Adversarial Argument, Agency, and Vulnerability

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Abstract

We address the position that the speech act of argument necessarily constitutes an adversarial interaction because of the arguer’s intent and ability to cause involuntary and costly belief change in the audience. This position proves problematic in neglecting the diversity of arguer intentions, the significant benefits that audiences receive from arguments, and the agency of the audience in belief change. The alternative of invitational rhetoric, designed to bypass negative effects of adversarial interactions in persuasion, demonstrates how audiences exercise agency. However, a general accounting for the complex impact of arguments on audiences and on arguers demands attention to the vulnerabilities involving various forces of argument, not just to the intellectual force of premise-conclusion complexes. Addressing vulnerability points to a holistic view of argument involving adversarial and non-adversarial elements, diverse intentions, and an array of costs and benefits to arguers and audiences alike.

Keywords: Adversariality, Audience, Doxastic Involuntarism, Persuasion, Speech Act, Vulnerability

1 Introduction

Argumentation theorists tend to assume that adversarial arguments are oriented by the arguers’ contradictory or contrary starting positions, of which only one can survive an argumentative contest (Govier 1999; Aikin 2011). Recently, John Casey (2020) builds a new case for the intrinsic adversariality of argument by considering how reasoners may lack direct control over their own beliefs, a view known as “doxastic involuntarism.” Casey adds to that
epistemological chestnut that the speech act of arguing can give an arguer direct influence over the audience’s beliefs, where “audience” describes the person or persons to whom the arguer directs the argument (Pinto 2010). In Casey’s view, the arguer’s control over the audience makes all arguments adversarial, whether their purpose lies in persuasion or some other end. More typical reasons for viewing argument as inherently adversarial regard persuasive arguments as prevailing over an opponent’s position or changing another person’s thinking. That adversariality might further be imposing, coercive, oppositional, dominating or aggressive. Some feminist rhetoricians find persuasion problematic insofar as it involves changing others and possibly doing so in imposing or oppressive ways (Gearhart 1979; Foss and Griffin 1995; Fulkerson 1996; Bone et al. 2008). One response to such concerns comes from Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin (1995), who propose an alternative to persuasion in their account of “invitational rhetoric.”

In the following, we focus primarily on the question of belief change through argument and whether adversariality provides the best (or indeed, only) way to characterize it. By “argument” and its cognates we refer broadly to the expression of reasons, which is in keeping with Casey’s “sharing reasons” (2020), Robert C. Pinto’s “offering premises or evidence” (2009) and “making reasons explicit” (2010), and Jean Goodwin and Beth Innocenti’s “making reasons apparent” (2019). The speech act draws attention to the reasons or premises expressed as belonging to a premise-conclusion complex of the sort that logicians call an argument. We find that while Casey’s considerations point to fundamental dimensions of the speech act of arguing, treating the interaction involved in expressing reasons as adversarial makes the most sense in contexts of deliberate persuasion. Even then, we aim to show that the vulnerability of the audience to the arguer cannot be properly described as adversarial. In offering a fuller account of the vulnerabilities at play in argument, we deemphasize adversariality and point towards a more variegated account of argument that includes adversarial and non-adversarial dimensions and that accounts for arguer and audience vulnerability and agency.

In section two, we unpack Casey’s view that the involuntariness of belief makes arguing adversarial. We challenge the view that audiences are largely “acted upon” in the process of belief change as well as the framing of intellectual force in terms of adversariality. In section

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1 Michael Gilbert’s “coalescent argument” (1997) also offers an alternative in having arguers seek points of agreement, but arguers still start with opposed positions.
three, we consider Foss and Griffin’s (1996) account of invitational rhetoric. We argue that although invitational rhetoric enhances understanding of audience agency considerably, it continues to conceive the problem in terms of adversariality and insufficiently explores the involvement of vulnerability. In section four we take up the matter of vulnerability in adversarial and non-adversarial forms of argument and draw upon a compathetic norm of argument (Cohen and Miller 2016) to advocate a more holistic conception of the intellectual and other forces at play in argument. We conclude that a compathetic approach, together with an enriched account of arguer vulnerability, contributes to a better understanding of adversariality in argument.

2 Adversarial argument and involuntary belief

Casey (2020) locates adversariality in the belief changes that arguers bring about in their audiences. Support for the view that belief change grounds adversariality comes from three principal claims regarding the nature of interactive arguing: first, that arguing is deliberate or intentional; second, that changing beliefs costs personal resources; and third, that arguers have direct influence or control over audience beliefs, while audiences themselves have only indirect control over their own beliefs. Working with the concept of “adversarial interaction” (p. 85) between arguers and audiences, Casey emphasizes the arguer’s role in bringing about a costly and involuntary change of belief in the audience. The arguer achieves this both by attempting to impose beliefs on the audience and by frustrating the audience should they attempt to change the beliefs of the arguer in response.

Casey distinguishes this account of adversarial argument from ancillary adversariality, identified by Trudy Govier (1999) as a form of adversariality involving the sorts of anxious, aggressive, or fearful feelings, motivations, and behaviors that often arise in adversarial contexts. On these accounts, aggressive, manipulative, or other problematic forms of adversariality have a personal nature in being intrinsically directed from one to another, whereas forces that frustrate and compel someone to adhere to a conclusion can be impersonal and belong to social structures. While ancillary adversariality can be avoided in Casey’s view, adversariality remains inherent to belief change arising from argument interaction.

It is also important to highlight that for Casey, adversariality stems from interactions between people and in this sense differs from ordinary adversity. Adversity, John Russell (2015) says, “is where situations or circumstances work against an agent so that he or she is further
away from a desired or desirable goal or state than expected. Adversity is thus implied by the
ideas of a setback, failure, misfortune, trauma, or a disappointment...” (163) Challenging
setbacks or misfortune can often be part of errors or obstacles that lead one to revise one’s
perspective or worldview but this does not make errors and obstacles adversarial, except perhaps
metaphorically. Adversariality involves something in addition to adversity, which is why running
competitions, for example, are not adversarial interactions. As Casey explains, running
competitors have adversarial interests and cultivate them to create a challenge: “the participants
resolve to treat each other as adversaries” (p. 90). But the runners do not engage in adversarial
interaction, they do not frustrate or compel other runners in the race as, say, hockey players do in
a hockey game, and it is the latter kind of relationship that makes arguments essentially
adversarial.

In this section, we consider the support Casey offers for viewing “adversarial interaction”
as inherent to the nature of argument. We first address the view that arguing involves a deliberate
or intentional attempt to change the beliefs of the audience, next consider the claim that belief
change is costly for audiences, and finally examine the extent to which arguers control belief
change in the audience and the role of the audience in argumentation. We find that each of these
three components of Casey’s argument suggests a more complex picture of arguer-audience
interactions, one with a more limited scope for adversarial interaction.

2.1 The purposes of arguing

Casey’s first reason to treat the interaction of offering reasons as adversarial is that in so
doing, arguers must deliberately affect an audience’s cognitive attitude toward the conclusion of
an argument. Casey maintains that “all arguments involve attempting to compel others to believe
something” (102) and to specify an “attempt” in this way involves the arguer’s intention. Casey
suggests that “offering arguments, after all, is the means of producing, maintaining, heightening,
or extinguishing those beliefs in others” (103) and this characterizes the expression of reasons as
involving a deliberate attempt at influence.2

2 Casey sometimes specifies the type of argument in question as “belief-focused arguments” (96, 100) in
order to distinguish it from arguments merely about commitment sets. But commitment-based arguing is a type of
logical game separate from the range of real arguments that serve purposes not directly involving the audience’s
regard for the conclusion. Commitments do not account for these other sorts of real-life affects of arguments on the
audience.
Casey regularly assumes that arguers have in mind the purpose of gaining the audience’s adherence to the argument’s conclusion and yet this psychological assumption about people’s intentions for expressing reasons only sometimes holds. Confronting this admittedly common assumption in argumentation theory, Robert C. Pinto (2001a; 2009) points out various other doxastic and non-doxastic effects on the audience that we explore in this section. But we will start by considering some studies that illustrate how widely argument purposes can range.

Marianne Doury’s (2012) analysis of people in a Paris shop sharing their reasons for agreeing with a new parking law would, on Casey’s account, show the Parisians reinforcing each other’s beliefs about the law. Doury rejects this (Perelmanian) approach, however; and instead notes three other likely motivations, the first being to establish a relationship with other people, a type of argumentative goal that Michael Gilbert (1997) calls a “face goal” (p. 67). Second, Doury finds the Parisian shoppers exhibit motivations of a cognitive, maieutic, or heuristic sort, goals of “tracing the boundaries and examining the limits of a position that is being elaborated as the discussion unfolds” (2012, p. 108). Finally, Doury observes the motivation for identity creation of the sort that Debra Schiffrin (1984) and Tempest Henning (2018; 2020) recognize in Jewish and African-American argument practices, respectively. Henning finds in certain African-American contexts that arguing must especially be adversarial in order to serve the desired identity functions. Other arguing styles could serve the same identity function in other contexts, as seems the case with the Paris shoppers.

In another study, Jean Goodwin and Beth Innocenti (2019) provide evidence that arguers may express reasons that are not motivated by intentions involving adherence to the argument’s conclusion. They draw from an example involving women’s rights advocates who used arguments for women’s suffrage even though they had no expectation of changing anyone’s mind about suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among other arguers at the time, recognized that women’s suffrage would remain implausible to the audience, but expressing arguments favouring suffrage allowed them to exhibit the good use of reason by women. The deliberate intentions behind an argument thus need not involve changing the audience’s relationship toward the conclusion, Goodwin and Innocenti demonstrate, either in terms of the audience’s cognitive attitude or in terms of the audience’s outward behavior, say in expressing acceptance.

A further issue lies in adversarial interactions’ contribution to common and well-recognized purposes for arguing that are not adversarial but instead collaborative or cooperative,
such as inquiry (Bailin and Battersby 2020), deliberation, and even negotiation--what Douglas Walton (1998) refers to as dialogue types. Frustrating another person within their level of tolerance can help build their strength, whether people are working out in a gym or arguing; for instance, collegiate debate is a great way to learn about the depths of a controversy and so, epistemically, all participants win, perhaps especially the “losers” (Cohen 1995; 2013). Similarly, as part of negotiation, adversarial interaction operates distinctly from adversarial interests. Negotiation has an adversarial dynamic of each party pressuring the other, but the intended outcome is mutual benefit or compromise. Moreover, interactions also can be purely accidental; arguers need not have in mind the frustration or compelling of others. These various considerations thus lead us to question Casey’s claim that arguing must involve the intent to affect the audience’s belief.

2.2 The cost of belief

Casey’s second reason for finding the expression of reasons to involve adversarial interaction is the “significant costs associated with [the] formation, preservation, revision, and extinction [of beliefs]” (2020, p. 81). Further, because a person’s beliefs relate closely to their personal identity, the influence of others through argument “constitutes a significant intrusion on the autonomy of another person” (p. 81). We agree that changes to one’s beliefs entail definite costs and can be disruptive but they can also entail efficiencies and benefits. A changed mind may involve more logically coherent beliefs, relieve stressful and exhausting cognitive dissonance, eliminate dangerous empirical and interpersonal misunderstandings, and avoid physical conflict. It is better to change your mind than end up in the hospital. So, it is not clear that arguing emerges as necessarily costly, or even on average, assuming we can precisely quantify such things. Especially when arguers have collaborative or cooperative interests (recalling that interests constitute a different level at which Casey identifies adversariality), such as to develop understanding and knowledge, to inquire (Bailin and Battersby 2020), or to negotiate for a mutually acceptable division of goods, then the audience uses arguing to eliminate real or potential costs. Formal structures and institutions of argument may be directed at cost reduction too, as in the case of legal negotiation. At best, whatever costs an audience might incur in cognitive change can be incidental and trivial relative to net gain. Indeed, the cost
of not arguing can be much greater. So, it does not appear that Casey’s second reason for the adversarial nature of interaction between arguer and audience provides clear support.

2.3 How audiences receive arguments

For the view that arguments are inherently adversarial, Casey’s main support comes from the thesis of doxastic involuntarism which holds that even extremely careful reasoners have only limited control over what they believe. Reasoners may take pains to foster a belief in themselves by pursuing supportive evidence and opinions, say, that the world is round or flat; but they cannot straightforwardly adopt or retain such a belief. In choosing, for example, to know the weather forecast by looking it up, people do not choose the actual content of the forecast and the resulting belief; that is, they do not decide to believe that it is 28C and sunny, and can merely open themselves up to such beliefs. They may seek some control by exposing themselves to influences that they predict will help them to gain or lose certain beliefs, a “planned serendipity” of sorts. They may also repeatedly challenge beliefs they wish to lose in hope that with time the beliefs will dissipate. In these ways, belief change depends on indirect methods to determine the exact content of belief.

Belief involuntarism relates to adversarial interaction, Casey contends, because it means that an audience lies at the mercy of an arguer who might influence their thinking. Arguers can direct the audience to specific belief contents, and so it follows that arguers control the audience’s beliefs in a way that the people in the audience do not themselves. The involuntary elements are not internal to the audience, on Casey’s account, but rather reside with arguers as they intervene in the audience’s mental contents. Similar involuntarism is addressed by feminist rhetoricians and argumentation theorists concerned that adversarial persuasion can affect reasoning in ways that are dominating, intrusive, and silencing and that this may have negative social, political, psychological, and epistemic consequences (Gearhart 1979; Gilbert 1994; Govier 1999; Hundleby 2013; Moulton 1989; Rooney 2003, 2010).

3 The term “planned serendipity” comes from business and career counselling which use it to describe setting up opportunities for oneself by cultivating new experiences. The term originates with the book, Get lucky: How to put planned serendipity to work for you and your business (2012, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco) by Thorn Muller and Lane Becker.
While the involuntary nature of belief change brought about through argument may sound troubling to reasoners—especially if they believe themselves to be quite epistemically self-reliant -- Casey recognizes that audiences can desire and benefit from the involuntary effect. Submitting oneself to the wisdom of another’s reasoning provides one of the key benefits of arguing:

This kind of directing is what arguments are all about even at the most rational level. I expose you to evidence that gives you no voluntary option but to change your mind. Naturally, you have to grant me access to your belief system, but this is part of what is involved in agreeing to argue or agreeing to hear evidence. (Casey 2020, p. 98)

The consent or choice comes with opting to argue or to listen and everything else seems to tumble from that. People may incline to agree with any arguments they hear in contexts they trust, and this may be virtuous: many value openness to persuasion as part of keeping an open mind.

Arguing, however, is rarely that simple and we maintain that it provides a strong case against the general rule of doxastic involuntarism. Argument provides the situation in which reasoners most actively control the development of their thoughts and beliefs. It allows and even encourages an audience to have control over influences from others because it enables the scrutiny of reason. Openness to questioning distinguishes argument from testimony. Even speechmakers face questions from audiences, whether at the venue or afterwards, and this questioning constitutes part of the argument such that dialogue, not oratory, provides the typical pragmatic context for arguing.

When the questioning ends also depends on the audience: an arguer who abandons the discussion before the audience has been satisfied with answers to questions about the reasoning has given up, failed to finish the argument. As a result, the end of an argument need not entail submission -- voluntary or involuntary -- by the audience to the arguer when the audience admits there is no more exploration to be had, whether because of available time, patience, or even in choosing a particular procedure (Walton 2005; 2011; Hundleby 2020). Audiences can terminate the discussion when unpersuaded, uninterested, or if they wish to avoid engaging, acquiring, or losing certain beliefs. When unsatisfied, they may decide to interrogate the arguer. In this way,
audiences guide their own responses to arguments and can object should they not receive proper discursive opportunities. That audiences recognize their control in the scrutiny of reasons is also evident in that many people seek training through critical thinking courses and subject-matter learning to improve their argumentation and reasoning skills. People often wish to better engage with other arguers and better assess and interrogate the reasons expressed. Audiences can learn to more effectively employ their wills and enhance their capacities to direct their cognitive responses to argument. Openness to questioning and an expectation that inferences are not merely reported but discussed allow reasoners exceptional control over their own minds. If argument reception or retention by the audience does not count as voluntary, then not much of anything does.

Audiences can also direct their consent to engage an arguer’s reasoning *without question*, as they might endorse someone’s testimony. They may choose to flow with the tide generated by the inferential strength of arguer’s premise-conclusion complex, the momentum identified by Goodwin and Innocenti (2019) as the “intellectual force” of an argument. Theorists typically parse this force in terms of premise acceptability and relevance along with inferential strength. Goodwin and Innocenti explain that intellectual force is “relatively asituational insofar as standards of rationality may be suprapersonal. Accounts of this kind of force orient researchers toward describing the [b]ounds of logical coherence and prescribing rules for assessing argument cogency” (2020, p. 671). This dimension of argument strength is familiar to philosophers; although it is not easy to actually isolate, as anyone who has tried to set exercises for a critical thinking course knows. Arguments of any interest are open to interpretation and so textbook authors often have to resort to artificial examples to minimize the range of likely interpretations (Hundleby 2010). So, while audiences may open themselves to the intellectual force of argument, at the same time, they retain significant interpretive license.

Additionally, audiences who are persuaded may make cognitive changes that are not as complete as fully-fledged belief in a conclusion. They may instead adjust their degree of belief or

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merely open themselves to the possibility of belief (Ichino 2015; Goodwin and Innocenti 2019). They may provisionally accept a conclusion or begin to have hope that the claim is true (Ichino and Räikkä 2020). Robert Nozick comments that a philosopher persuaded by an argument to infer “a conclusion … rejected until now … may accept this conclusion, or reject one of the previously accepted premises, or even postpone a decision about which to do” (1981, p. 2). The flaw may reside anywhere in the set of premises, the sources of premise support, the calculated weight of the inference, or in the formulation of the conclusion. Nozick adds that the way an audience adjusts their beliefs in response to a persuasive argument will depend in part on what they want to be true, and this may not be a bad thing because an audience can learn about the prospects that their desires might be true by reflecting on them in light of a good related argument (p. 3).

The distinctive agency of audiences also factors into Pinto’s well-known definition of persuasive argument as an “invitation to inference” (2001b, p. 37). In this account, an audience accepts or declines an arguer’s invitation to draw an inference. To accept an arguer’s invitation “is a matter of drawing the ‘inference’ which the argument invites” (2010, p. 233). The audience must follow the line of reasoning in their own way, a process which involves at least a degree of self-awareness and questioning. In Pinto’s view, “belief transitions not open to the influence of critical reflection are not inferences in the full sense of the word” (Pinto 2001b, p. 43). Similarly, as Linda Zagzebski (2012) argues, “When I adopt a belief from another person, I am still the one who has to add that belief to my total set of beliefs and other psychic states, and I am the one who must adjust for any dissonance that occurs” (p. 169).

These considerations lead Pinto to reject causal theories of inference favoured by earlier argumentation scholars and which may also be part of Casey’s view. The causal view that persuasive arguments work by causing an audience’s adherence to a conclusion does not bear up. Pinto argues:

imagine a situation in which the presentation of an argument caused assent to its conclusion but in which the addressee did not make an inference from the argument’s premises to its conclusion. For example, the argument is actually too complicated for the addressee to follow, but worn down by its length and caught up by the arguer’s charm,
the addressee’s resistance to the conclusion disappears. Would we count this as a case in which the addressee was persuaded by the argument to accept its conclusion? Caused, yes. But not, I maintain, persuaded. (2001b, p. 37)

A causal account must admit that arguments have a range of desirable effects beyond belief in the conclusion, such as in moral and practical arguments in which conclusions are actions: do this or don’t do that (Pinto 2001a, p. 15). Whether a conclusion is a proposition and thus subject to belief or whether it is a plan of action and subject to implementation, adherence to a conclusion does not require full-blown persuasion. Adherence involves only the willingness to employ the conclusion further as an acceptable consideration.

Causal theories face further problems, on Pinto’s account, because they presume the discernibility of some unique force connected to the inference, what Goodwin and Innocenti identify as the intellectual force. Attempts to isolate such forces have failed and even the most common intellectual forces, simplicity and explanatory coherence, remain uncodified. Pinto adds that only deductive reasoning has any hope of ruling out psychological and contextual influences on how audiences draw their own inferences and yet “the abstract structures that classical logic studies just don't coincide with the factors that make arguments logically good” (2001b, p. 38). Most if not all of the ways that audiences ordinarily draw inferences depend on other influences, such as social hierarchies and institutional structures that may pit people against each other as adversaries, or the unique psychologies, histories, and personal interests of the arguer and audience that may or may not motivate adversariality. These influences converge in an ecology of argument forces, one that indicates the need for a holistic account.

Pinto recognizes further that reasons affect a variety of attitudes in the audience that are conscious but not specifically cognitive -- not beliefs, doubts, or questions. Such attitudes include “reasons for wanting this or that to be the case, reasons for choosing one or another course of action (i.e., forming an intention to engage in that course of action), reasons for fearing, reasons for hoping, reasons for preferring one thing over another, and so on” (Pinto 2009, p. 269). Consider further, audiences bring their own epistemic feelings, both incidental and dispositional, to argument and these will both play a role in uptake of the arguer’s claims and be affected by them. Audiences may be disposed towards feelings of doubt or certainty, for example. Arguers have little influence over such dispositions, and yet they strongly influence audience uptake of premises and conclusions, and their following of inferences. So which
attitude results and how it develops will depend significantly on how the audience engages the reasons offered.

There remains the issue that argument proves relatively ineffective means of persuasion. J. Anthony Blair (2020) observes, for example, that non-argumentative means of persuasion often prove most effective. Advertisers infrequently make use of arguments in their persuasion; similarly, religious sects inculcate beliefs in children through story-telling, social and emotional control, and other non-argumentative means. Blair also notes, like Casey, that changing one’s beliefs is cognitively costly, but whereas Casey maintains that cognitive costs make arguments adversarial, Blair observes how astonishing it is that any arguer ever successfully manages to persuade anyone given these costs. Blair and Casey’s divergent conclusions from the same set of considerations make clear that weighing the costs of cognitive change and applying this to belief change is difficult and complex.

One further note is that sometimes arguments have pragmatic force but not intellectual force, as indicated by Goodwin and Innocenti’s case studies of arguments for women’s suffrage, where the arguers do not expect to influence belief, but do hope to create social pressure that will change the context in which the audience will receive future arguments. An argument may need a certain basic intellectual strength to serve certain pragmatic uses but its force may nevertheless not be intellectual. As Blair adds, even unpersuasive arguments have their uses: they may function to “reassure oneself,” “show that a decision has not been arbitrarily arrived at,” or “indicate the reason one has for making the claim” (2020, p. 7). So, the utterance of a good premise-conclusion complex can create a pressure, but it is not necessarily that of frustrating or compelling the audience to believe in the conclusion.

In sum, the expression of reasons may be one of the least effective ways to impact on another’s thinking and the effect of an argument on an audience may not involve their regard for the conclusion at all. The many ways that audiences direct discussion and evaluate reasons for conclusions, in whatever conditions and purposes are at play, weakens the claim that doxastic involuntarism gives the expression of reasons an involuntary, and thus adversarial, effect on the audience.
3 Invitational rhetoric and audience agency

Thus far, our position challenges the view that audiences are largely “acted upon” in the process of belief change as well as the view that frames intellectual force in terms of adversariality. Foss and Griffin’s (1996) account of invitational rhetoric further helps to build the case that, however involuntary an audience’s response to an argument, it need not be adversarial. Unlike Pinto, who uses the notion of invitation to address the nature of persuasion, Foss and Griffin advocate invitational rhetoric as an alternative to (but not replacement for) persuasion. Pinto, Foss and Griffin do, however, share the use of the invitation concept to indicate modes of interaction in which the arguer is not the audience’s adversary. (They lit on the same language of “invitation” coincidentally around the same time.)

Part of Foss and Griffin’s concern with persuasive argument relates to the kind of issues Casey raises regarding the involuntariness of belief change. Rhetors may intrude upon the belief systems of the audience and either undermine or at least challenge the audience’s autonomy of belief. Foss and Griffin are particularly concerned with accounts in rhetorical studies that define rhetoric “as the conscious intent to change others” (1996, 2). Their feminist perspective drives concerns that a dynamic exists in persuasion wherein the rhetor has influence, power, authority, and control over the audience. Their account conceives the rhetor as the agent of belief change in others, who can appear not only as epistemically self-determined and self-reliant but also, from the standpoint of feminist and social epistemologies, as hyper-autonomous, overly individualistic, intrusive, and dominating. They argue, in a way resonant with Casey, that the aspects of persuasion associated with involuntariness and compromised audience agency makes argumentation adversarial. But rather than conclude that adversariality cannot be avoided, they instead look to alternatives.

The invitational alternative to persuasive argument that Foss and Griffin develop invokes principles of “equality, immanent value, and self-determination” for both the rhetor and audience.

5 Foss and Griffin tend to conflate persuasion with argument, as is common in rhetorical scholarship on argumentation. For sake of clarity, we will use the terminology of “persuasive argument” to discuss their account, allowing that there may be non-persuasive forms of argument that are themselves “invitational” and thus for which invitational rhetoric would not serve as an alternative.
(1996, 5). In keeping with these principles, an invitational rhetor aims not to change and control others, but to enable and facilitate understanding of the issue and of the participants themselves. They explain:

Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or [devalue] others’ perspectives, but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own. Ideally, audience members accept the invitation offered by the rhetor by listening to and trying to understand the rhetor’s perspective and then presenting their own. When this happens, rhetor and audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity (p. 5).

Invitational rhetoric identifies particular effects arising from respectful listening and effortful attention to another person’s perspective on the world: both rhetor and audience leave the exchange with a better understanding of one another because of the “nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework established for the interaction” (Foss and Griffin 1995, p. 5). Rhetor and audience alike learn and transform.

The invitation that is offered to explore the worlds and perspectives of others is in itself neither imposing nor adversarial. The principles that discussants follow and the structure of the communication exchange aim to locate and minimize “impediments to the creation of understanding,” and create an environment for the “process of discovery” (p. 6). There is no effort to establish one view over another or to foreclose the exchange such that one party is intact and the other changed. Moreover, Foss and Griffin explain that

The internal processes by which transformation occurs also are different in invitational rhetoric. In traditional rhetoric, the change process often is accompanied by feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, pain, humiliation, guilt, embarrassment, or angry submission on the part of the audience as rhetors communicate the superiority of their positions and the deficiencies of those of the audience (p. 6).

The emotional risks associated with adversariality diminish when both the audience and the rhetor jeopardize their beliefs or worldview. They are in it together.
Foss and Griffin stress — and Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008) further clarify — that invitational rhetoric cannot entirely replace persuasive argument. Rather, it provides a fully viable non-adversarial option for rhetors. In addition, the invitational rhetoric approach may spill over into persuasive contexts, encouraging arguers to stress principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination, much as arguers do when they wish to avoid ancillary adversariality through skillful management (Aikin 2011) and a focus on virtue, wisdom, and intellectual flourishing in argument (Aberdein 2020; Cohen 1995). Further, invitational rhetoric does not foreclose on the possibility that changes in belief and perspective may arise in invitational contexts. As Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008) explain:

in invitational rhetoric the result might be change, however, agency lies in the means by which safety, value, and freedom are created not in the effort to change. Rhetors are focused on creating invitational environments (through dialogue, listening, understanding or exploring another’s position or view, and/or sharing one’s own position with respect and care for the positions others might hold) and they do so by creating the conditions of safety, value, and freedom (p. 446).

The creation of safety, value and freedom that they envision is both epistemological and social in nature. The invitational environment seeks to enhance epistemic security, epistemic value, and epistemic autonomy for all, together with their ethical counterparts. In this way, the invitational account accords with argumentation theory’s emphasis on the epistemic value of respectful engagement with others’ views. As Phyllis Rooney (2003) explains, the Gricean "cooperative principle" and pragma-dialectical accounts encourage respectful listening and careful assessment of differences in positions and points of view. They are not simply recommended in order to make argumentation more pleasant or, given cultural norms, more hospitable to women. They are required by generally accepted epistemological norms of good argumentation which endorse a careful weighting of all the evidence, particularly when that evidence emerges from different experiences, perspectives, or points of view (Rooney 2003, pp. 3-4).

An understanding of agency that rejects making the arguer the agent of change and the audience the changed object underlies the normative dimensions of invitational rhetoric. In their
elaboration of invitational rhetoric, Bone, Griffin and Scholz (2008) conceptualize agency as involving “the means to act” rather than an agent’s ability to cause change (p. 445). This suggests an autonomy consisting in a suite of capacities and skills rather than a statically defined, unitary personal characteristic (Anderson 2013). Understanding agency as including multiple means to act reveals that even in cases where an audience involuntarily changes its belief, there can be various other means of agency available to manage, adapt, reject, avoid, or otherwise address that change. The invitational rhetoric program shows the complexity of audience agency and the rarity of circumstances in which the audience has no control over their acceptance or rejection of a conclusion.

Given the complex forces and means of engagement that influence an audience’s response to an argument, there is reason to resist models of argument and adversariality rooted in the idea that arguers are “doing to” rather than holistically “engaging with” an audience and the context of argument. Adding to this Pinto’s observation of the many cognitive and non-cognitive influences from arguments and the failure of causal accounts of inference, there remains little reason to consider argument interactions necessarily adversarial. Instead, we find that the source of concern resides in the element of argument that Goodwin and Innocenti call “intellectual force” and we endeavor to account for this influence on the audience in terms of the audience’s vulnerability.

4 Vulnerability in Argumentation

As arguers and audiences, we are vulnerable in many ways. We are vulnerable in a basic or ontological sense given “our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social natures” (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013, p. 7). We are also subject to “context-specific” or “situational” vulnerabilities that “may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013, p. 7). Both ontological and situational vulnerability involve certain features that pertain to understanding the speech act of argument. First, as Erinn Gilson recognizes, vulnerability is universal and persisting: it is not the case that only some individuals are vulnerable; nor is it the case that vulnerability is “transient” over the course of life, with periods of invulnerability only occasionally interrupted by episodes of vulnerability
Second, Gilson maintains that vulnerability involves ambivalence: it is not “an essentially negative state tantamount to harm; when it comes to the forms that it takes and the ways it is experienced, vulnerability is neither inherently negative nor positive” (Gilson 2011, p. 310). Indeed, vulnerability can be enabling when it involves “openness to being affected and affecting in turn” (Gilson 2011, p. 310).

This understanding of vulnerability as universal, persisting, and ambivalent supports our view that vulnerability better characterizes the impact of the logical force of argument than does “adversarial interaction.” To support this claim, we will make clear: first, that vulnerability better accounts for the personal effects that the speech act of arguing has on both arguer and audience; second, that it accounts for positive as well as negative impacts of argument interaction on those involved; third, that it enriches our understanding of how adversarially works; and fourth, that it connects the intellectual force of arguments with a normative conception of “compathetic argument” developed by Daniel Cohen and George Miller (2016).

The first way that “vulnerability” provides an improved conception of arguments as interactions concerns which people the argument affects. Recall Casey’s view that an arguer’s influence on the audience qualifies as “a significant intrusion on the autonomy of another person” (2020, p. 81) and that the audience “grants” the arguer “access to [their] belief system” (pp. 98-99). In Casey’s account, the arguer acts on the audience. Foss and Griffin hold a similar view of the arguer-audience dynamic in persuasion, associating the audience’s experience with a suite of vulnerabilities regarding their belief contents, agency, identity, and so on.

These accounts, however, address the vulnerability only of the audience. Considering the first feature of Gilson’s notion of vulnerability, its universal and persisting nature, it seems implausible that arguers change audiences while remaining completely inert themselves. Those who affect others also have vulnerability (Gilson 2011, p. 310) and in the case of speech this involves vulnerability to being heard, to the responsibilities that come with being heard, and to the effects or implications of uptake. Argument, more specifically, involves an arguer’s vulnerability to audiences, whatever purposes the argument serves; sharing reasons will succeed in the purpose of persuasion, deliberation, inquiry, negotiation, or identity formation, only in light of appropriate responses from the audience, some cognitive, others involving other attitudes, and still others behavioural. Audience response and engagement may frustrate and compel arguers in various ways, or it may aid them. In fact, any trust that an audience places in
an arguer’s reasoning can enhance that arguer’s epistemic agency, as Cynthia Townley argues (2011). An arguer’s potential loss or benefit involves vulnerability, whereas conceiving argument as an “adversarial interaction” only accounts for potential loss by the audience.

To neglect how affecting others involves vulnerability and to assume the invulnerability of an agent may involve willful ignorance, Gilson suggests. Assuming an implausible “closure to being affected and shaped by others” serves “in the formation of masterful self-identity” (p. 319) This ideal involves a certain “invulnerability” to false beliefs and belief changes motivated by others, a fictitious invulnerability that excises the epistemic community with which one is actually epistemically interdependent (Fricker 2006). As a description of the arguer it presumes a false asymmetry of vulnerability relative to the audience.

Second, characterizing argument interaction as adversarial reveals only its negative operation: persuaded or otherwise moved audiences appear to experience an unwanted loss of belief or a costly belief change. A changed belief, however, can enable rather than diminish audience strength, and so an arguer may undercut one means of audience agency while boosting another: becoming persuaded that a job posting might be suitable can motivate the learning and and other actions to secure an improved position. The potential for such positive changes emerges from vulnerability’s “ambivalent” nature (Gilson 201, p. 310) and includes the openness required for adaptation to new information, changing situations, and one another.

The ambivalence of vulnerability combined with its universality makes clear that invulnerability and strength do not principally align with the arguer while vulnerability and weakness align with the audience. Vulnerabilities, strengths, and weaknesses mix it up in arguer-audience interactions.

Third, the relationship between adversariality and vulnerability becomes distorted when adversariality provides the focus of interest because that makes it easy to assume that adversariality increases problematic forms or degrees of vulnerability while invitational rhetoric decreases them. Certainly, the forcing and compelling involved in adversarial argument can create dangerous insecurity, as is perhaps most obvious in forms of ancillary adversariality such as aggression. But adversarial arguing can also minimize the danger arising from vulnerability. For example, adversariality in systems of law aims to protect defendants from the epistemic distortions, biases, and abuses of power possible in inquisitorial legal systems. Additionally, as Henning (2018, 2020) shows, adversarial argument norms may enhance agency, identity, and
relationships between arguer and audience in cases wherein invitational or cooperative argument norms would not. For instance, “invitational” or cooperative arguing may reflect white epistemic privilege, such as when white feminists “politely” silence or devalue disagreement coming from people who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Colour. Bone, Griffin and Scholz (2008) note Dana Cloud’s observation that, “from the perspective of oppressed persons, it is clear that some people and many ideas should be challenged rather than invited to perpetuate hateful rhetoric and material practices such as racial discrimination and racist rhetoric” (2004, p. 3). Vulnerabilities may also be intensified by invitational rhetoric when a more adversarial form of persuasion would work better. Bone, Griffin and Scholz refer to Mark Pollock et al.’s (1996) example of how invitational rhetoric might fail to ease the vulnerability of an audience considering suicide. Pollock et al. contend that there are some cases in which persuasive force is about “care and love for another… to preserve that which is unique and valuable in that person…” (p. 149).

The fourth benefit of viewing argument interaction in terms of vulnerability arises from vulnerability’s alignment with a normative conception of argument as compathetic (Cohen and Miller 2016). Cohen and Miller (2016) introduce the ideal of compathetic arguments as “organic unities, wholes whose values are more than the sums of their parts” (p. 454). Compathetic argumentation acknowledges that adversariality contributes to argumentative experience, noting that while disagreement can be part of argumentation, agreement must also be present if disagreement is to have traction. Further, agreement and disagreement vary by degree and kind, and so “partisans who agree, but with different degrees of commitment, can argue” (Cohen and Miller 2016, p. 456). In our view, the compathetic approach to argument can reveal the value and disvalue of both adversarial and invitational modes. It has elements in common with invitational rhetorics insofar as compathy involves genuine sharing and effort “to understand and to make oneself understood” (p. 455). Moreover, it constitutes “an integrating, and unifying phenomenon, so it is anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian” (p. 455). Compathetic argument thus seems to motivate the kind of safety, value, and “means to act” that invitational rhetorics understand as part of the invitational project.

We also emphasize that the forces that influence arguers are not just intellectual but can be social or conventional. Or they may be pragmatic, “generated just by making utterances and the commitments, obligations, responsibilities, and the like undertaken in the course of making the utterances” (Goodwin and Innocenti 2019, p. 671). All such forces engage vulnerability, and
coming together in this fashion makes sense of how sometimes the logical force holds sway and sometimes other forces do. Other holistic models of argument, such as Michael Gilbert’s multi-modal account (1997), break down the situation differently but likewise recognize forces that operate alongside the logical forces and may compete with or complement them. Cohen and Katharina Stevens (2019) further suggest that arguers play various roles in argument, and this too may be a matter of engaging aspects of vulnerability. Diverse roles and different arguments can involve distinct vulnerabilities depending on the context and even the relative positioning of participants over the course of an exchange of reasons. The complexities of vulnerability in argument reveal the inadequacy of the simple adversarial dynamic between arguer and audience as proponent and opponent, or even as cooperative co-reasoners or inquirers, as a general view of argument. Compathetic, multi-modal, and role-based accounts better address the multidimensional vulnerabilities that attend the speech act of argument. These vulnerabilities extend beyond involuntary belief change and its associated costs to include the epistemic and practical costs and benefits of argumentative openness and flexibility for arguers and audiences alike.

5 Conclusion

Casey shows, we contend, not that argument is inherently adversarial, but that arguing introduces vulnerabilities related to reasoning. Our further contention is, not that doxastic involuntariness never holds, but rather that audiences have greater control and agency than Casey allows in the case of argument, and than Foss and Griffin allow in the case of persuasive argument. Audience control and other factors weaken the connection they draw between involuntariness—the imposition of belief—and adversariality, insofar as this imposition is mitigated by many factors including active resistance by audiences in argument contexts and the various benefits that audiences seek.

What Casey identifies as “adversarial interaction” depends on the intellectual force of arguments, a key component of persuasion. Yet, arguers may have different purposes than persuasion, even purposes that do not directly focus on gaining adherence to an argument’s conclusion. In expressing reasons, arguers generally must also involve the audience, not just frustrate or compel them. The variable and robust exchanges that can take place between arguers and audiences demonstrate that audiences can significantly guide and even decide the effect that
an argument has on them. In this way, the person who loses a debate may be open to learning or they may not.

To avoid the problems of domination and adversariality associated with persuasive argument, arguers may opt for alternative modes of reasoning, for rhetoric that stresses reciprocity and equality. Invitational accounts offer non-adversarial engagement with the other person’s reasoning and this may achieve better epistemological, pragmatic, or social results over adversarial interaction, but even persuasive argument allows significant latitude for the audience to exercise agency. The expression of reasons may involve a powerful intellectual force, and exerting that force on others can be the whole point of arguing. But people express reasons in light of many different purposes beside persuasion and intellectual force sometimes just doesn’t matter. Further, audiences stand to gain all sorts of things from argument, from true belief to jockeying for position and on to the negotiation of social justice, and dialogue is one way that they guide and refine an argument’s influence on them, with or without invitational rhetoric from the arguer.

Admittedly, the ability of an audience to participate fully in dialogue can depend on surrounding social conditions and these may involve hierarchies and forms of authority as well as discursive cultures that constrain the potential for audiences to participate in the progress of an argument. Such conditions may include adversarial relationships that make it hard for the audience to modulate the force of an argument or collaborative structures requiring agreement that can make it hard to move forward. Such difficulties may strengthen the force of an argument, whether the force is intellectual or has other sources, such as democracy. If someone with a great deal of authority makes ridiculous arguments and insists on those reasons for that conclusion, it may be impossible to object, and even hard to avoid. The audience, however, need not accept those reasons as their own.

As an alternative, invitational rhetoric can assist with the management of adversariality and enhance an audience’s agency, but conceiving of the problem in terms of adversariality will not suffice. Characterizing argument interactions in terms of frustrating and compelling the audience misrepresents the dynamic and ignores the involvement of vulnerability. Vulnerability accounts for the impact of an argument on the audience but also for its impact on the arguer, and
these may be positive or negative influences. The rich texture of vulnerability can even enlighten how adversariality operates and how it can benefit the audience. The person who loses a debate may be harmed in losing a contest, yet benefit in gaining knowledge.

Compahetic argument, along with other ideals that engage with the complex vulnerability of both arguers and audiences, improves our understanding of how adversariality works. It may also improve how adversariality functions. Audiences can embrace their agency and question infringements upon it, and arguers who open themselves to the audience in full awareness of their vulnerability to the audience may find themselves strengthened, not weakened. For an adversarial arguer to recognize their dependence on audience uptake, or perhaps adherence to the reasoning they offer, may allow them to recognize and uphold their real responsibilities to the audience, and make them stronger for it.

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