*" (p. 48, original emphasis). Of course, *if* the aim of all argumentative interaction is coalescence, then it seems to follow that when someone never thinks she can be wrong, she must also deny the goal of mutual coalescence, and that when such a person is not willing to seek agreement with others at all, she should not be argued with by someone who does value and seek that goal. So it is perhaps not truly so surprising that Gilbert reaches this conclusion after all, even if it strikes at first blush as a sweeping injunction needing justification.

Chapter 2, *All about arguers,* begins to address the rhetorical side of arguing, which Gilbert clearly prioritizes over the other two prongs of argument use: the pragmatic and the logical. This is in line with the object of his book, being in effect a guide for the production of reasoned agreement between people-who-argue, although it also has some theoretical teeth. In other words it seems clear that there are some very good reasons to consider rhetorical concerns such as audience and *ethos*, for instance, to be of prime importance when engaged in dialogic argumentation. Gilbert offers some of those reasons convincingly when he warns us to watch out for the "super eristic": those who might not "suffer from psychological disorders [but] who are just plain mean, selfish, and boorish" (p. 52). Ignoring the character of such people in our argumentative exchanges would be to our peril if coalescence is our goal. In addition, Gilbert highlights the importance of gender (pp. 69-72), prefacing his comments with a warning that "we have to be clear *and careful* about how we generalize when we talk about gender (p. 69, original emphasis). While there may be noticeable dif-

ferences in the ways many men argue compared to women, gender is only one aspect of a person we should take account of when dealing with an argumentative partner (p. 70). A noteworthy passage occurs in this section when Gilbert tells us that his is more a descriptive project than a normative one: “this book is primarily not about how people *should* argue, but about how they *do* argue” (p.71, original emphasis); the upshot being that to ignore the many different ways that people approach and engage in argumentation (such as those influenced by gender) is to understand argument from a limited perspective.

Chapter 3, *Arguing with people* is where the theoretical considerations of the first two chapters meets the practical application that readers should be so concerned to develop in their own argumentative lives. Here Gilbert offers many observations and aphorisms that will help arguers in their endeavor of seeking coalescence, should that be their ultimate goal in arguing. In effect, this chapter speaks against what Gilbert has said earlier about his being a book about how people do argue, and offers what sometimes seem like moral and not just epistemological imperatives for how we should go about arguing.

For instance, on page 76 Gilbert tells us that you “need to have an understanding of both your [argumentative] partner and yourself . . . a real appreciation of your goals, objectives, and beliefs and those of your partners”. On pages 84 and 85 Gilbert stresses “the most important belief you can have . . . that no matter what—you might be wrong”. Here Gilbert rightly points to the overarching acknowledgement of fallibility arguers should approach their arguments with, though it is unclear from Gilbert’s rule how much of a skeptical attitude this should imply. On pp. 94-95 Gilbert elucidates a few of the firm character traits an “ideal arguer” should manifest in her argumentation, where he tells his reader to be “reasonable” or “a person who understands that evidence is important”; to “not [be] dogmatic” or “someone who is willing, under the right circumstances, to change his mind”; to be a “good listener”, or “someone who wants to understand [a] position rather than just reiterate her own”; and to be “empathetic”, someone who “knows that arguing always involves emotion and intuitions, and [that] they need to be taken into account”. Gilbert concludes section 3.4 (“The Rules”) with a presentation of what he calls “The Golden Rule of Argumentation: Argue with someone the way you would want to be argued

with". In these ways Gilbert indicates the importance of character and attitudes to the enterprise of seeking agreement with others through argumentation. In section 3.7 (pp. 107-116), Gilbert offers exemplifications of these rules in mock dialogic exchanges "in action", illustrating how argumentative partners might both fail, and work towards succeeding, in the efforts to conduct their argumentation with these rules in mind. This penultimate section of chapter 3 provides a much needed illustration of the rules Gilbert says are so important.

Finally, before an index and after the final chapter, the book concludes with a brief section of exercises (pp. 119-126), none of which can be said to be the normal fare of critical thinking pedagogy found in textbooks. All of the exercises require more than simple answers recalled from rote memory, and many of them require having a partner to think them through. This is in-line with the dialogic approach to argumentation that Gilbert prioritizes, and is a refreshing change from the kinds of exercises often found in critical thinking textbooks. They should be very helpful for students attempting to practice the lessons learned in the book, and for teachers who should be constantly striving to provide students with practice in argumentation that will help to foster the skillful application of concepts rather than simply the propositional knowledge of them.

3. Evaluative Comments

Perhaps the one thing missing from this book that could improve it the most as a learning tool is the inclusion of a glossary. Gilbert uses so many terms that readers are probably not familiar with, and he uses them with such frequency, that it would be helpful to have a list of those terms and their definitions in the back of the book. On many occasions I found myself going back to previous pages in order to remind myself just how Gilbert intended some term to be understood, and instead of hunting through the pages it would be more convenient to have those terms easily accessible at the end of the book, or even at the end of each chapter.

Another pedagogical complaint is also a point of praise, for the exercises section could be more developed. Gilbert is on the right track with the kinds of practice he encourages of his readers, but there could certainly

be more of it. In a later edition I would like to see an expanded section of exercises that reinforces the content and allows students to practice the approach of arguing-for-coalescence that Gilbert presents.

There are also a number of theoretical points that a critical reader would want to push back against, though I will only mention a few here, as on page 24, when Gilbert claims that "emotion is an integral part of every argument". But in my judgment this is putting the case categorically when it should be put in a more tempered fashion. Sometimes people surely offer arguments dispassionately, as when they are arguing hypothetically, or in a thought experiment, or simply "for the sake of argument". I am not suggesting that such arguments have no emotional content whatsoever, but simply that their emotional aspects might not be so essential in the sense of significantly influencing either the process or the outcomes of the arguments in question. This is especially so if arguers happen to have other goals in mind besides coalescence, which is a perspective Gilbert gives little hearing to.

On Pages 95, 104, and 106 Gilbert uses the concept of "empathy" and its cognates "empathic" and "empathetic". Importantly, it is one of the characteristics of an "ideal arguer" that he lists on pages 94-95. For instance, he says that "an important ingredient in pursuing agreement is empathy, and by that I mean understanding the position your dispute partner holds: why does she believe what she does, and how does she see your position as opposing hers?" (p. 106). Reaching coalescence in an argumentative exchange must surely involve understanding why a disputant is arguing the way she is, but does such an understanding amount to empathy? I don't think so, if we understand empathy more specifically to mean not just understanding how another person is thinking or feeling, but also in some visceral sense sharing-in and experiencing those feelings and thoughts for oneself in an act of "perspective-taking" (Oxley, 2011, p. 9). While the concept of "empathy" is contentious and defined differently by different theorists depending on their disciplinary orientation (ibid., pp. 7-8, and passim), Gilbert is not clearly describing empathy in the passage cited above. What is confusing is that Gilbert actually seems to have the more nuanced idea of the concept in mind when he describes the "empathic arguer" as someone who "knows that arguing always involves emotions and intuitions, and they need to be taken into account. . . The ideal arguer *tries to see things from your point of view*" (p. 95, emphasis added).

But if arguing *simpliciter* with another person means being empathetic in this more nuanced sense, by perspective-taking and communicating that person's perspective to the person with whom one is arguing, then arguing with empathy goes far beyond simple understanding *per se*; it thus sets a very high bar for anyone who wishes to engage in argumentation: not only must a person strive to understand, but strive to inhabit and communicate that understanding, in addition to her own point of view. In the true act of empathy, and so it seems for Gilbert in a true act of argumentation, a person somehow also adopts or inhabits the understanding of the other person for herself. Perhaps (or perhaps not) this should be a requirement of arguers. If it is, however, then Gilbert is surely providing a normative injunction, and not simply describing the way people do in fact argue: it seems clear that the empathetic arguer is an ideal many arguers, if not most, fall very much short of, even if we should try honestly and diligently to cultivate it in ourselves.

On page 106 Gilbert offers some practical advice on how to improve one's argumentation skills, again focusing on intellectual character. Much of this advice stresses certain virtues, an approach I believe Gilbert means to distinguish from a focus on skills: for instance, on page 94, Gilbert prompts his readers to have a certain *awareness* of the stage an argument is in, to be *disposed* to seek out beginning points of agreement, and to "*behave like* an ideal arguer" (emphasis added). In addition, Gilbert reminds us to argue in ways that are inclusive of our argumentative partner's goals and respectful of her values (as a truly empathic person would argue). This last point deserves some scrutiny, however, because if a partner's goals or their values are excessively eristic, then it is difficult to see how much respect and attention and empathetic understanding those goals are due, given that Gilbert's advice to those who are confronted by the "super-eristic" is to walk away, effectively choosing not to argue with such people. While I applaud thinking about the virtues of argumentation (or more properly speaking, of the virtues of argu*ers*), I think these recommendations conflict.

On page 107 Gilbert claims that we should "want to be ideal arguers who are communicating with ideal arguers" and by this he means we should seek as much as possible to strive for an attitude that is the least eristic, the most geared towards agreement, and the most inclusive of the emotions

and goals of our argumentative partners. However, his advice to strive to always be more heuristic than one's partner is hard to see how it could be put into practice, and Gilbert offers no real guidance on how to do so when one has a partner who is clearly more heuristic than ourselves.

Some eyebrow-raising statements that could have been phrased more felicitously include Gilbert's claim that "some Asian cultures avoid conflict more than some western [cultures]" (p. 72), which falsely dichotomizes a continent with a hemisphere, whereas if Gilbert meant to generalize about continents he might have contrasted "Asian" with "European", or if he meant to generalize about hemispheres he might have contrasted "Eastern" with "Western".

A more serious complaint comes from Gilbert's consistent insinuation that critical thinking is a limited kind of argumentative activity, whereas coalescent argumentation is more felicitous. I think Gilbert is both correct in an important way, but also that he blurs the distinction between the way many people approach critical thinking, and the way they should approach it. He criticises critical thinking as being an approach that by definition avoids aspects of argumentation that do not have to do with the conception of argument as an abstract object, composed of premises and conclusion. But to my mind this is clearly a straw-person attack on the conception of critical thinking: even if mainstream approaches to critical thinking tacitly or even explicitly make critical thinking about discrete and mostly written arguments, there are other approaches to critical thinking that pointedly deny this is the right way to conceive of and practice critical thinking and critical thinking pedagogy (See, for example, Groarke & Tindale, 2013; Bailin & Battersby, 2013; Kenyon, 2008; and Facione and Gittens 2015, in addition to others). In effect, Gilbert disparages the "critical thinking" view of argument and argumentation for his own preferred view, but there is so much in common with his view and with some (in my estimation) more justified views of critical thinking, that Gilbert is really making a contrast between the more illicit views of critical thinking that are extant, and a more holistic view of critical thinking that is also more defensible, and I would like to see him qualify his disparagement to acknowledge that his view is in line with many critical thinking theorists and pedagogues who value things about reflective thinking other than the argument-object.

4. Conclusion

Arguing with People is a pleasure to read. It is informative, intellectually stimulating, and will provoke reflection on the many different facets of how and why we argue with others. Even while I do not wholeheartedly agree with many of Gilbert's claims, I can appreciate the value of this book for what it is: a much-needed treatment that focuses on the people themselves who make arguments, not simply on the arguments people make.

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