

The Secret Lives of Arguments – ISSA 2023, Leiden University

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Even as arguments are the focus of our attention, so much about them eludes our understanding or provides occasions for disagreement. Anthropologically, we do not even agree how to use the term “argument.” It does not carry the same sense across languages. And some conceptions of “argument” are quite impoverished, overlooking much that is important for understanding and evaluation. What might Toulmin have had in mind when associating informal logic with a conception of argument as *human interchange* in distinction to conceiving it as a string of propositions “which may be written on the blackboard or thought about in the abstract”? Different conceptions invite different terms for description. The contrast is not quite O’Keefe’s insofar as it captures that between the abstract and the immanent. Between those who step back from the argumentative situation and extract a core, and those who immerse themselves in it and address the immediate. In the history of argumentation there have always been those who take us outside of the context in pursuit of transcendent universal truths, and those who would return us to the human roots of the case, to the immanent. All this announces the importance of the rhetorical dimension for the study of informal argument.

My discussion advances a conception of rhetorical argument by considering respectively the type of rhetoric and the type of argument involved, along with the hidden information that is contained. What does an argument conceal? Its assumptions; its prejudices; its construction of the normal, with all that involves; its values and cultural determinations; and more. Arguments teach us about the arguers themselves and the ways audiences are imagined. All this awaits unpacking, and rhetoric provides the means to do so, making present what is otherwise absent (Donne) and layering flesh across logic’s skeletal frame (Weaver).

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