Second thoughts, second arguments:
a new introduction

An academic author can hardly resist the temptation of a second edition. Not only is there the prospect of more readers, but the writing of a new introduction presents unmissable opportunities. Under the guise of minor amendments and modest clarifications, scores can be settled. Critical reviewers can be put in their place. Rival theorists can be dished. Best of all, the author’s latest work can be advertized. Yes, I wrote this a few years ago ... still worth reading, of course, but you should see what I’ve been doing in the meantime ...

A second edition of Arguing and Thinking, however, poses particular problems. The book celebrates the argumentative spirit. Disagreement is praised as the root of thought. The author of such views is confronted by a dilemma, when attempting to write the new introduction. To support the book’s message – to continue its spirit of contradiction – I should argue against the things I wrote ten years earlier. But if I disagree now, then I’m agreeing with my younger self; and if I agree, then I’m disagreeing. An impossible paradox, of the sort beloved by the sophists, beckons.

Ideally, the writing of a new introduction should not simply be a matter of drawing up a balance-sheet of agreements and disagreements. The earlier logos, having had its say, now requires reply. The first edition should be treated as a friendly disputant, as if the younger and the older self can talk across time. The earlier author can be reproached for failing to have read texts, which have now been maturely digested. The younger self can be informed about later developments, and told what to think of them. There can also be grudging admiration for the energy, which he must have had in those days. But, sadly, in this diachronic debate the younger self must always remain mute.

Thinking about the argument

At first sight, Arguing and Thinking seems to be putting forward a fairly straightforward message. The sub-title sets a scene: the book provides a ‘rhetorical approach to social psychology’. The author is bringing the ancient tradition of rhetoric to the attention of modern social psychologists. In so
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doing, he is making himself useful. Those ancient rhetoricians, he is saying, knew a thing or two about the importance of argumentation. This is something which we would do well to take seriously nowadays. Many psychological issues will be illuminated if we pay attention to the argumentative dimensions of social life. Thinking is a form of internal argument, modelled on outward dialogue; attitudes are rhetorical stances in matters of controversy; justification and criticism are key rhetorical activities; and so on. Thus, the author seems to be helping the business of developing today’s social psychology.

The approach, as advertized by the sub-title, implies a rhetorical theory of meaning. Attitudes are not to be understood in terms of the supposed inner psychology of the attitude-holder. They have outer, rhetorical meanings, for to hold an attitude is to take a stance in a matter of controversy. The meaning of the stance derives both from what is being supported and from what is being rejected. For example, to declare oneself in favour of capital punishment is not merely to make a declaration about oneself or about killing serious criminals: it is a declaration against the abolitionist view. The point can be generalized. An argument for an issue of controversy is also an argument against counter-views. Any reasoned argument seeks to exclude, or persuade against, counter-arguments. In this way, affirmation and negation are intertwined, as the logos of discourse are also anti-logoi, to be understood in relation to the context of controversy.

This argument can be applied to itself. Arguing and Thinking was arguing for argumentation; to be rhetorically meaningful, it must also argue against other positions. If all approaches to social psychology were rhetorical ones, then there would have been little point in writing Arguing and Thinking. By its own admission, the book would have carried minimal meaning. Fortunately, academic targets can easily be identified. The book was arguing against those cognitive theories of thinking, which tend to treat thinking as if it were the silent, internal processing of information. Such theories, which currently dominate much academic psychological thinking, assume attitudes to be internal structures of meaning, rather than stances in public controversy.

So far the message sounds fairly straightforward. Yet, the text itself suggests something more complex, even underhand. On the first page, the author introduces himself. He does not depict himself as an earnest social psychologist, keen to build on the work of fellow social psychologists. He does not even present himself as a social psychologist. He is, or so he says, an ‘antiquarian psychologist’ – a mere collector of curios from the neglected history of rhetoric. Busy colleagues, conducting their serious experiments, haven’t got time for these charming bits and pieces. So the author says to them: “Look what treasures can be picked up on the low tide of rhetoric’s forgotten beach; spare a moment for Protagoras; pause for Aristotle; look at the lovely Lord Monboddo quotation I’ve just found”.

Form and content

Psychologists might be momentarily hoodwinked by the tone. Proper historians, who know something about the story of rhetoric, will be suspicious. The antiquarian’s collection is not haphazard, whatever the impression he gives. The author is selective in his celebration of the rhetorical tradition. Arguing and Thinking provides no synoptic history of rhetoric in the manner of Brian Vickers’s In Defence of Rhetoric (1988), whose very title, also, declares a rhetorical intent. The collector was looking for certain curios, ignoring others. One might say that he had schemata of collection. If rhetoric after the Renaissance went through a phase of being almost exclusively concerned with classifying the adornments of language, then the antiquarian author simply skipped those bits. He was accumulating a different sort of collection.

In this collection, Protagoras, that elusive sophist, was given pride of place. Other heroes could have been chosen; indeed, as will be suggested, a heroine should have been noticed. The selection of Protagoras fitted the argument, which was celebrating argumentation. Protagorean rhetoric was not the rhetoric of style, tropes and belles lettres: it was a rhetoric of argumentative invention. Protagoras claimed that there were always two sides to every issue. This appealed to the collector searching for a rhetoric of inventio, rather than dispositio.

In presenting his praise of argumentative rhetoric, the author made use of the conventional distinction between the content of discourse and its form. He was interested – so he claimed – in the content of arguments, rather than their stylistic form. The text gives examples from the Talmud, as rabbis of old exercise their argumentative imagination. It is implied that these accounts are shorn of literary embellishment, so that the essence of argumentative inventio, purified of dispositio, is revealed.

But if this were the end of the matter, then why, one might ask, does the author bother to introduce himself as ‘an antiquarian psychologist’? This self-description carries a rhetorical story. And what of the style of Arguing and Thinking? Were the words merely flung together with no thought for presentation? Hardly. This raises the question whether there might be arguments within arguments, with the form itself part of the argumentative content.

Form and content

The distinction between form and content is more easily drawn in theory than in practice. No actual utterance, whether written or spoken, can only have content, for it must appear in some form or other. So-called ‘plain’ or ‘unadorned’ styles are themselves styles, which themselves can demand just as much authorial skill as more floridly verbose rhetorics. As Roland Barthes (1984) stressed, the literary art of naturalism is by no means natural. The
same argument can be applied to scientific writing. Psychological reports tend to be written in their own particular plain style, which appears to reject rhetorical adornment in favour of presenting the 'facts'. One does not read the technical journals of psychology in order to enjoy the grace of language. The apparent rejection of rhetoric is itself a routine style of writing which must be accomplished to qualify for publication in the journals. More than this, it also embodies an argument about the nature of psychological 'facts' (Bazerman, 1987 and 1988; Gergen, 1994).

Readers, who are familiar with social psychological writing, would be aware from the first page that *Arguing and Thinking* was not using the conventional rhetoric of the discipline. The book was originally published in a series of social psychological monographs, but it does not read like the other volumes in the series (including the two that I wrote). *Arguing and Thinking* has no graphs, figures or numbers; the technical terms are used sparingly, at least in comparison with their customary abundance. There are stories, even jokes. One reviewer, who was by no means uncritical, mentioned that the book was fun to read:

> As evidence, I note that I could read one chapter of the book undistracted while changing trains at Leeds station late at night. (Myers, 1989, p. 225).

I personally gained pleasure from such comments – better a critic who reports enjoyment on a train, than a reader who expresses grim agreement with the contents. And when I gave the manuscript to friends or colleagues, I would ask anxiously, "Did you get the jokes; did you smile?"

The question can be asked: what were the attempts at humour doing in a text which seemed to dismiss form? Why try to aim for a lightness of touch? Surely, the message about the two-sidedness of human thinking, or about the argumentative nature of attitudinal positions, could have been presented with greater disciplinary propriety (and, in all probability, with greater persuasive impact on social psychological readers). There was no need to summon the assistance of Protagoras, Talmudic rabbis or Lord Monboddo. And what on earth were the tales about cricket doing? Social psychology is supposed to carry a universal, international message. If sporting examples were deemed necessary, surely the author could have cited an American – and thereby universal – sport, such as baseball. However, home-running, base-touching metaphors were avoided.

Some of the writing in *Arguing and Thinking* is rather mannered. Yet, this mannered writing appears to argue the case for a rhetoric which detaches form from content. It is as if the argument were using a form which conflicts with its own content. Two possibilities suggest themselves. Either the form was a detachable adornment, in which case the author was betraying his own high-minded principles about the virtues of *inventio*; or the form can be
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understood as part of the argument itself, in which case the distinction between form and content collapses.

Conflicts between form and outward message have a long history in rhetorical writings. One can think of the many textbooks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which urged the use of aesthetically attractive language, but whose own pages carried only the dullest of sentences. Most notably there is the case of Plato. Outwardly he seemed to be proposing a philosophy which aimed to discover essential truths. The chatter of opinion should give way to the single, monologic voice of truth. Yet, as is well known, Plato wrote dialogues to argue for this apparent philosophy of monologue. As Jan Swearingen (1990) has argued, Plato was no literary simpleton, unaware of what he was writing. He deliberately constructed animated scenarios, which ring with the clash of argumentative challenge. In Plato’s texts, Socrates’s case for an ideal world, in which all would quietly revere a single truth, was not itself treated with silent respect. Accordingly, Plato’s own message is more complex, and certainly more ambivalent, than the position he was attributing to Socrates. His dialogic form was doing argumentative business. As such, it is neither adornment, nor self-refutation.

The style of Arguing and Thinking suggests an analogous conflict between form and content. If the author were aware of what he was doing, then he might have been using the form to pursue further arguments. Perhaps, he was displaying an unwillingness to accept the conventional terms of debate: by his choice of style he would, then, have been revealing a greater distance from rival social psychological approaches. From the privileged position of an older self, I can offer the hindsight, but by no means disinterested, suggestion that the style of Arguing and Thinking was part of the argumentative business. That being so, the fun might not be so innocent, the charm not quite so charming.

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If an academic book is to be understood in terms of its rhetorical context, and if this means identifying the targets of its logos, then Arguing and Thinking needs to be set in its own argumentative context. To do this, some words about background are necessary. This involves depicting a mixture of personal, intellectual and political backgrounds. These descriptions are inevitably tales, which are constructed after the event. They are no less misleading for being post hoc. To discover how a book was written, it is sometimes not worth asking the author during the time of writing. The academic author, obsessed by index cards and keyboard, tends to see the words before the eye, but misses the turning of history into present, which is going on around the solitary task.

The book was begun, but was not completed, while I was lecturing in the
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Department of Psychology at Birmingham University. I had trained as an experimental social psychologist and, before I moved to Loughborough University, my professional life had been spent in psychology departments. In British universities, as well as in North American ones, psychology departments tend to provide rather distinctive intellectual environments. Possibly there, more than elsewhere in modern academies, the spirit of scientism prevails. Scientism is not so much the routine practice of science, but the elaboration of this practice into an ideological credo. In psychology departments, this credo often becomes something akin to a party line. This affirms that we, as psychologists, must advance beyond the hunches of poets, philosophers and other blithe spirits who have commented on human nature in the past. To do this, we must employ the practices of science. Human behaviour has to be observed in controlled conditions, so that its flux can be translated into the statistically analyzable fixity of numbers. Ideas, which are not supported by the practice of experimentation, are deemed suspect, being prone to the biases of subjective judgement.

In this way, psychologists, schooled in orthodox departments, justify their own activities. In so doing, they implicitly, and often explicitly, repudiate those other parts of the academy, which do not employ the approved methodologies. Sociologists are dismissed for their unscientific wooliness. History’s all very well (at least for historians), but it’s not scientific. It’s rather speculative, isn’t it? You can’t really prove anything, unless you re-run the course of history, holding the relevant variables constant. But, of course, you can’t do that. So much the worse, then, for the discipline of history and its putative claims to knowledge.

Accordingly, we psychologists are encouraged in a hierarchy of intellectual snobbery. We gaze admiringly towards our betters in the natural sciences, while disdaining the poverty of truth to be found in the humanities. The path to truth is thought to be paved with correct methods. Those psychologists who question the accepted techniques are not made welcome: they are seen to challenge the very activity of psychology itself. “Why don’t you go to sociology?” carries the same rhetoric of accusation and threat (not to mention insecurity) as did “Why don’t you go to Russia?” during the age of Senator McCarthy.

Within orthodox departments, social psychologists tend to be somewhat marginal figures. They trade at the softer, down-market end of the business, far removed from the purveyors of real biological goods. In the contexts of their departments, social psychologists are expected to behave like eager provincials, alongside the metropolitan scientists. All too often, they compensate by using a disciplinary language, which copies the linguistic fashions of the metropolis. The fashion today is for the language of computing and information-processing models. Social psychologists like to show that
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they are comfortable with phrases such as ‘top-down processing systems’, ‘attitudinal-schemata’ and ‘knowledge structures’, treating these phrases as if they described materially existing things (for analyses of the rhetoric of social psychology, see Gergen, 1994; Harré 1981; Billig, 1994a; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

All this is mentioned because no one, who was at home with such habits of language, would have written a book like Arguing and Thinking. Some critics of social psychology attribute their dissatisfaction to methodology. They believe that laboratory experiments are inappropriate, even immoral, devices for finding out about humans. However, my turning from conventional social psychology was not rooted in methodological objections. I still teach experimental psychology, including Henri Tajfel’s intergroup experiments, in which I was privileged to collaborate as a postgraduate student (Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel, 1981). My apostasy stemmed from an unease with the language of orthodoxy. For me, the articles in the professional journals seemed to be written in a difficult, foreign language. I was always attempting to translate the big, official phrases into smaller, homelier ones. Far from getting easier, this language became harder to understand, let alone use spontaneously. I never managed to become a fluent speaker: the words never came readily to my lips or typewriter. And in the library, I was getting impatient. Other shelves were more inviting.

So, over a period of years, I ceased to read what I was, in effect, being employed to read. For reasons which I find now hard to understand, I was cut off from the wider academic world. I did not attend conferences. I did not defect to the company of sociologists. My academic world was the department in which I worked and was fortunate to have good personal friends. But my intellectual home was becoming the shelves, which offered the forbidden fruit, not of knowledge, but of speculation. In time, I discovered Plato and Aristotle.

The word ‘discover’ might seem odd in this context. How can a paid academic claim to ‘discover’ such well-known figures? In other ways, the word is not so peculiar. Dr Livingstone and other Victorian explorers were always conducted by indigenous guides, who knew well the places ‘discovered’ by the Europeans. Their ‘discoveries’ were only possible because the explorers, and their society back home, refused to treat the knowledge of the guides as if it were proper knowledge. By the same token, I could imagine myself to be ‘discovering’ famous books, because, in my familiar academic home, such volumes were customarily unread and their regular readers in other departments were dismissed from serious, scientific consideration.

Through Plato, and then through Aristotle, I was drawn towards the rhetorical tradition, of which I had previously been unaware. It was as if, on the distant shelves of Birmingham University’s superb library, I had stumbled
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across the ruined cities of a lost civilization. Some of the volumes, like those of Whately, Campbell and Fénélon, were original editions, which had to be held with care lest the dried leather spines cracked. Their archaic words were easier to understand than the modern journals which I had been trained to read and which I was now avoiding. Also, there were reprinted editions, reproducing the original, unfamiliar print-faces. Shelf after shelf of green-bound Scolar Press reprints from the history of English rhetoric were waiting to be ‘discovered’. I did not pause to consider the implausibility of ‘discovering’ volumes, which someone else had ordered for the library and for which a contemporary publisher had identified a small market. The thrill of individual discovery – of metaphorically possessing and being possessed by the books – allowed no such thoughts. If ever the library recalled a volume, informing me that it had been requested by another reader, I never wanted to know who that other reader was. Dr Livingstone, after all, never sought out the company of Stanley. I was excited by the illusion of solitary discovery.

The background of university politics

There is another background story. The last paragraph of the first chapter of Arguing and Thinking mentions, in tones of heavy irony, the political circumstances which faced institutions of higher education in Britain during the 1980s. Broadly, these circumstances have continued with increasing force into the 1990s. The Conservative Party, led by Margaret Thatcher, came to power in 1979 with the avowed aim of sweeping aside all traces of socialism. The institutions of state were to be rolled back and market forces were to reign supreme. Everyone had to compete. If state institutions, such as postal services, hospitals and schools (but not the armed forces) were to survive, then they must be seen to be profit-making. The structures of the welfare state, and more importantly its underlying ethos, were dismantled. Capitalist values were to be pervasive.

The universities, long suspected by Conservatives of being incubators of socialism, were particular targets. They, too, were told to become entrepreneurial. Academics were to be useful members of the society, contributing directly to the national goal of wealth-creation. The government, which finances the main funding councils of research, has made it clear that research, which aids the nation’s profitability, should be given priority. Sad to say, the universities have accepted their new role of wealth-creators. Entrepreneurial professors are the order of the day. Academics compete to obtain research contracts. Funding is not sought in order to do research, but research is done in order to get funding.

This political background seems to have little relevance to a book whose antiquarian playfulness appears totally apolitical. I had previously written
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about the psychology of racism and fascism, not to mention the racism and fascism of psychology (Billig, 1978 and 1981). Now I was apparently turning away from political issues – and doing so, just when a right-wing government was directly interfering with academic life and was discouraging criticism. Surely, it was cowardly escapism to delight in Protagoras and Cicero.

At the time, the government was attempting to encourage practical science over the humanities. Philosophy departments were being closed. After all, philosophers were irrelevant, when the philosophy of state was being successfully practised by the gladiators of the market. As for the study of ancient Greek and Latin, the new conservatives were settling class scores with the classically educated gentry in their own party. In the ten years since the writing of Arguing and Thinking, the commodification of British academic life has continued. The government has set in place overseers who grade the research output of each university department. Every academic product can be assigned a commercial value, as the balance sheets of academic activity are regularly drawn up. Fundings, of course, directly follow from the gradings. It is not difficult to put the financial value to each publication. The pressure is to produce, and thereby, to ‘earn’.

In psychology departments, academics, with the financial lure of research contracts before them, have proclaimed their scientific usefulness. To great effect, they have demonstrated their familiarity with the new information technology. The computing metaphors of psychological theory – the person as an information-processor, as a memory-activating device and so on – have an economic basis. In university terms, big money is at stake in the human-machine interface.

Against the demands to be scientifically useful, a turn to the neglected shelves of rhetoric and to the texts of ancient Greece was a small act of refusal. Antiquarian psychology was making no claims to improve the scientific status, and thereby commercial possibilities, of social psychology. In effect, Arguing and Thinking was arguing against the scientific pretensions of social psychology. Taking inspiration from Protagoras and Quintilian (neither of whom managed large-scale, funded research teams), the book suggested that each law, or scientific generalization, about persuasion demands qualification. And so does each qualification. The dream of an ordered science of social psychology is a mirage. It is a nightmare rather than a dream. There is a wider implication. The spirit of contradiction can be provoked by any attempt to formulate absolute laws of psychology. If we are told that it is not in our nature to think particular sorts of thoughts, then, out of a spirit of opposition, we can think them. The laws of the market, which supposedly appeal to an innate psychology of self-interest, can be resisted. “There is no alternative” was a constant refrain of Thatcherism (Young, 1993). But there always is, according to Protagoras.
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Rhetoric’s revival

The happy ignorance, which accompanied the escape from disciplinary constraint, has left its mark in *Arguing and Thinking*. The illusion of discovery is noticeable, as the author presents himself as the lone scholar who has happened across rhetorical curios. There is hardly a mention of anyone else currently working in the rhetorical tradition. Ten years later, the illusion can no longer be sustained. Omissions must be put right.

First, there is an obvious omission to rectify. In the United States, the rhetorical tradition never disappeared. Even when degrees in rhetoric were no longer being taught in major European universities, departments of rhetoric survived in the States. Such departments have maintained the rhetorical tradition, providing academic shelters for fine rhetorical scholars. *Arguing and Thinking* overlooked this intellectual heritage, the author being unaware of the work of figures such as Lloyd Bitzer, Richard McKeon and Karlyn Campbell. In mitigation, it might be said that the American departments of rhetoric have existed on the intellectual margins. They have not attracted the attention given to new movements within linguistics, communication science or the social psychology of persuasion. Moreover, within their own universities, the rhetoric departments have not typically enjoyed prominence. The rhetoricians are often employed to teach remedial composition, undertaking what one such teacher has called “low class grunt work” (Neel, 1995, p. 62).

*Arguing and Thinking* has further omissions. There is no sense of the cultural background, which made possible its own claimed discovery of rhetoric. Instead, the explorer’s ego is magnified. As the ego expands, it is untroubled by an obvious thought: the forces, which were impelling my feet on their bibliophilic wanderings, might be directing other feet along similar paths. The author was not listening for others; he could only hear his own footsteps.

The ignorance of others is displayed early in *Arguing and Thinking* – to be precise, in the second sentence of the second paragraph. I was writing ironically about the delights of the psychology journals, which tell “what colleagues in Iowa or Nebraska have been doing in their laboratories”. At that time, I personally had no colleagues in Iowa or Nebraska. I imagined that these places, with their exotic names, might be homes for the most orthodox of American social psychology. In making my little joke, it never crossed my mind that a major, intellectual movement to revive rhetoric was at that very moment taking place in Iowa City.

The University of Iowa has become a pivotal focus for scholars who have come to rhetoric out of a dissatisfaction with the scientist ideologies of their own disciplines. Donald McCloskey, professor of economics at Iowa, published his superb *The Rhetoric of Economics* in 1986. This had demon-