
Histoire des théories de l’argumentation is volume 292 in the prolific series “Repères,” published by Les Éditions La Découverte in Paris. Philippe Breton, a researcher at the Laboratoire de la sociologie de la culture européenne at l’Université Marc-Bloch in Strasbourg and lecturer at Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, has written extensively in the areas of information sciences and communication, and is the author of Argumentation dans la communication, volume 204 in the “Repères” series. Gilles Gauth is a professor in the Département d’information et de communication at l’Université Laval in Quebec City and has written numerous articles on argumentation and communication in political discourse. In this pocket-size book, the authors attempt to provide, across three chapters, a chronological synthesis of what we know about the history and evolution of argumentation study from antiquity to modern times.

The first chapter encompasses the two and a half millennia stretching from the birth of argumentation as an object of study to its decline in the mid-twentieth century. It is divided into four sections.

In the first section, “La naissance de la rhétorique,” the authors explain that the first theories of argumentation emerged during the fifth century BC, after the intellectual revolution of the eighth and seventh centuries BC during which the spoken word achieved preeminence over all other instruments of power. The pertinent contributions of the Greek Corax, “one of the first professors of rhetoric” (p. 12), as well as of the Sophists and of Socrates are outlined. The section concludes with a discussion on how rhetoric became the target of critics, who questioned the moral, relativistic, and political implications of its use as well as its utility outside of intellectual spheres.

In the second section, “Aristote et les bases de la théorie de l’argumentation,” the response of the Greek philosopher to the moral and philosophical criticisms leveled at the first theories of argumentation is discussed. The authors first explain how Aristotle extended rhetoric into all situations of argumentation by distancing himself, on the one hand, from the rhetoric of Socrates and of the Sophists and, on the other hand, from that of Tisias, student of Corax, and their successors. Aristotle’s classification of oratory genres, his distinction between different types of argumentative reasoning, and his conception of the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic are then outlined.

The third section, “La rhétorique, culture commune du monde antique,” is a discussion of the “diffraction” of rhetoric into a series of practices, which emphasized its theoretical complexity (p. 28). It was within this new theoretical vision of rhetoric that the major works of Cicero, of the anonymous author of Ad Herrennium, of Quintilian, and of the Greek, Hermogoras, emerged. This new vision of rhetoric also provided a model for the composition of persuasive discourse that is still valid today.

The fourth section, “Le déclin de l’argumentation,” explains how the decline of rhetoric and of all argumentation theory, beginning in the nineteenth century, was due in part to the internal evolution of rhetoric into literary expression and to the external influence of rational demonstration as advanced by Descartes.

The second chapter examines two 1958 publications which are generally recognized for their fundamental role in the renaissance of argumentation study in the twentieth century. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s A Treatise on Argumentation: The New Rhetoric is described as an affront to rationalism that brings out the importance of opinion over facts in argumentation. It proposes a rationality that is distinct from mathematical demonstration. Stephen Toulmin’s The Uses of Argument is characterized as a reworking of logic that makes it more suitable to the use of argumentation in situations of everyday rational discussions. It proposes a form of reasoning that is more general and more complex.
than the syllogism. The principle characteristics of each approach, their fundamental differences, as well as their importance for the twentieth century renaissance, are discussed.

Chapter 3 looks at important contemporary approaches to argumentation study, emphasizing the divide that exists between the Francophone and Anglophone worlds, one that corresponds to different intellectual cultures. It is divided into two sections.

In the first section, the main contemporary developments in the Anglophone world are presented. Recognizing the “subterranean” influence of Toulmin (p. 70), the authors qualify the general interest of these researchers as empirical in nature, attuned to the communicational and pragmatic dimensions of argumentation. They emphasize how work in the Anglophone world has been greatly influenced by the Aristotelian notion of fallacies, and how the study of fallacies has evolved within a framework more attuned to the social, communicational, and pragmatic dimensions of situations characterized by naturally occurring argumentation. The presentation begins with Charles Hamblin’s revival of the whole question of fallacies and the subsequent dramatic increase in interest in this dimension of argumentation study. It then skims through Ralph Johnson and J. Anthony Blair’s informal logic, through critical thinking and communicational argumentation, through Trudy Govier’s practical theory, Douglas Walton’s dialogal theory, Charles Willard’s oppositional theory, and finally Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst’s pragma-dialectic theory of argumentation.

The second section is a presentation of the main contemporary work on argumentation that has been carried out in the Francophone world. Qualifying this work as more philosophical than empirical in nature, they distinguish between four main approaches: a rhetorical approach, inspired by the work of Perelman and characterized by the revival of rhetoric by Michel Meyer and Olivier Reboul; an epistemological approach, characterized by the natural logic theory of Jean Blaise Grize and the discursive-logic theory of Georges Vignaux; a socio-enunciative approach, characterized by the linguistic theory of Christian Plantin and the sociological theory of Uli Windisch; and the approach of Philippe Breton, which is also inspired by Perelman and is concerned with the ethical dimension of argumentation. The authors conclude the chapter by citing various manuals of rhetoric and of argumentation.

Although the authors attempt to treat such a vast topic within the confines of a pocket-size book, the weak points are minimal. The presentation of the material proves distracting at times; for instance, it is not immediately apparent where the reader is to situate certain tables and, in two instances, the introduced outline of a section does not seem to correspond to what follows. The most important criticism, however, is the complete and regrettable exclusion of Jean-Claude Anscombe and Oswald Ducrot’s linguistic approach to argumentation study (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1983, 1989). Indeed, not even a footnote allowing for a bibliographical reference is provided. Given the influence that the work of these authors has had in the Francophone world, both in Europe and in Quebec, it is surprising that it has not found a place in this volume.

This is not a book big on detail, especially in the coverage of contemporary approaches, but it does what it sets out to do, and it does it well. As a historical presentation, the book not only presents the most important events chronologically from antiquity to modern times, it also clearly establishes the links between the different periods covered, giving us a good idea of the influence and impact that preceding generations of argumentation theorists have had on subsequent generations. The extent of the bibliographical references fits the scope of the book; however, the inclusion of a subject and/or author index would not have been a waste of time. Also noteworthy is that this book provides in the French language an overview of the principal theories of argumentation, many of which, as claimed by the authors, remain unknown to the Francophone public. This volume is succinct, written in very accessible language, and is a quick, informative, and enjoyable read.
A good introduction to the history of argumentation research, it will provide a handy reference guide for both students and professors of argumentation alike.

References

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