

Reflective Summary:Toulmin

Nancy Cathcart, 2009

Toulmin is concerned with the form of arguments. “Keeping our eyes on the practical business of argumentation, that is, applied logic” (p. 95), he seeks to answer the question: What features should a logically candid layout of arguments have? In other words, he is trying to account for how much the form of an argument affects its quality. In response, he establishes a model that I will refer to as the “warrant model”.

To begin, Toulmin notes that there are many things involved in establishing conclusions through the production of arguments. We have basic forms such as premises, conclusions and claims, but in making an assertion, for example, we must have premises consisting of data that can “back up” our claims. We should be able to produce facts that support the conclusion. In support of the facts, we must also be prepared to offer the warrant that connects the facts to the conclusion. Toulmin calls these data “bridges” that authorize the association between the data and the conclusion in a relevant way. He offers the example of someone’s hair color. The fact is that it is not black, and the warrant that supports that fact is that something cannot be two different colors at once. The warrant serves as a missing premise that further backs the acceptability of the conclusion.

Warrants are implicit. Toulmin says that without a warrant, “it will become impossible in that field to subject arguments to rational assessment” (p. 100). However, in order to establish their relevance, sometimes the warrants themselves need to be qualified, so that others can understand how the warrant applies. And sometimes the warrant needs to be rebutted. Both rebuttals and qualifiers are part of the form of arguments that can make them more complex.

Warrants must also be backed. Often, others will challenge the acceptability of the application of a warrant for a claim, and so we must provide more information which will make the warrant acceptable. Acceptability of warrants is dependent on the field in which one is arguing.

Toulmin says that “a bare conclusion, without any data produced in its support, is no argument” (p. 106). But backings, warrants, qualifiers and rebuttals are all optional parts of the form of argument. It isn’t always necessary to provide these other parts in order to formulate an argument.

He goes on to compare the “warrant model” to the traditional syllogism. The middle line in the syllogism serves as the warrant that bridges the claim (premise) and the conclusion. The backing is located in the syllogism by examining the factual content it contains, and that is field dependent, similar to the other “warrant” model. Overall, they syllogism and the warrant model seem to perform similarly.

Toulmin concludes, however, that reliance on the syllogistic form is often insufficient. The form of the argument is important, but the syllogism is too simplistic for complex arguments the occur in natural language, as opposed to the symbolic. Often it is the data contained within that argument, and the backing for the data, that determines the quality of the argument overall. He says that “the two-fold distinction between premises and conclusion appears insufficiently complex and, to do justice to the situation, one needs to adopt in its place at least the four-fold distinction between datum, conclusion, warrant and backing.” (p. 114).

Reflection:

I found this piece difficult to comprehend. I never did figure out exactly what the difference between the warrant and the backing for the warrant was, or how to consistently tell the difference. Overall, however, I have a great appreciation for the historical significance of Toulmin's contribution to informal logic and the development of the theory of natural language arguments. He is correct in understanding that the traditional, formal syllogistic argument style can only carry us so far. I also agree with his ideas on arguments being what he calls "field dependent". I think that what he means by that is that each argument is conducted within a context (e.g., arguments about buildings will happen in an architectural context, a construction context, or an inhabitant's context), and each of those "fields" will have something to say along the lines of qualification or rebuttal that will make the argument different, but no less correct. He is arguing for a consideration of context-relevance, and I believe that is a crucial component of understanding argument.

He is also pointing out that there are arguments that require our consideration that are not analytic, and thus, self-contained. The syllogism works just fine for analytic arguments, and formal logic can quite easily "map" these forms. But this kind of formal design doesn't translate well to substantial, natural language arguments. In fact, forcing this kind of form on to a non-analytic argument can cause an otherwise useful piece of communication to appear useless and ridiculous.