

PART I

Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue

CHAPTER I

Seeking Polylogue

Start talking with almost anyone and you will discover some differences for which they will have their reasons. Carry on the conversation and it is likely that what at first seems to be ordinary communication between two people managing their differences is actually quite complex. It is this complexity that we examine in this book.

Consider two neighbors who happen to see each other at a local café, when one discovers that the other has some property available. A half-joking offer is made and met only with a nod. Two days later, a realtor contacts the property owner about acquiring the property on behalf of a potential buyer whose friend had overheard the conversation at the café. The property owner consults with her three siblings about selling the property that they co-own from a recent inheritance, and then each individually investigates values for comparable property online, as well as the inquiring realtor's credibility. They cannot agree among each other about a sale price for the property, so they contract with their own realtor to help determine a price and to engage the buyer's realtor. After a few exchanges of counteroffers, the seller and buyer agree on a purchase price. Before the sale can be completed, the buyer and the bank financing the purchase require an inspection of the property for defects and compliance with safety and environmental regulations set by government agencies. In addition, before the property exchange is finalized, the government requires certification of the property boundaries and clearing of any debts against it. The inspectors and certifiers involved each produce a document to be signed and attached to the sales contract as proof validating key facts necessary for the buyer's offer and the seller's acceptance.

From the café encounter to the completion of the property transaction, the opening scenario is an instance of something quite recognizable about everyday life: humans are immersed in complex communication. The café encounter between two neighbors is overheard by another, the realtor speaks to the property owner on behalf of an interested party, the owner

is actually a group of family members, and the owner and eventual buyer interact through a variety of other parties with their particular, possibly divergent or incomplete, perspectives about the property and the circumstances. The complexity does not simply reside in the important but obvious fact that many different people are engaging each other in the many different events that develop from the café encounter. Complexity resides in the fact that taking any action relative to others, including saying something, can have consequences, even unknown ones, for any of the parties directly or indirectly involved. Moreover, the parties expect that each other, as individuals or collectives, may have reasons for their actions and can be held accountable for having reasons. The acceptability of any action depends, at least partly, on reasons justifying it. Herein lie the risks and opportunities of communication in human activity: when reasons are made explicit and open to criticism, the conduct and outcomes of interaction, as well as the individual and shared perspectives about the circumstances, are given shape, and often in unexpected ways. In our scenario, these events range in formality from casual conversations and online search to consultations and negotiations to transactions requiring signed, official documents. The events are linked together (or unlinked) by how communication's risks and opportunities are managed by those who become involved and by the degree to which one event is consequential for the conduct and outcomes of other events. After all, the property transaction did not have to follow from the café encounter. Differences and disagreements are not per se bugs or failures of communication, but rather natural, even essential, features of communication. How the differences and disagreements are handled within and across these events through argumentation – the making and criticizing of reasons in the context of doubt and disagreement – matters for what develops or not and for the intelligence of the interaction.¹

The scenario lets us formulate the basic problem we address in this book: how to understand the complexity of argumentation, that is, how argument and communication are entangled in human activity. This problem opens up new possibilities for theory and practice in describing,

¹ "Argumentation," so understood, is clearly a communicative *activity*. Less obviously, it can also denote a communicative *act*, for example, when we speak of pro-argumentation. "Argument," similarly, can refer to an *object*, an *act*, or an *activity*. These ambiguities, while being a feature of ordinary English, have led to lively conceptual debates in the field of argumentation studies. It's not our intention to explicitly enter into these debates here. Wherever necessary, we clearly disambiguate between these various senses. Whenever context makes it clear that we refer to an activity, we may use the term "argumentation" and "argument" interchangeably.

evaluating, and prescribing argumentation. The complexity to be examined, however, is occluded by a received view of argumentation that depends on a particular characterization of argumentation as a form of communication that happens just between two parties trading reasons and criticisms on “both sides” of an issue in one place at one time for the purpose of two parties to resolve their disagreement, in particular by means of one party convincing another. While the received view has merits that we hope to preserve, its base characterization is a limiting factor for seeing the complexity of argumentation, let alone engaging that complexity.

For instance, the opening scenario could be understood as two parties (i.e., a buyer and a seller) in a one-to-one exchange of a pro and a con position (i.e., accepting or rejecting a purchase price) that happens in one place (i.e., realtor’s office) – but obviously that scenario suggests that there is much more going on argumentatively within and across communicative events. A realtor might, for example, insinuate that the neighborhood is not appropriate for potential buyers from a particular ethnic or religious minority by stating they would feel “more comfortable” someplace else; and when criticized for a bigoted insinuation, she can sneakily respond she merely meant an age group.² Or, instead, the realtor might respond by apologetically pointing out the sad reality of what kind of offers get accepted around here, thus unveiling deeper institutional conditions privileging what is arguable, such as when specific stipulations are written into deeds disallowing property transfers to buyers from a particular race.³ Any such intervention opens new lines of (counter-)argumentation and affects the kind of practical conclusion that can be reached in the event. All the same, an all too common simplification of argumentation – what we call a *dyadic reduction* – dismisses such complexities and the often subtle dynamics that open up and close off argumentative opportunities: what could be said, what would count as a relevant argument, who could become involved, what differences could lead to, and where interaction could take place. The dyadic reduction of the received view is pervasive in technical, professional, media, and lay understandings of argumentation such as when: purchasing is seen as only a buyer and seller exchanging some good, finding a companion is seen as if it was only the two people who fell in love made it happen, health decision-making is seen as only the doctor and the patient selecting one treatment over another, electing

² This example is taken from Camp’s (2018) analysis of the mechanisms of insinuation and denial in everyday conversation.

³ As documented by the Mapping Prejudice Project (www.mappingprejudice.org/).

leaders is treated as a choice between only left or right, handling a novel viral pandemic is treated as a choice only between saving the economy or saving public health, and policy controversy is treated as siding with either climate change acceptors or deniers. This list just names a few.

The dyadic reduction in technical, professional, and everyday efforts to describe, evaluate, and prescribe practices of argumentation is not only pervasive but also fundamentally problematic. The received view's limiting factors are particularly poignant with respect to understanding contemporary controversies and decision-making but also consequential for what knowledge from other fields is taken to be relevant for understanding argumentation and for the recovery of important insights from the history of argumentation theory and practice. In contrast to the received view, we seek to articulate an alternative path of inquiry that is more deeply engaged with the entanglement of argumentation and complex communication in human activity.

Our opening scenario begins the turn from the dyadic reduction by building on our basic observation that communicative situations have always been replete with "third parties": some ready to ameliorate or exploit differences and the making and criticizing of reasons, and others affected by the way differences are handled. More official, classical argumentative situations include judges, lawyers, juries, mediators, arbitrators, or audiences in all their well-known forms and capacities (assembly members, crowds, viewers). Less official, everyday situations, involve unaddressed bystanders, overhearers, and eavesdroppers in addition to directly addressed participants. And now, in the increasingly digitalized environments, this basic fact is exacerbated as highly complex networks of participants take up a variety of roles relative to the making and criticizing of reasons. These include addressees, readers, lurkers, trolls, moderators, service providers, conveners, AI-bots, advertisers, etc., all of whom tap into the affordances of devices, apps, platforms, and algorithms that underpin both formal and informal everyday interactions of people as they participate in social, civic, and economic life. Giving attention to third parties, especially in the evolving digital environment, disrupts some of the most basic ways argumentation is delineated such as interpersonal (micro) in contrast to mass public (macro) or as institutional (procedural, fact-based) in contrast to noninstitutional (free-wheeling, value-based). Yet surprisingly, third parties, and the many-to-many communication their roles reveal, are typically neglected in argumentation analysis, evaluation, and prescription.

Seeking Polylogue

7

This basic observation, moreover, brings new focus to the fact that the conduct of argumentation matters. Yet, while philosophers from Socrates to Habermas have argued that the quality of argumentative exchanges is the best check on human rationality, the correspondence between the individual human capacity and willingness to make and criticize reasons and the intelligence of the way this capacity is collectively organized remains an elusive theoretical problem and a persistent practical issue. In complex communication, the quality of interaction is an achievement that goes beyond the individual rationality of each supposed participant. For instance, the fact that self-interested parties to legal proceedings (e.g., plaintiff and defendant) are characteristically incapable or unwilling to yield to the force of the better argument of the other party does not render these proceedings flawed or useless. Over and above these two parties, it is a collective achievement of judges, attorneys, witnesses, expert assessors, jury members, and other courts of appeal to safeguard the reasonableness of the procedure and its final outcome. On the other hand, two dozen intelligent and critically minded people do not necessarily generate critical and intelligent exchanges on their Facebook pages. Moreover, the way in which complex communication, as in the opening scenario, becomes organized involves many choices, reflective or not, about the who, what, and where that is included in or excluded from the system of transactions and the consequences of those choices. One of our chief arguments throughout this book is that simplifications that ignore, downplay, hide, or dismiss such important realities of complex communication are detrimental to understanding and improving argumentation and thus to seeking intelligent interaction.

Our main task in this book is to highlight and reimagine the concern with the rationality of many-to-many communication that is blocked by the received view's dyadic preoccupations about argumentation and its valorization of one-to-one and one-to-many communication. We give the concern about many-to-many communication a particular twist with the term *polylogue* to recognize that in complex communication many parties (*players*) pursue many distinct standpoints and rationales (*positions*) across multiple situations (*places*). The crucial point in recognizing polylogue is the obligation it creates to understand how argumentation and complex communication are entangled in human activity – that is, to explain how positions, players, and places are organized through argumentation and the consequences of their systemic interdependencies. The received dyadic view hinders this important task. So in making the case that it is imperative to see *polylogue*, we also make a case for embracing the descriptive,

normative, and prescriptive implications of polylogue for argumentation theory and practice.

We chose *polylogue* as a simple yet perspicuous term for renewing and advancing inquiry of argumentation in complex communication. For the basic understanding of the concept, it suffices to unpack its Greek etymology – *poly-logos* signifies discourse (*λόγος*: *logos*) between many (*πολύ*: *poly*).⁴ In this sense, it can easily be added to the common vocabulary of other words of Greek origin frequently used in the same semantic field, such as *monologue* or *dialogue*. Especially *mono-logos*, discourse of a single person, is a direct equivalent here. Dialogue, by contrast, might be a confusing term. Etymologically, *dia-logos* means “through” discourse; but this is all too easily mistaken for a *di-logos*, discourse between “two.” This slight difference in the original Greek prefixes arguably contributes to the dyadic reduction mentioned above. Indeed, both ordinary and academic vocabulary fall prey to the deeply entrenched practice of limiting a dialogue to a di-logue: dialogue becomes basically an interaction between *two* speakers, and argumentative dialogue is characteristically theorized as an exchange of reasons and criticisms between only *two* arguers (proponent–opponent, protagonist–antagonist, arguer–critic, questioner–answerer). We aim to critically analyze this practice and its consequences.⁵

To further set the stage for our investigation of polylogues, we introduce three chief motivations for addressing polylogue in the first place. The first of them is the undeniable empirical reality of polylogue. As in our opening scenario, much of people’s daily argumentation happens in complex communicative situations. That this fact cannot be simply dismissed has been reflected in an ongoing practical concern with the conduct and rationality of many-to-many communication and its mediation (Section 1.1). In this context, second, it is necessary and quite thrilling to trace and understand the origins of the theoretical dismissal of this reality via its reduction to dyadic interaction (Section 1.2). Finally, it’s equally necessary

⁴ Although we are reminded by our Greek friends that in modern usage a *polylogos* can also signify a person who produces a lot of discourse, that is, a loquacious talker, we do not intend to use this notion in this sense.

⁵ One last etymological clarification before we move on. Given the capacious, and very central, meaning of the notion of *logos* in ancient Greece – which may refer to a “word,” “discourse,” “opinion,” “thought,” “account,” “reason,” “argument,” “rule,” “ground,” etc. – it is common to follow Aristotle and understand “logos” with a normative edge as “reasoned discourse.” This paves the way for conceiving of polylogues as reasoned (based on reason-giving and reason-criticizing) and thus, at least ideally, also reasonable or intelligent interactions between many. As will become clear from our discussion throughout the book, this etymologically natural sense will be important for studying specifically argumentative polylogues.

to acknowledge various developments in contemporary argumentation theory – most importantly, scrutiny of the context dependence of reasoning – that show there is more to see, to evaluate, and to manage in argumentation than the schematic simplifications of the dyadic reduction project (Section 1.3). Yet, these developments also reveal some unfinished business in reversing the dyadic reduction and embracing the complexity of argumentation. Our study of polylogue – this book – explores precisely the curious theory-reality gap, occasionally noticed but overall inadequately or incompletely treated. While we hope scholarly business of any sort can never be quite finished, we at least argue the steps we take here advance the study of argumentation in complex communication.

1.1 Managing Disagreement under Polylogical Conditions

The polylogical challenge to the received imaginary of argumentation is ever more obvious in light of the radical transformations in communication media and the increasing digitalization of social and institutional life. Consider the circumstances of the prominent platform-based companies coming to terms with the consequences of creating a place for large-scale, many-to-many, and, ostensibly, reasonable communication. One of Twitter's founders, Evan Williams, highlighted an empirical and normative naïveté all too prominent in the social media era when he said in a May 2017 *New York Times* interview, "I thought once everybody could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world is automatically going to be a better place." And, significantly, he added: "I was wrong about that." It was as though the platform was simply enabling a series of unfettered encounters, like face-to-face, one-on-one conversations, where people freely and reasonably engage. This widely held presumption crashed into another communicative reality when many social platforms were exposed for participating in systematic, often hidden, distortions and manipulations of participation and content that in some cases were conducted by "rogue" commercial or state agents exploiting affordances of the platform.

Disagreement, it turned out, was a many-splendored opportunity for interested third parties, including the platform companies, whose actions were facilitated by the design of social media platforms to cultivate data by curating interactions. Indeed, the European Union's 2018 General Data Protection Regulation requirements exposed just how many hidden commercial organizations act as third parties to the personalized interactions people have with each other and with various online services. In light of

this, it was a telling moment when, in an interview during Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's spring 2018 tour defending Facebook's societal role, he claimed that Facebook, with its more than two billion members, is more like a government than a business (Zuckerberg on Kleinberg show, March 2018). Indeed, it remains empirically and normatively naïve to expect that free, critical, and reasonable communicative exchanges can naturally happen at scale. And when exploiting disagreement at scale becomes part of the business model, it is necessary to admit that there are serious governance issues in generating trustworthy content and legitimate many-to-many communication. And now, all the platform companies have come in for at least some critical reassessment of their pervasive impact on the most basic interactions where people work out social and civic relations, economic exchange, political choice, and knowledge development. The contemporary struggle with platform companies reveals an age-old problem with a new media wrinkle – that is, admitting the puzzles of polylogue is not the same as understanding it.

What was (is) apparently lost on social media and other platform entrepreneurs about many-to-many communication was a front-and-center consideration for the authors of the United States Constitution when in 1788 they had to decide on “the number [of members in the House of Representatives] most convenient for a representative legislature” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 269). Should the citizens of the new republic be represented by a few dozen or a few hundred delegates? According to James Madison, the number needed to be substantial in order to “secure the benefits of free consultation and discussion” and yet significantly limited so as not to let passion “wrest the sceptre from reason” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 270). Sixty-five representatives, as stipulated by Art. 1, sect. 2, of the Constitution (pending the first national census), was a reasonable choice, given the historical circumstances of the nascent country, argued Madison. And he added a defensive punchline to those who would only be satisfied with a much larger assembly: “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 270). Madison and other framers of the Constitution thus clearly recognized the practical issue that the capacity and willingness of individuals to argue does not guarantee intelligent interaction. They feared that the human capacities to make and criticize reasons would yield to the passions, unfounded arguments, and other behaviors characteristic of a mob. They also had ideas about the potential for disagreement to be managed in a normatively justifiable and yet workable manner that can

Seeking Polylogue

II

realize what is actually possible for knowing and acting in less-than-ideal circumstances.

As Madison's words show, the framers turned to the dialectically inspired Socratic ideal for guidance to define an assembly that could tame complex communication's risks while exploiting its opportunities in devising prudent courses of action. Was he really wrong in drawing upon the Socratic ideal for this design? Here, it is important to stress again that a reasoned dialogue between two speakers who exchange arguments and counterarguments – traditionally called “dialectic” and epitomized in the ideal Socratic dialogue – has long shaped understanding of what intelligent interaction is and what it should be. Perhaps Madison understood the problem of reasonable communication being swamped in the intricate passions and dynamics of an uncontrollable mob so well, that – by limiting numbers to better match their idealization of reasoned dialogue – he had already found a solution that would prevent surprise and harm, unlike the Facebook and other platform CEOs.

The framers and the platform CEOs share a concern with the uses of argument in complex communication for translating pluralistic perspectives, opinions, tastes, and preferences of the many into courses of action. While they may differ about the role of deliberation, administration, and markets in shaping courses of action, their choices highlight a practical awareness of communication as an architectonic art about configuring the interaction of positions, players, and places to realize a particular conduct and quality of argumentation. The framers devised a novel approach for a governance platform built around managing differences of opinion to construct policies. The platform found its legitimacy in its capacity for collective self-determination and adaptive development grounded in human rights rather than a monarchy, theocracy, or despotism. However, there was more and less to the framers' practical theorizing about scaling up from dyadic Socratic interaction, with its emphasis on individual skills and virtues, to “polylogical” interactions where various collective dynamics enter the stage. The more involved their choices about who had the individual skills and virtues to participate in representative deliberations. Most notably, these choices included privileging propertied, white men as legitimate participants in public deliberation while other people were not considered legitimate public participants – women, those defined as property without any human rights whatsoever (the enslaved Africans, African-Americans, and conquered indigenous peoples), and others as objects of conquest (indigenous peoples still free at the time). The less involved the