

Agonistics: A Language Game*

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Description

Ag`o*nis"tics\, n. The science of athletic combats, or contests in public games.

Webster's 1913 Dictionary

Argument is war. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain how this is metaphorically true. The language we use to talk about arguments is a language of war. We “attack” our opponents positions and “defend” our own. We “shoot down” opposing arguments. We say that claims are “defensible” or “indefensible.” We talk of “winning” and “losing” arguments. In arguing we have “tactics” and “strategies.” We are “on target” or “off target” in our criticisms. We “gain ground” or “lose ground.” In fact, it is not simply that we talk about arguments like this, this is what we *do*. Lakoff and Johnson ask us to consider a culture in which arguments are not conceptualized as verbal warfare, but as collaborative dances: participants are not opponents but partners and

* in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Editors (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and ZKM|Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 2005)

each counter-move is a balanced, graceful response. That would be a very different world.

Of course the latter is not an alien idea. Philosophers have long distinguished the constructive, cooperative art of conversation (*dialectics*) from verbal combat (*rhetoric*). However, the problem has often been that – when the cool reason of conversation comes in contact with the heated emotion of argumentation – rhetoric melts dialectic and we get a shouting match rather than a reasoned debate. What can be done?

There is an argument about arguments and it has at least two sides. On one side, the advice given is of a moral quality: To allow reason to prevail over rage, calm everyone down. Make everyone follow the rules of calm and reasonable conversation and disallow the shouts and unruly outbursts of the arguing parties. The other side is neither moral nor immoral but opportunistic. This side is usually the one politicians listen to when they are running for office or ruling a state. The other side starts with the assumption that any verbal interaction will eventually become a shouting match so the best preparation is voice training and acting lessons, so that – when the transition to shouting is at hand – one can shout loud enough to make one's emotional appeal. The former is the utopian, Enlightenment ideal of reasoned debate, rational politics, democracy and verbal diplomacy; the latter is our world, the world of image, charisma, negative advertising, power politics, and war.

But, if we want deliberative debate, democracy and diplomacy, how do we get from here to there? Political philosophers have been arguing about arguing

for a long time. Even though the most of this territory is occupied by the two sides described above, a third “camp” is emerging. (Hmm. There’s that metaphor again!) The third camp tries to break up the fight between the moral conversationalists and the political rhetoricians by attempting to get everyone off the battlefield and to reconsider the shape and forms of the field of engagement. Lakoff and Johnson do this by making us examine the language we use to describe what we are doing when we argue. Political theorists like Chantal Mouffe provide us with alternatives by pointing out that – even if argument is war – war is just one form (although a deadly form) of contest between adversaries. Mouffe’s alternative to a utopic, moral, deliberative democracy is – what she calls – an *agonistic pluralism* where *agon* is understood as the ancient Greek term denoting “A public celebration of games; a contest for the prize at those games; or, a verbal contest or dispute between two characters in a Greek play” (*OED*).

Political theorists, like Mouffe, interested in the democratic potential of agonistic contests, oftentimes recast deliberative discussion as a *language game* -- in the sense invented by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Moreover, this reimagining of politics leans heavily on Friedrich Nietzsche’s understanding of *agonistics* and ancient Greek philosophy. A close look at the writings of this set of political theorists (which must also include Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour) rewards one with the following insight: just as Lakoff and Johnson show how everyday thinking about arguments draws on a set of metaphorical images and actions, so do these theorists assume a different set of metaphorical images and actions to describe verbal contests – specifically, game-like images and actions. Neither

are these images and actions the moral frameworks of, for example, Jurgen Habermas and other moralists hoping for perfect conditions for communicative interaction. Nor, are these images and actions the violent ones implied by the commonsense metaphor “argument is war.” Mouffe, Deleuze, Latour and others have provided us with a reimagining of democratic debate as a contest to link, unlink, build and dissolve networks of people and things.

Game Play

Using any email program, players will be able to post to one or more online, public discussions (e.g., Usenet newsgroups, weblogs and/or Yahoo groups). The system will translate players’ posts into a graphical display. Here are the rules of the game:

Agonistics is a game played by sending email messages to an online, public discussion forum.

The goal of the game is to win points, move to the center of the circle, and get one’s words displayed at the top of the screen.

Players are randomly assigned a face.

Players win points by engaging in dialogue with other players.

When a player wins points, the player's face is moved towards the center.

The faces of players in dialogue are moved together.

When a player in a dialogue group posts a message that addresses a theme the group is discussing, the theme is shown and a sentence from the player's message is highlighted at the top of the screen.

Players who are not in dialogue with others never have their words highlighted.

Winning players will be those who can (a) build a large coalition by engaging a number of people in dialogue; (b) promote a desired set of themes of discussion that are taken up by others in their posts; and, (c) articulate an influential opinion about the themes of discussion.

References

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Chantal Mouffe, *The democratic paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000).

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