CHAPTER 1

The role of audience in a theory of argumentation

1.1 Approaching argumentation

In words that could be a commentary on our own times, Albert Camus once observed: "We live in terror because persuasion is no longer possible" (Camus 1972: 21). Indeed, in a world divided along so many lines by disputes over fundamental social and political questions, we could easily be forgiven for thinking that the art of constructive persuasion has been lost and that human beings might even be better off if they did not argue. Of course, there are many things without which we might be better off, yet which form essential parts of our nature. But without the resources of argument and argumentation in particular, we would be hard pressed to even begin addressing those very disputes. Camus' observation might serve us better today if we replace the "because" with a "where," and even then we might reject the pessimism that would suggest there are occasions where persuasion cannot operate successfully.

Contemporary research suggests we have evolved our reasoning skills not just to become better decision-makers and improve our knowledge but in order to devise and evaluate arguments (Mercier and Sperber 2011). In fact, if we could divest ourselves of the practice of arguing we would not be better off. This practice is a fundamental aspect of our social nature, and as the current project strives to show, it defines us in crucial ways as well as enriching our interactions.

The negative ideas that might be associated with the nature of argument and arguing may well have their source in two quite distinct experiences: the ways many of us were first introduced to the elements of technical arguments and, at the other extreme, the disorganized quarreling that often passes as arguing. On the first count, arguments are conveyed to us as related structures of statements of support. Organized on a page, such structures have premises and conclusions and properties of being valid or invalid, depending on the relationships that pertain between the

statements. This view sees argument as a product, but it is often difficult to see of what it is a product. The statements are isolated from any social dynamic that might conceivably have produced them. Even where they can be traced back to people that issued them, attention has shifted to the product alone and we are asked to decide whether it is a "good" argument. The terms on which it might be deemed good, however, are not terms that take us beyond the statements themselves to consider the person or source who produced them or, more importantly, the person or people for whom they were produced. Thus, our common experiences with arguments in this technical sense are not with products of social interaction that in their evaluation might tell us something about those who produced and received them. This is not to deny that there are benefits to understanding the strengths of arguments as units of sentences and learning how to test their validity. It is just that we have difficulty seeing any connection between that kind of practice and the exchanges that go on around us and in which we engage, and that reflect and address issues of real disagreement in the social domain.

Likewise, quarreling seems equally unlikely to provide any positive contributions to social debates, and as an example of an argumentative exchange the quarrel is as unattractive as the isolated logic exercise in the classroom. In his dialogue *Euthydemus*, Plato captured a particularly egregious kind of quarrel in the practices of the Sophist brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.[1] These practices, technically termed eristics, involved attempts to win an argument at any cost using whatever means, fair or unfair, deemed necessary to meet that goal. Thus, one of the brothers can say of a young man who has been asked a question that could be answered along two alternative lines that it doesn't matter which one he chooses, he will be refuted in either case. Such eristical play, so often at the heart of the modern-day quarrel, suggests that arguing itself is rather pointless and lacking in the positive tools necessary to help resolve disputes or even understand them.

Contrary to these views, argumentation involves the practices of using arguments to interact with, explore, understand, and (sometimes) resolve matters that are important to us. It opens up conduits between people, introducing us to other minds and other perspectives. Even what to many is the paradigm of argument use – the courtroom scenario – offers only an artificial reflection of actual argumentation. When an argument

1 A practice often unfairly attributed to other Sophists and even deemed characteristic of sophistic argument itself.

is directed to a jury or judge, that audience is not expected to be predisposed one way or the other. But in everyday argumentation people do have a prior stake in the issue and are specifically addressed in relation to their interests. Hence, they are already disposed towards receiving the argument in a certain way.

We are argumentative beings as is witnessed by the fact that we disagree about so many things and worry not only that things could be other than they are, but that they *should* be other than they are. To see the world as other than it is and to think about how it might be changed accordingly is to think in terms of the argumentation that might be used to bring about the desired changes. Of course, if we are essentially argumentative beings, and this is a constructive component of our make-up, then to change this would require a fundamental change to our own nature, and for the worse. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* envisaged a world in which homogeneous agreement was achieved through the use of a drug. People did not need to think; everything was decided for them. This particularly unattractive view of human beings is not something we would choose for ourselves – which was Huxley's point. We want the hardships of decision-making, with any ill consequences that might follow from it. We value disagreement, even when it has unfortunate outcomes, because this is how we express ourselves while retaining our independence. Autonomy and the responsibility that comes with it are important things that we prize for ourselves but that were missing from Huxley's dystopia. Argumentation is something through which we assert ourselves and measure the assertions of others; it is part of the fabric of the social world.

As a practice involving arguments, then, argumentation has little interest in the classroom example or the quarrel. It encompasses a wider practical situation in which the arguments produced are simply one component, and never one that is to be divorced from the rest. Equally essential both to understanding an argumentative situation and evaluating it are the arguer who at least initiates the exchange, and the audience of that exchange.

1.2 Argumentative speeches and journeys

The source of argumentation is itself a topic that attracts considerable debate. Traditionally, we would see the arguer as a speaker or writer who inventively composes a discourse with an audience in mind, transferring intentions from mind to voice or page with skill and fluency, and thus communicating a meaning that the audience can in turn "pick up"

and understand. The source of this argumentation is a single individual, isolated in the performance of an activity over which he or she has full and final control. If we need to know what a discourse means, we go to this source who provides the authoritative word.

This is a picture with which few working within the field of argumentation theory would now agree. Every element of the account could be contested in some way. Argumentation has a dynamic nature to it, with arguers and audiences wedded in an active relationship of exchanges to such a degree that the audience provides much of the content of the discourse because they are so central to the context. The discourse is *for them*, and so is composed in their terms. In this way the arguer is constrained in what he or she can say if persuasion is the goal. The arguer is not an isolated performer but an engaged co-constructor of the discourse. In fact, more modern (or post-modern) appreciations of the arguer's role bring into question the individuality of the arguer altogether. Speakers and writers are the conduits of a multitude of influences, from what they've read, to what they've experienced and the people they have listened to. Drawing on such an understanding in his dispute with John Searle over intentionality and the nature of speech acts, Jacques Derrida (1988: 29–107) went so far as to suggest that each speaker is a company of limited responsibility (a limited inc.). Searle's practice of deferring in his acknowledgements to all those who had contributed to his ideas played into this conception of shared authorship.

Certainly, such ways of thinking serve to undermine the authority of the author, whether speaker or writer, as *the* one who knows the meaning of what is uttered. That is, the smooth transition of intentions to words is questioned.

In the modern world, we may think of speechmakers as corporate entities, at least with respect to the speeches that have the greatest impact on societies. We fully expect public figures to have "representatives" whose words those figures will convey or who may even speak on their behalf. And politicians will front a team of writers who convert policy into language and construct the speeches that will convey them. It may not even be left to the speaker to decide the manner of delivery, since even that can be carefully orchestrated to achieve the desired effect, or at least avoid undesired effects.

While the focus of this project is on the audiences that are addressed and the range of problems associated with understanding such audiences in argumentative contexts, we cannot ignore the other principals in the argumentative situation. The dialogical nature of the enterprise that

engages us here dictates that we isolate elements, whether the audience, argument, or arguer at our peril. Matters of audience can be addressed apart from the relationships from which they emerge, but only to the degree that what is said and learned reflects those relationships. Actual audiences, as they are discussed (and used to illustrate general features of "audience") always belong to a context, and are audiences *of*, whether that "of" refers to argumentations or speakers.

So it is appropriate to begin with discussions of some speeches that reflect types of argumentation and the skills and strategies that can be employed. These speeches illustrate some of the principles that will become important as the project develops, while also reflecting the kinds of difficulties to be addressed.

Speech #1: A new Lincoln

On Saturday February 10, 2007, in Springfield Illinois, a young senator stood on the steps of the Old State Capitol and announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the United States in 2008. While observers who had followed this man's political career would have been unsurprised by his actions that day, for the majority of people, even in America, it was their first real introduction to Barack Obama. Thus, it was an occasion for the senator to present himself in his own terms. In language that Greek rhetoricians set down centuries earlier, this was the opportunity for Obama to create his image through his words, to construct his *ethos* (or character).

On many fronts, this is a typical introductory speech in which a candidate makes his or her introduction, provides credentials for a proposed task, sets an ambitious agenda, and invites an audience to share in the venture. But each phase of the speech is rhetorically textured to suggest something momentous and compelling. On the one hand, there is a simple content to the discourse, and on the other, there is how that content is packaged and delivered.

The speech begins with Obama acknowledging the journey the crowd has made to be there on that occasion. But this is quickly translated into a metaphorical journey to build a "more perfect union."[2] By the end of the speech this has become a quest, rooted in a shared destiny, that the audience is invited to adopt. Before he can fully issue such an invitation,

2 All quotes from the following speeches are from the official transcripts, available at: http://obamaspeeches.com/

however, it is important that they (and the larger audience that stands behind them) know with whom they will be travelling on this quest. Obama explains how he came to be there, working with the poor for little pay, living out his Christian faith, until he decided it was by entering the legal profession that he could best continue to play his part in "building a better America." With this background, he was elected a state senator, and thus arrived in Springfield, the state capitol. This autobiography is described with the important attendant values that both explain his behavior in the past and equip him for the future.

These values are also reflected in his accomplishments and the positions he took as a senator: reforming the death penalty system, providing health insurance to children in need, improving the tax system for working families, passing ethics reforms, and opposing the war in Iraq. His interest with ethics is repeated later, when he reminds his audience that he "was proud to help lead the fight in Congress that led to the most sweeping ethics reform since Watergate." This reminder follows his detailing of the current state of affairs in American politics, thus inviting an important contrast.

The agenda he introduces is one of fundamental change. But in anticipation of the skepticism this may evoke, he roots his discussion in the nation's accomplishments of the past: defeating a tyrannical Empire, surviving the Depression, and achieving justice in the face of hatred and discrimination. The agenda of change in fact involves a recovery of the past in the sense that he issues a call to take back the government and heal a union that has been divided. The government needs to be taken back from the cynics, and lobbyists, and special interest groups, and the ethics reforms that Obama has championed are offered as evidence that the change is already in progress.

To pull these threads together and capitalize on the sense of place he had evoked earlier through the choice of Springfield, "where North, South, East and West come together," and where Lincoln called for a divided house to stand together, he resurrects that "tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer," calling him into the present: "He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us that there is power in conviction … He tells us that there is power in hope." Obama, another gangly, self-made lawyer, differing only in color – which he never mentions and will never make an issue in his campaign – exploits the place, the voice, and the character of a predecessor that he would emulate in his audience's eyes. If Lincoln is present on the day, it is in the figure of Obama. As the invitation is then given to join the quest, the identity of the one making the call has been deliberately made ambiguous.

For all the recalling of the past, this is a speech about the future. He is asking his audience to deliberate, to weigh some important decisions and decide. And he is offering crucial advice for that deliberation, guiding it towards the only conclusion that his discourse can imagine. It is a call for action as an outcome of deliberative choice.

Who is that deliberative audience? The immediate audience stands before him: those who have travelled "from far and wide" to hear him. Among them are the members of the media who act as conduits for a larger audience of Americans who have the opportunity to face the challenges of the "millennium together, as one people." But buried within this larger audience are those that he wants to specifically address, and who he refers to as "our generation." This is the larger group of importance to which he and those standing before him belong: "Each and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what's needed to be done. Today we are called once more – and it is time for our generation to answer that call." Obama closes the gap between himself and those he is addressing and turns an "I" and a "you" into a "we." It is no longer about him, as he tells them, it is about them. The agenda is a shared venture, and so midway through the speech he issues a call: "let us begin." That "let us" refrain is repeated twenty times in the next few minutes of the speech (or seven paragraphs of the text), and gradually interwoven with the repetition of "we can." Obama will use the figure of repetition several times during the speech, including the later repetition of "he tells us" attributed to Lincoln. In the history of rhetoric, names have been given to strategies of repetition. Anaphora[3] describes the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences.

As noted earlier, permeating the whole speech are the central values that Obama wants both to weave into the picture of his character and stimulate in his audience. These are values that distinguish past events and that he will project into the future. In fact, the whole speech is characterized by a value-focused rhetoric. Obama presents himself as a compassionate man, working as a community organizer in a job where he gave far more than he got. But he is also an accomplished man of achievement and he wants to pass this ethic on to others. Core to this is

3 Since later discussions may invite confusion on this, I should distinguish the traditional rhetorical term from Chastian's (1975) development of anaphoric chains. In this sense anaphora denotes a primitive recurrence structure characteristic of many terms (like indexicals and proper names). This is the sense we will see Robert Brandom (1994) adopt in a later chapter.

the accepting of responsibility reflected in the "we can" refrain. And this is backed with a vision of a united nation that can "disagree without being disagreeable," that can compromise and listen to other perspectives, which can assume the best in people. Accountability, fairness, courage, honesty, are all values that are evoked and encouraged.

A final thing to note at this point about Obama's speech is its proleptic quality. He anticipates objections that are likely to be made (worries that may arise in his hearers' minds) and responds to them *before* they can arise. It is true that he is not from Illinois, but he explains how he came to be there and why, making the details of that explanation a natural part of his candidacy. People may worry about his name and possible Muslim associations. But without making explicit reference to these, he talks early on about his Christian faith and its importance to him. He is young and inexperienced and so may seem arrogant: "But I've been here long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change." The most significant aspect of his candidacy is never mentioned or referred to, lost perhaps in the image of a new Lincoln.

Speech #2: Architect of change

A year and half after the Springfield speech, on November 4, 2008, Obama stood at the podium in Grant Park, Chicago as president-elect. A lot of speeches had been written and delivered in the interim, including the crucial speech distancing him from his former pastor. But the Grant Park speech differed in its focus. Attention was given to how they had arrived at that historical moment and what was at stake in getting there. And the speech attempts an analysis and interpretation of what this means.

The speech begins with anaphoric force. Any doubters have had their answer that night, but what that answer means is carefully spelled out with a series of repeated "It's the answer." So, for example, it's the answer demonstrated by long lines at polling stations because people believed that on that occasion their voices would make a difference. And it's the answer of the rich diversity of Americans that they were united, not divided. These opening passages are important to the kind of interpretative analysis that the victory is being given in the speech.

The next move is to thank the many people who have had a hand in the achievement, ending as might be expected with the "you" that had most made it happen. This "you" will be addressed directly because it accounts for the remarkable victory. To emphasize this, Obama creates a contrast by first analyzing the early stages of the campaign, born in

backyards and living rooms and supported by the contributions of everyday working people. Given this unlikely origin, the victory can only be explained by the belief and industry of the people.

He then begins to directly address them: "I know you didn't do this just to win an election and I know you didn't do it for me." So he tells them why they did it: because they understood the task ahead, a difficult path. In rallying his listeners to persevere he again recalls the words of Lincoln recounting the bonds of affection that bind even those Americans who disagree among themselves.

The speech culminates with the example of the 106-year-old Ann Nixon Cooper. She had seen a century of remarkable changes, changes that had convinced her how much America could change, and thus that it could be changed again. The progress she has seen is linked to the potential of the future and the final invocation of the speech to answer the call of progress.

Unlike Speech #1, this speech spends more time analyzing the path that has led to the victory than looking ahead. The invocations about the future are vague and indistinct, while the analysis of the past is used to recall the values that Obama wants to highlight and reinforce. This judging of the past calls for a different kind of judgment than that involved with deliberations about the future. The past exists; it needs now to be interpreted so that its meaning can provide lessons for the future.

This judging audience extends far beyond the deliberative audience of Springfield. Obama begins by addressing those who voted for him, and extends his address to speak to those who helped him directly and worked for the campaign. Then, given the message of unity that pervades the speech, he includes those Americans whose support he has yet to earn, promising to represent them. And then he extends his address to "those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of our world." The message of unity is extended to these: their story is a singular one, the destiny shared. It should strike us how ambitious, or amorphous, this audience really is. Rhetoricians speak of addressing all human beings, but few speakers find themselves in a position to attempt such a feat. It will be one of the concerns of this project to consider the problems inherent in such an attempt.

This speech may be unlike the Springfield speech in its concerns and the direction of its analysis, but it is similar in that it too is enriched with value-focused rhetoric. The lessons, accomplishments and examples are vehicles for the values that are to be embraced and championed. Those who

believed in the campaign and worked for it are deemed to have shown courage and sacrifice. Building on this, Obama summons "a new spirit of patriotism: of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other." The message of unity is underlined by emphasizing that the Republican Party was founded on "values of self-reliance, individual liberty and national unity." These are values, Obama insists, shared in common by Republican and Democrat. And the widest audience "beyond our shores" is offered the lesson of the enduring values of America: "democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope."

That hope is captured graphically in the example of Ann Nixon Cooper, who over the course of seven paragraphs comes to represent the nation itself. The history she has seen over one hundred plus years is the history of America. The changes she has seen have been America's changes. And her hopes have been a nation's hopes. That the example offered, brought before the eyes of the audience, is a frail, elderly woman symbolizes the inner spirit that can endure and overcome physical weakness to succeed. As this figure of hope comes to represent America itself, another repetitive refrain is introduced to show how hope can be successful, this time at the end of each clause: "Yes we can." Like anaphora, the figure of antistrophe involves repetitions but at the end of successive clauses. Each simple "Yes we can" contrasts a point in American history when things looked bleak, when women's voices were silenced or tyranny threatened democracy. The refrain is repeated six times and then one last time at the end of the speech.

Speech #3: About a man

The final speech to consider here was given by president Obama in Washington, DC in August 2009. It was a speech of a different nature, even genre, to those discussed above, insofar as it was a eulogy for Senator Edward Kennedy. Eulogies play an important role in the lives of states and communities. They offer an opportunity to reflect on the character of a person and the values he or she possessed. Eulogies are occasions when the values of a community can be highlighted and reinforced.

The Kennedy eulogy, as we would expect, focuses on the life and accomplishments of one individual. Albeit an extraordinary individual whose life (like that of Ann Nixon Cooper) witnessed pivotal events in America's social history and who comes (in the course of the speech) to represent the society's achievements of progress and improvement on