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Is 'argument' subject to the product/process ambiguity?

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Abstract: The product/process distinction with regards to "argument" has a longstanding history and foundational role in argumentation theory. I shall argue that, regardless of one's chosen ontology of arguments, arguments are not the product of some process of arguing. Hence, appeal to the distinction is distorting the very organizational foundations of argumentation theory and should be abandoned.

Resumé: La distinction processus/produit appliquée aux arguments joue un rôle de fondement de la théorie de l'argumentation depuis longtemps. Quelle que soit l'ontologie des arguments qu'on adopte, je soutiens que les arguments ne sont pas le produit d'un processus d'argumentation. Donc l'usage de cette distinction déforme le fondement organisationnel de la théorie d'argumentation, et par conséquent, on devrait abandonner cette distinction

Keywords: Argument, acts of arguing, process, product

1. Introduction

In recent work, Ralph Johnson raises several problems for the adequacy of the Logic/Rhetoric/Dialectic trichotomy and for its alleged basis—the argument as product/process/procedure trichotomy. My concern here is not with Johnson's problems—rather it is with what Johnson leaves unchallenged. While Johnson ultimately has some reservations about argument as procedure, he leaves the product/process distinction untouched. He writes: "The distinction between product and process seems to me fairly secure. It has a longstanding history here and in other disciplines. In logic, for instance, the term 'inference' is understood as ambiguous as between the process of drawing an inference and the inference that results from that process" (Johnson 2009, p. 3).

Despite its longstanding history and foundational role in argumentation theory, I am not so confident about the security

of the product/process distinction, at least as it applies to "argument" or even "inference". In what follows, I shall focus on "argument". In section 2, I shall first articulate the conditions required for "argument" to be subject to the product/process ambiguity, and then, in sections 3 and 4, argue that, regardless of whether one thinks arguments are composed of acts or propositions or sentences, not all of the conditions are met. Finally, in section 5, I shall point out some ways in which argumentation theorists have been led astray by relying on this alleged ambiguity.

2. The process/product distinction and argument

In his chapter on ambiguity, just after giving an example of how an argument can go wrong by failing to distinguish the action sense of a word from the result sense of a word, Max Black writes: "A great many words exhibit a similar fluctuation between emphasis upon a process (a doing something) and an associated product (the result of an activity)"(Black 1946, p. 177). The general consensus, among argumentation theorists at least, is that "argument" is such a word. Though Black himself does not acknowledge that he thinks "argument" is such a word, his own discussion of argument evinces at least part of such an ambiguity. On the one hand, in his glossary, he defines an argument as follows: "Argument. A process of reasoning in which the truth of some proposition (the conclusion) is shown, or alleged to be shown, to depend upon the truth of others (the premises)"(Black 1946, p. 379). But in the main body of his text he writes: "We have seen that the elements out of which that complex object which we call an argument is constructed are statements (or more precisely, propositions); and we have noticed that the propositions are arranged or related to one another in a certain way"(Black 1946, p. 18). On the one hand, Black defines argument as a process of reasoning, but on the other he calls an argument a complex object constructed of statements or propositions.

That there are words subject to the process/product ambiguity is not a matter of dispute. Black's own examples of "science" and "education" are perfectly legitimate. But is "argument" subject to the ambiguity? To say that a word is subject to the process/product ambiguity is to say that (a) there is a sense of the word that refers to an activity; (b) there is a sense of the word that refers to an object or thing; and (c) the object or thing is in some sense the result or outcome of the activity. For example, we could use "science" to describe the activity of doing cer-

tain sorts of investigations or we could use "science" to describe the results or outcomes of those investigations. But while "argument" satisfies conditions (a) and (b), it is not at all clear that it satisfies condition (c) as so many seem to suppose.[1]

That "argument" satisfies conditions (a) and (b) is also not a matter of contention. Just compare—"It is better to engage in argument than in intimidation" and "Peter Unger's argument for skepticism consists of three propositions." But merely satisfying conditions (a) and (b) is not enough to warrant talking about arguments as process and arguments as product. Satisfying conditions (a) and (b) merely warrants talking about the activity of arguing[2] on the one hand and arguments as objects on the other. Indeed, no one ought to dispute that there are acts of arguing, as opposed to acts of explaining or prophesying or poetry reading, on the one hand, and groups of propositions, sentences, statements or utterances, on the other. But for the product/process ambiguity to obtain, the object must in some sense be the product of the activity—does this hold for "argument"?
Many theorists write as if it does. Here are but a few examples:

> O' Keefe and other rhetoricians think that argument in the second sense is given too much importance, especially by logicians and philosophers, and that more emphasis should be placed on the process of arguing, rather than on something produced in that process. (Levi 2000, p. 59)

> The term 'argument' can be used to refer either to the process or to the product of that process. (Johnson 2000, p. 12)

> Logic helps us to understand and evaluate arguments as products people create when they argue. (Wenzel 1990, p. 9)

> An argument is produced by the activity of arguing and arguing is something people do. (Fogelin 1985, p. 2)

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[1] Perhaps "argumentation" as some people use it does satisfy the three conditions. But then, if I am correct in what follows, that just shows that "argument" and "argumentation" are not always interchangeable. Regardless, for any who view "argumentation" as interchangeable with "argument", then the following discussion applies to "argumentation" as well.

[2] Though most of my examples will involve individuals making arguments, there is nothing in my formulation that restricts activities to the acts of single individuals. Groups debating or having an argument are also instances of the activity of arguing. But since group arguing is at least in part comprised of individuals making arguments to others in the group, if the distinction fails in the individual case it will fail in the group case.

Not all theorists are willing to be constrained by the product/process locutions. For example, Alvin Goldman writes:

> The term 'argument' will be used here for the product, or perhaps content, of argumentation, usually, for a set of sentences, or a set of propositions that might be expressed by means of such sentences. One member of such a set is a conclusion and the other members (possibly null) are premises. The elements of an argument might be printed, uttered, or merely thought. 'Argumentation', by contrast, will refer to the process or activity of producing or deploying such a complex object. A process of argumentation can be purely mental, in which case it is 'inference', or it can be overt and public. (Goldman 2003, p. 52)

Note that while Goldman does incorporate the possibility that argumentation is the process or activity of producing arguments, he also allows for the possibility that arguments might be the content of argumentation or what is deployed in argumentation.

Despite Goldman's willingness to allow for the possibility that arguments might be related to acts of arguing in some other manner than product of the process, the norm in argumentation theory is to treat arguments-as-objects as the product of the process of argument-as-activity. I shall, however, argue in the next sections, that even Goldman's weaker position concedes too much, for arguments are just not the products of the process of arguing.

3. Products as propositions?

Suppose you hold that arguments-as-objects are sets of propositions. Should you accept that these sets of propositions are the product of acts of arguing? No. Propositions are abstract objects, either eternal or atemporal, and not the subject of production. Hence, whatever is the product of acts of arguing, if there is such a product, it is not the set of propositions that is an argument.

But perhaps someone might object that while the propositions are not created, perhaps the sets or particular groupings of them are—in other words the argument, i.e., the group of propositions does not exist as an argument until someone groups them that way and that way of grouping happens as a result of the activity of arguing.

Short reply: If the group that is the argument just is a set, say the ordered set of a set of propositions and another proposition, then, since the set is itself an abstract object and exists in-

dependently of anyone thinking of it or creating it, the group is not produced by the act of arguing.

Longer reply: Suppose one holds that the entity that is the argument is not the set of propositions, but rather the group of propositions that results via the activity of some agent. One might wonder whether this group just is the set of propositions even if it is the activity of the agent that has made us become aware of the set (and even though one may not think of the entity one is now aware of as a set or an ordered set). But assume for the moment there is a distinct entity that is the result of this grouping activity. So according to the current proposal, an argument is a group of propositions that gets grouped as part of the activity of arguing.

Assume, for the moment, that arguments are groups of propositions. Is the act of arguing t he *only* means of performing the grouping activity that produces arguments? No. Suppose Sally asks Roy to give her an example of an argument comprised solely of existential generalizations. Roy slyly responds with, "Some arguments are composed solely of existential generalizations, so some arguments are composed solely of existential generalizations." While an act of example giving has occurred, an act of arguing has not. (Roy need not be trying to convince Sally of anything. Sally may have no doubts that such arguments exist and merely be testing Roy or expecting Roy to generate an ingenious example). At the same time, Roy has satisfied Sally's request for an example of an argument. The grouping of propositions that makes an argument come into existence has occurred even though an act of arguing has not. Hence, acts of arguing are, at the very least, not the only means of grouping propositions to produce arguments.

Are groupings of propositions even *mostly* the result of acts of arguing? No. Imagine that I am verbally expressing the arguments of this paper to an audience. When I argue that "argument" is not a process/product word, I may be making my audience aware of various arguments via my speech acts, which would certainly constitute acts of arguing—but I am certainly not making myself aware of these arguments. I was aware of these arguments well before I presented them or wrote them down. Also, while many acts of reflection, imagination, following through implications, etc. occurred, as well as considerable reasoning about everything from word choice, sentence order, possible objections and possible consequences, in the production of these arguments, no obvious acts of arguing, even with myself, occurred. But if my arguments exist prior to my using them here to argue and if the groupings happened by some means other than arguing with myself, which I am pretty sure they did,

then my arguments, as groupings of propositions, are not the products of acts of arguing.

My arguments are not special in this regard. Most arguments are already known, even if not fully or with sufficient clarity, to those who use them to argue. In other words, assuming that arguments are groupings of propositions, the arguer has already grouped the propositions into an argument prior to engaging in the act of arguing. But if arguments in general exist prior to their use and if the grouping in general happens by some means other than self-arguing, then arguments are not, in most cases, the products of acts of arguing.

Are arguments as propositions *ever* the result of acts of arguing? Perhaps there are cases of spontaneous arguing in which the arguer has no idea what his or her own argument is until he or she is done arguing. I cannot immediately rule out the possibility of such cases. Nor, however, can I produce any clear examples of such spontaneous arguments. Until such examples are forthcoming, we should remain skeptical that there are any such cases and so remain skeptical that arguments as groups of propositions are the product of acts of arguing. Also, even if there are some examples of these sorts of cases, surely these sorts of cases are not the norm. Nor, given a general concern with improving the quality of one's arguments or increasing the forethought one puts into one's arguments, do we want these sort of cases to be the norm. But if these sorts of cases are not the norm, if they exist at all, then argumentation theory should not have a fundamental organizing principle that presupposes these sorts of cases.

Note that these objections work even if one has a view of propositions or abstract objects such that they are the sorts of entities that can be created by human activity. Even if propositions, or sets of propositions, are created by us, in the vast majority of cases (and perhaps all cases), the propositions or sets of propositions are created prior to being used to argue. But then arguments, as sets or groups of propositions are not, in the vast majority (and perhaps all) cases, the products of acts of arguing.

4. Products as sentences? Speech acts?

Suppose one takes arguments to be composed of sentences rather than propositions. Presumably there are two choices—sentence types or sentence tokens. Neither option, I strongly suspect, will do as an adequate theory of arguments-as-objects, but arguing that claim is a different paper. Regardless, even supposing that one of these options will work as a theory of ar-

guments-as-objects, neither option supports the view that such objects are the product of the process of arguing. Sentence types, quite straightforwardly, are abstract objects that are not the subject of production, but rather instantiation. Sentence tokens, on the other hand, either exist prior to the acts of arguing or are a component of the act of arguing rather than the product of the act of arguing.

Consider for example the sentence tokens that exist on this very page. Those sentence tokens came into existence long before being spoken aloud or read here. If my act of arguing occurs when the sentences are spoken aloud to an audience or read here, then the sentence tokens exist prior to the act of arguing. Hence, the sentence tokens are not the product of the act of arguing. But perhaps my act of arguing occurred when I first wrote the sentences down. Or perhaps the auditory argument is composed of not the tokens on this page, but the auditory sentence tokens that come into existence when I present this argument verbally. In either case the sentence tokens are not prior to the act of arguing. Nor are they the product of it either. The auditory sentence tokens are part of the very speech acts that are the act of arguing that occurs when presenting this argument orally. But if they are part of the act of arguing, then they are not the product of the act of arguing. Similarly, if my act of writing the sentence tokens down is my act of arguing, then the sentence tokens are not the product of the act of arguing, rather the production of the sentence tokens constitutes the act of arguing.

This latter point also reveals the problem if we suppose that arguments are composed of utterances, or statements, or speech acts. While, unlike propositions or sentences, the utterances, or statements, or speech acts cannot exist prior to the act of arguing, it still makes no sense to say that the utterances, or statements, or speech acts are the product of the acts of arguing. The statements, or utterances, or speech acts currently being made just are the acts of stating or uttering that constitute the current act of arguing. If I were not to make those statements, or utterances, or speech acts in the proper context or order there would be no act of arguing. Hence, taking arguments to be composed of statements, or utterances, or speech acts does not support the claim that arguments are the products of the process of arguing.[3]

The only option left is that the act of arguing somehow occurs prior to the writing or uttering of the sentence tokens. But

[3] Of course "statement" or "utterance" also turn out to be ambiguous, since they could refer not to the act of uttering or stating, but to the sentence (or proposition) uttered or stated, in which case the arguments deployed in the first two cases come into play again.

then the act of arguing must be a mental act of the arguer. I have already suggested that while many acts of reflection and imagnation may have occurred prior to the writing of my arguments (which on the current hypothesis are composed of sentence tokens), it is not at all clear that any acts of arguing with myself occurred in the production of these sentence tokens. Nor do I think that other arguers are engaging in self-argument in order to produce the arguments they make for their audiences. But suppose I am mistaken about my mental life (and the mental life of other arguers). Suppose there are acts of arguing with myself that produce these sentence tokens. It is not, however, these mental acts of arguing with myself that the many argumentation theorists are referring to by the "argument-as-process". When numerous argumentation theorists enjoin us to focus more on the "process of arguing" rather than on the "product of arguing", surely they are enjoining us to focus on the overt acts of arguing that happen in our everyday lives, (such as the politician arguing before Congress (or Parliament) that a bill should or should not be adopted, or the letter to the editor arguing that the publication got something wrong, etc.), rather than sets of propositions abstracted from any context. It is the overt observable acts, in their context of occurrence, that are supposed to be the focus of our study—not the inaccessible mental acts of the arguer.[4]

Note that the problems for "argument" with regards to the product/process distinction, also apply to Johnson's "inference" example. There is no doubt the act of inferring—but what is the thing that is the inference that is allegedly the result of the act of inferring? The inference could just be the thing inferred, i.e., the conclusion, but it is hard to see how the conclusion is the product of the act of inferring rather than just the endpoint reached via the act of inferring. One may be aware of one proposition or sentence and aware of another, and then come to realize that the

[4] One might point to Dale Hample's papers, "A Cognitive View of Argument" or "A Third Perspective on Argument" to suggest that at least some theorists have argued for a focus on the relevant cognitive events. Admittedly, in the first paper, Hample claims that the message's only function is to "stimulate the production of an argument within someone's cognitive system"(Hample 1980, p. 152), though even here he is more interested in the productive contribution of the receiver rather than the stimulus provided by the message. In the second paper, however, he focuses on the arguer and argues that "argument-as-cognition" is what generates public acts of argument making (Hample 1985, p. 17). Hample does not describe these mental arguments as themselves the product of self-arguing. So even Hample's call for a focus on cognitive events does not support the view that arguments are the products of acts of arguing.

second can be inferred from the first. But the second proposition or sentence existed prior to the inferring of it from the other, so it cannot be the product of the act of inferring. Alternatively, the inference might be the expression of the form "X, so Y". But the expression captures part of a description of the act of inferring. Just as a painting is not the product of what it pictures, the expression, "X, so Y" is not a product of the act of inferring, but rather a partial description of the act of inferring (and if Robert Pinto is right, a partial description that has the power to invite others to engage in the same act of inferring.) Finally, the inference might just be the event that is the moving from, say, X to Y. But what is this event other than just the activity of inferring X from Y described after it has happened? The event is not the product of the activity—it *is* the activity. So, like "argument", "inference" is not subject to the process/product ambiguity, even if it is subject to the act/object ambiguity.

5. The danger of the process/product distinction for argumentation theory

Still, someone might think something is odd about these results. Surely, after acts of arguing we have something we did not have before—surely something was produced. Undoubtedly something was produced, but there is no guarantee that the thing produced was an argument. It is quite possible that what is produced is awareness of an argument—an awareness we did not have before. For example, what seems common to the "act of arguing" case and the "giving an example" case discussed in section II is that in both situations, the activity of arguing and the activity of giving an example made the target audience aware of a given argument. But being made aware of an argument one was unaware of before should not be confused with production of that argument.

Surely arguments must be the product of something. Perhaps. If arguments are sets of propositions, then perhaps arguments are better described as being discovered rather than produced. Regardless, even if arguments turn out to be the sort of thing that is produced, there seems little reason right now to say that they are the product of acts of arguing. They, or the expressions of them, may be the result of various acts of imagination, reflection, etc., but that does not make them the product of acts of arguing.

Maybe then I just have too narrow a conception of acts of arguing. Imagining, reflecting, reasoning, and so on are, one might claim, all argumentative processes out of which we gen-

erate arguments. If by "argumentative process" we merely mean a process associated with or involved in arguing or arguments, then or course argumentative processes are involved in the production of arguments (or argument expressions or acts of argu-

ing). But to be relevant and non-trivial, we must mean by "argumentative process" processes that are themselves acts of arguing. While what is covered by acts of arguing can be quite broad and include internal mental debates, the giving of closing arguments in a trial, parliamentary debates, etc., the range is presumably not so broad as to include all acts of imagining, reflecting, or reasoning. If "arguing" were construed so broadly, then almost every outcome of intentional human activity would be the product of arguing and every reasoned activity a kind of arguing. There are certainly debates about what is and is not an act of arguing, but no argumentation theorist I know of wishes to claim that all reasoned activity is a kind of arguing. Given that we quite reasonably want, in many cases at least, to distinguish arguing from explaining from story-telling from bridge-building and so on, we should not treat all reasoned activities as arguing. By the same token, since these diverse activities involve the same sort of reflectings, imaginings, and reasonings, we should not claim that these mental activities are all mental arguings.

Perhaps, some will say, that I am merely quibbling. Yes, the attribution of "process" and "product" may have been ultimately unfortunate, but all we really mean is that there are acts of arguing on the one hand and some sort of object on the other. Once we are clear on this, the objection goes, we can understand comments such as, "I will here focus on argument as process rather than as product" well enough.

Firstly, of course we can easily understand such comments once the clarification is made. But we should not need to make the clarification in the first place. If we mean acts of arguing on the one hand and arguments-as-objects on the other, then say this. All the use of the process/product locution does is make it seem that there is not only the acts and the objects, but that there is a specific relationship between the acts of arguing and the arguments, when in fact there is not.

Secondly, if distinguishing arguments-as-acts from arguments-as-objects were the only sort of use made of the process/product distinction, then perhaps what I have done here might be rightly construed as quibbling. But as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, it is not the only use to which the distinction is put. For example, the distinction is used as part of an attempt to ground the difference between the so-called Logical

and Rhetorical perspectives. Appeal to the distinction is also used to justify the adequacy of definitions of 'argument'—certainly a core notion within argumentation theory. For example, van Eemeren and Grootendorst provide the following definition of "argumentation":

> **Argumentation** is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint. (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 1)

As part of the explication and justification for this definition they write "the process-product" ambiguity of the word 'argumentation' is maintained: The term *argumentation* refers at the same time to the process of arguing ('I am about to complete my argumentation') and to its product ('This argumentation is not sound')."(p. 1) But if "argument" (and "argumentation") is not subject to the process/product ambiguity, then judging the adequacy of definitions of "argument" in terms of the ambiguity is bound to lead us astray.

In addition, the distinction is also used to ground claims of priority or importance.

Michael Gilbert, for example, takes Ralph Johnson to task for taking written arguments as primary, when Johnson's own framework seems to indicate that the process should be primary. Gilbert writes:

> However, the object of NASTy veneration is not the process, but the product of the process: "At a certain point in the process, the arguer distils elements from what has transpired and encodes them in the form of an argument"(159). This product is the distillate that is the epitome of the practice of argument. But this seems to indicate that the process is ontologically more fundamental than the product, since without the process the product does not come into existence.
>
> It is important to realize that the exclusion of certain factors as arguments seems to rely on the distinction between the process of arguing and the product produced by that process. This is a NASTy distinction that most NICe theorists would not really allow. Rather, the NICe theorist will, at best, see the written argument or speech as a snapshot of the process at a given moment in time, much as the inventory of a grocery store accounts for its contents at some specific moment: as soon as the inventory is complete, it changes with the first customer. I have no problem at all with there being such argument products, though, with Willard, I believe they cannot really be understood independent of the process used in arriving at them. (Gilbert

2003, p. 6)

While Gilbert, in the middle of this extended quote, seems to be disavowing the process/product distinction, he clearly uses the distinction to give ontological and intellectual priority to the

process since, according to Gilbert, the argument products "cannot really be understood independent of the process used in arriving at them."

But if arguments are just not the products of acts of arguing, then such an argument cannot be used to ground claims of either ontological or intellectual primacy to the acts or process of arguing.

The debate about the primacy of various aspects of argument is not new. David Zarefsky, three decades ago, suspected, that "our disputes over definition turn on the question of whether argument$_1$ or argument$_2$ should be the primary notion informing our research"(Zarefsky 1980, p. 229). Indeed, at this time, argument$_1$ was tied with argument as product, and argument$_2$ with argument as process. But even Daniel O'Keefe, who originally introduced argument$_1$ and argument$_2$ resisted this identification (O'Keefe 1982, p. 23).[5]

Zarefsky worried that progress in argumentation theory was being thwarted by "definitional concerns [which] may distract us from the substantive issues we wish to investigate"(Zarefsky 1980, p. 228). But the flipside is that failure to make progress on the definitional concerns may mean that worse than failing to make progress, we are actually producing false theories about the phenomena in question since we have failed to articulate clearly what the various phenomena in question are. This appears to be what is in danger of happening if we insist on talking about arguments as processes and the products of those processes, for it prejudges the relationship between the acts of arguing and the things that are arguments in a way that, I hope I have shown, is likely to distort the real relationship between the acts and the objects.

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[5] Some might suggest however that O'Keefe's act of making an argument$_1$ and argument$_1$ are the correlates for argument as process and argument as product. Reply: Though O'Keefe does sometimes use the unfortunate locution—the argument made by the act of making an argument, he also talks about the argument conveyed by the act of making an argument. Indeed, I suspect that what O'Keefe wants to capture by the act of making an argument could just as easily be described as the act of presenting or giving an argument. While the act of presenting or making or giving an argument to you may present or convey an argument to you, it is not the act of producing that argument, since it is quite likely the producer of the argument had the argument in mind before it was given or presented to you.

At the same time, I am certainly not claiming that the arguments as objects are somehow primary. For example, if arguments are groups of speech acts, then acts of arguing and arguments have the same constituents, and you cannot have the one without the other. Also, while I have given cases where the arguments are temporally prior to the acts of arguing with which they are associated, in no way does this generate ontological or intellectual priority. After all, the arguments may only become a matter of intellectual interest after they have been made evident by an act of arguing. In addition, I suspect we, as theorists, want to have room to say that acts of arguing can go so awry, that the argument presented via the act of arguing is not the argument the author had hoped to convey. But even with some appeal to charity, it is clearly incumbent upon the presenter of arguments to argue in a way that aids rather than hinders in the presentation of the desired argument. Regardless, the upshot of my comments so far is that restricting ourselves to talk of arguments as acts on the one hand and objects on the other in no way supports the intellectual or ontological priority of one aspect of argument over the other.

6. Conclusion

Despite the longstanding history of treating "argument" as if the arguments-as-objects are the product of the process of arguments-as acts, the facts do not support this treatment. Regardless of one's chosen ontology of arguments (propositions, sentences, utterances, statements, speech acts, or sets or groups thereof), either the arguments exist prior to the relevant acts of arguing or are constituents of those acts of arguing—they are not the products of those acts of arguing. If, as part of organizing the domain of argumentation theory, we merely want to distinguish acts of arguing from arguments-as-objects, we should not use the misleading process/product labels to do so. At the very least such labels imply a relationship that does not exist and so distort our perceptions of the domain of study. At worst they ground false claims about the ontological or intellectual priority of one perspective of argument and argument theory over another. Without the distorting lens of these labels, we will be in a much better position to provide accurate answers to some of the fundamental questions of argumentation theory—what exactly are arguments-as objects and how exactly are they related to acts of arguing?

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