

In Defense of Pragmatic Reason: Responding to the Postmodern Challenge – ISSA 2023, Leiden University

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The last fifty years have witnessed a renaissance in the study of argumentation. Three great research traditions have developed: pragma-dialectics, informal logic, and an American emphasis on argumentation in context. Each of these traditions has produced an enormous quantity of highly valuable theoretical work and innovative case studies.

At the same time that this renaissance in argumentation research has occurred, core principles of public reason have been strongly attacked. One challenge comes from postmodern scholars who dispute the existence of principled standards for distinguishing between strong and weak arguments, in some cases, denying that there are any real standards for evaluating truth claims. Another challenge comes from scholars who have argued that traditional reason functioned as a support for unjust societal structures, including patriarchy and racism. Others have argued that traditional reason led to the horrors of totalitarianism or war.

The epistemic and the moral challenges to public reason can be met by recognizing the fundamentally pragmatic underpinnings of all three traditions. Argument is valuable not because it identifies ultimate truth, but because it helps people distinguish between claims that are pragmatically useful for solving problems and those that are not useful. Viewed in this manner, the three approaches to public reason can be justified based on their pragmatic utility for distinguishing between strong and weak claims, that is claims that are pragmatically productive and those that are not. Similarly, the theories help humans distinguish between processes of argument that are useful for problem solving and those that are not. Moreover, when argumentation theories are justified based on their pragmatic utility, it becomes clear that they are forces for empowerment, not oppression. There are no good arguments for patriarchy or racism or discrimination or totalitarianism, but there are many good arguments for constructing an inclusive, humane and democratic society.

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