

Commentary on: M. Lewinski's "You're moving from irrelevant to irrational" – critical reactions in Internet discussion forums"

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Are internet forums in general essentially worthless discussions carried on by narcissists or losers? It is not clear how this hypothesis could be conclusively tested, but personally and anecdotally, it seems to me that there must be significant truth to it. Before researching this commentary, I was never able to bring myself to read more than a page or so of any blog or forum, even a 26-page thread that is largely on one of my own published papers

(<http://www.top-law-schools.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=49767>). Life is short, so why would you want to spend any of it reading material that is not vetted or peer-reviewed? And surely, I cannot be the only one who has had the thought 'if you had a life, you wouldn't be blogging/posting'. But let us put aside any ad hominem impulses and consider what light can be shed on the most interesting question on the table, a question that is at least indirectly raised by Lewinski's paper: Is internet discussion forum discourse, specifically that of political discussion forums, worthwhile?

We can address this question by reviewing principal characteristics of political discussion forums according to Lewinski's analysis. In his paper Lewinski uncritically (so far as I can see) adopts and applies pragma-dialectical theory (as developed mainly in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), according to which argumentation is understood

as part of a procedure aimed at resolving disputes by critical testing of standpoints put forward. . . In the pragma-dialectical view, such testing ideally takes place by means of a critical discussion – a rule-governed dialectical procedure that clearly specifies the rights and obligations of both parties to a discussion: the protagonist and the antagonist. . . The protagonist is the one who argues for, or against, a certain standpoint, while the antagonist acts as a pure critic, who does not assume any positive or negative position, but solely casts doubt on protagonist's argumentation. (p. 2)

There are two general ways that protagonists and antagonists can reasonably defend or attack positions—by questioning the “propositional content” or the “justificatory (or refutatory) force” of the argumentation (p. 2). This corresponds to what elsewhere in informal logic would likely be understood as questioning the truth of the premises or how well they support the conclusion, or loosely, to the parameters of soundness and validity. As Lewinski put the two a little later, does the argumentation involve “unacceptable. . . information” or “wrong application of one of the informal argumentation schemes or formal patterns of deductive logic” (p. 3)?

It is perplexing therefore that later in the paper (and in the abstract) these two acceptable parameters of argument evaluation become “the propositional content and the relevance of arguments” (p. 12, cf. p. 10). In classical deductive logic, of course, the relevance of the premises to the conclusion or “standpoint” is, as it were, irrelevant; there need be no content connection between the premises and conclusion. This is perhaps most vividly apparent in the so-called ‘paradoxes of material implication’ or the principle that any proposition whatsoever follows from a contradiction (*ex contradictione quodlibet*). Perhaps the reason for Lewinski’s shift in how he discusses this parameter of evaluation lies in the paucity of the logic tools applied in political discussion forums themselves: they rarely go beyond the simple informal criterion of relevance in considering the “justificatory” force of the argumentation.

Lewinski refers to the fact that once a standpoint is taken, argumentation on political discussion forums is “exceedingly difficult to conclude.” He attributes this largely to a serious lack of “common grounds” or “intersubjective procedures” among the discussants that would constrain the discourse. This is compounded by the distinctive structural ‘open-ended’ format of the forum sites and their anonymity. This encourages the antagonists to play “persistent skeptics” (p. 12), the easiest role to be seen as “winning” in discussions that may get “fiercely adversarial” (p. 13). This sounds like it could be fun to participate in, but unpleasant to watch. In contrast, in informal “offline contexts,” it tends to be easier for the argumentation to conclude since the procedures tend to be “consensual,” with a preference for agreement and cooperation (p. 12). An example of this, I suppose, is a face-to-face meeting of a group in a business or organizational setting. Also in contrast are more formal “offline contexts,” such as “legal disputes or academic debates,” in which Lewinski indicates that usually there are “clear rules for moving along the procedures which are eventually concluded” (pp. 12-13).

This seems true for legal disputes and academic debates in the physical sciences, but what about academic debates in the social sciences and humanities? One could argue that practically by definition, the degree to which an academic or intellectual debate is inherently inconclusive, it is philosophical. Or if at some point the debate can be concluded, at that point the debate becomes scientific or scientific results are achieved. The history of thought is of course replete with examples of this, such as how the metaphysical issue of atomism shifted to the domain of physics. This points to the first of three reasons why I think Lewinski’s summary lament, that generally “online discussions do not bring about rational results” (p. 13), is misguided. The *subject matter* of internet political discussion forums is significantly philosophical, and as such, it is necessarily inconclusive. But that does not mean that such discussions fail to bring about rational results any more than doing philosophy fails to bring about rational results. To think so would appear to confuse rationality with certitude. Lewinski’s analysis is good at isolating structural or formal characteristics of these forums that engender inconclusiveness, such as ones noted above, but it seems to be blind to this factor.

The second reason that the lament that generally “online discussions do not bring about rational results” seems misguided is that it appears to stem from an analytical perspective that is perhaps overly legalistic. Relative to some of the apparent expectations of pragma-dialectical theory, political discussion forums could never measure up. We saw earlier that this theory understands and to some degree idealizes argumentation as “part of a *procedure* aimed at *resolving disputes* by critical testing of standpoints put

forward” using “a *rule-governed* dialectical procedure” (p. 2, emphasis added). “It is by going through the procedures. . .that the result of a discussion can be decided” (p. 12). And the rules are quite specific and detailed (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, ch. 6). These procedures are reminiscent of legal procedures such as those that govern hearings, trials, rulings, and arbitration—all of which by definition have an endpoint at which some kind of a decision is reached, a decision that the procedures are designed to make reasonable. If this is the model of “rational results,” then it is no surprise that there are few of them on political discussion forums. It should also be mentioned, however, that in addition to this ideal or strain of dispute resolution, pragma-dialectical theory also apparently contains an ideal of extreme critical testing of ideas. As Lewinski puts it, “there are special rules that are meant to secure. . . maximal externalisation of disagreements and optimal use of the right to attack” (p. 12). In the application of such rules “eventually, the unremitting criticism may lead to a situation where the protagonist is unable to discharge his multiplied burden of proof” (p. 4). Ouch, that sounds brutal! The point is, surely these two ideals could work at cross purposes, the one leading to conclusiveness and the other to inconclusiveness.

The third reason Lewinski’s summary lament that generally “online discussions do not bring about rational results” seems misguided is that there does not appear to be sufficient attention paid to the *relativity* of this issue. Various benefits can accrue to *participants* of internet political discussion forums that have to do with both content (e.g., delineating the nuances and implications of a position) and form (e.g., honing argumentation skills). A case could be made that these benefits are “rational results” for the participants. But this need not apply at all for mere (nonparticipant) *readers* of the forums. At the end of his paper Lewinski raises the question of “what we are left with as readers of online political discussions” and answers “a repository of sometimes thoroughly criticised standpoints and arguments. . .even if endless, such discussions are not completely fruitless. If we believe in ‘a free marketplace of ideas’” (p. 13). Yet if we are informed and skillful arguers, reading such ‘repositories’ will be unlikely to produce beneficial or rational results. This seems to mark one end of a continuum of value of internet discussion forums, that is, little or no value. At the other end, such forums could have great value for ignorant, novice arguer participants (and as subjects of study for argumentation students, of course).

REFERENCE

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.