Alfred Sidgwick: A Little-Known Precursor of Informal Logic and Argumentation

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Alfred Sidgwick (1850-1943) is such an obscure figure in philosophy that whenever his name is brought up, inevitably people confuse him with his well-known cousin Henry Sidgwick. Although he wrote six books on practical logic (listed below), and wrote many articles in this area, mostly published in the journal *Mind* - a list of these is given in the bibliography (in Nielsen, 1997) - hardly anyone seems to know who Sidgwick is. Hamblin (1970, p. 176) wrote that although Sidgwick was the only person to have tried to develop a theory of logic around the study of fallacies, 'the result is not a success ... and has been passed over by modern developments.' Hamblin adds however (p. 176) that we should not infer Sidgwick's project does not deserve attention, and that on some topics, Sidgwick has some interesting things to say about topics that have been neglected in logic. Contrary to this somewhat gloomy view of the prospects of Sidgwick's contributions to logic, Sidgwick did contribute some worthwhile insights on various topics in these areas.

Nielsen's dissertation (1997) has shown how Sidgwick was a man ahead of his time, whose concerns are familiar and resonant to those of us now working in argumentation and informal logic. Nielsen's explanation of Sidgwick's work in practical logic shows how Sidgwick's ideas were not only ahead of their time, but out of step with developments in logic during and after his lifetime. The explosion of work in mathematical (formal) logic around the beginning of the twentieth century eclipsed the pragmatic concerns of Sidgwick and the few contemporaries of his, like F. C. S. Schiller (1912), who were interested in the uses of argumentation, as opposed to its formal representation, abstracted from contexts of use. We can see now why Sidgwick's work was ignored by most of his contemporaries, and then fell into obscurity.

Sidgwick was a highly important precursor to the recent work in argumentation and informal logic studies. There is much that could be said

about many aspects of Sidgwick's work that would show how he is a precursor of recent developments. But there are two fundamental aspects stressed by Nielsen that are of key importance - the principle of access and the rogative approach.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCESS

Sidgwick's principle of access tells us that when we attempt to criticize another person's argumentation, the only evidence we have access to are the natural language formulations of that person. The problem, as Nielsen (1999) pointed out, is that the corpus of this person's natural language formulations in any given case can be complex, and difficult to make sense of. What the person has said may be unclear, ambiguous, evasive, and incomplete. In some cases, an arguer may be purposefully trying to deceive us by using tricky tactics called fallacies. The problem, as Sidgwick clearly saw, is not so much one of formalization, but one of interpreting a natural language text of discourse in some supposed context of use. Thus Sidgwick was right to warn that the real problems to be concerned about in evaluating any argument in a real case are those of unfair interpretation, and faulty criticism based on that unfair or unwarranted interpretation. But then the problem is - how do you, in some objective manner, interpret a natural language text of discourse in a given case? This is the famous problem of how to 'deconstruct' a person's text of discourse in a real case of argumentation.

Sidgwick's answer to this fundamental question lies in his view of logic as an essentially interrogative subject of a kind that raises intelligent questions. Nielsen (1999) calls such an approach rogative logic. In current argumentation theory we would say that rogative logic is based a dialogical (or dialectical) approach to argument criticism. According to the dialectical approach, pinning down a fallacy or criticism in a given case is not a matter of exact calculation, but a matter of guesswork. Immediately, many people, especially formal logicians and analytical philosophers will throw up their hands and say, 'See, I told you so. There's no exact method of calculation whereby you can prove that the argument is this thing or that thing.' Guesswork is taken to be opposed to logic, because guesswork is not exact. While there is something to be said for this objection, the problem is that it misses the most important point. Intelligent guesswork, of the kind we are talking about, can be based on verifiable evidence. In some cases, the evidence can be definitive, even though in other cases, the evidence is inconclusive, or there is not enough of it to arrive at other than a conditional judgment (hypothesis).

It is natural to see Sidgwick as anticipating the dialectical approach to argument criticism advocated in (Walton and Krabbe, 1995), which takes commitment in dialogue as the central concept needed in criticizing any

actual case of an argument. What we need to do, in evaluating the argumentation in any specific case, is to assemble the textual evidence in the case, and interpret what the arguer is supposedly saying in light of a normative model of dialogue. The normative model represents the supposed context of use of the argument. Using such a normative model, we can then look at the text of discourse (critically but fairly), and use that textual and contextual evidence as a basis for constructing hypotheses or intelligent guesses about the arguer's commitments. Commitments, following Hamblin (1970) are expressed by the arguments, or other moves in the dialogues an arguer has put forth in the case, judged from the record of what she said or wrote. Sometimes the evidence is quite clear and definitive. If the arguer asserted 'Bill Clinton is President of the USA' in a public speech, recorded on video, and does not subsequently retract that commitment, then we can quite definitely say that this arguer is committed to the proposition that Bill Clinton is President of the USA. But notoriously, in other cases, it can be very hard to tell what a person's commitments are, or may fairly be said to be, based on the evidence of what she said in the text of discourse we have as evidence.

The important thing however is that in all such cases, there is evidence that can be used to support or refute claims about what an arguer can fairly be said to be committed to, as a definite set of propositions in a given case. It is no longer just a matter of my word against yours, in the new dialectical theory of argumentation. It's not that there aren't borderline cases, and exquisitely difficult cases, demanding a high level of natural language skills to sort out. The point is that there are objective criteria for collecting and evaluating the evidence in a given case. Sidgwick saw this possibility already, and the need of it to have any kind of practical logic. His principle of access pointed the way to the dialectical approach that has now become the structural tool for evaluating arguments in modern argumentation theory.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THE ROGATIVE APPROACH

Sidgwick's work on problems of the application of logic to argumentation in everyday discourse led to his distinctive rogative approach, an approach that is a forerunner to the commitment-based structures of dialogue constructed by Hamblin (1970) and others. Summarizing various points from (Nielsen, 1999), it could be said that the rogative approach has five distinctive characteristics.

1. Arguments or assertions are clarified through critical questioning.
2. The use of an expression is 'recommended', not 'insisted on'.
3. Criticisms have the form of objections rather than refutations.
4. There is an openness to 'further clarifications'.
5. The assertor has final say on what he 'actually meant to assert'.

These five characteristics of the rogative approach foreshadow Hamblin's use of commitment and the device of critical questions used by Arthur Hastings (1963), the Amsterdam School (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992), Kienpointner (1992) and other proponents of the new approach to argumentation theory and informal logic. The notion of commitment is rogative. An arguer's commitments, as noted above, are the propositions that she has gone on record as having accepted, as far as can be determined from the text and context of what she actually said. But commitments can be retracted. They can be clarified. They can be revised. Such retractions and clarifications can be made by continuing a dialogue, if it possible to do so. The notion of critical questioning is also rogative. The goal of practical logic is (generally speaking) not to decisively refute an arguer, but to find the weakest points in her argument that are open to critical questioning. The aim is to pose objections or criticisms of a kind that can be answered in a continuation of dialogue. The aim is 'critical' in the positive sense. It is not to embarrass or humiliate an opponent, by making him look foolish. It is to find the weakest points in his argument by asking the appropriate critical questions. Then by discussing these critical questions, the original arguer can not only improve his argument and make it stronger, but can gain insight into aspects of it that might not have occurred to him before. Much of the rogative approach is Socratic. Dialogue is used to probe into an arguer's position, and by asking the right critical questions, make the respondent revise and reformulate his commitments, so that the resulting position is more internally consistent and more free from logical difficulties. The kind of dialectical approach advocated by Sidgwick harks back to the ancient dialectic of Plato and Aristotle in many ways.

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