

Introduction

Adelino Cattani, Bruno Mastroianni

If we had a balance of reasons, where the arguments presented in favor and against the case were weighed precisely and the verdict could be pronounced in favor of the most inclined scale... [we would have] a more valuable art than that miraculous science of producing gold.
Gottfried W. Leibniz

Will there be ever again arguers ‘happily ever after’? Once upon a time, there was the Dispute. It used to have at service two trusted maids named Dialectic and Rhetoric. The dispute was a public event of great appeal and a real spectacle: it was a ‘demonstration’ in the term’s double sense. It was both an exhibition – a display of skills – and a proof, a testing of a thesis. The best disputes were not those that were quarrelsome or those that ended with a compromise, in which each of the two parties gave up something. They were rather those that sought an agreement in the conflict, by means of active and cooperative opposition, and whose purpose was that something would arise from the clash again, something different, something good, a *tertium quid*.

This is where dispute is seen as the mechanism of democracy: from plurality and diversity, with disagreements and conflicts, facing uncertainties and insecurities, to come up with something new, different, right. With all their limitations, debate and democracy are, by definition, ‘put to the test’.

The dispute was not a war-like clash, but a test, in which we tested ideas and not commercial products. «The discussion is a war», they say. The discussion can indeed be conceived and visualised as a conflict, a clash between accusation and defense, and a fight between two boxers in the ring, but also as a two-sided sport, a negotiation between two business partners, and a confrontation between thinkers from different schools – a verification test. The outcome of a

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debate is hardly the fairy tale celebrated by the advertising campaign for a new car: «This is the sound of a mechanical roller that is testing the suspension of the new car. Also this time it did not hold up. The mechanical roller, I mean».

The etymological origin of 'deliberated' tells us that we are supposed to like what we get after we auction our ideas. In a debate, a thesis, an idea, a proposal, is tested. The winner is the one who offers more, meaning more and better reasons. «May the best win, not the best person, but the best idea», meaning the best reason. The preferable conclusion differ from that of a simple dialogue – the cornerstone of coexistence – but emerges at the end of a good controversy. The good debate is one that did not mask any differences. Appeals to dialogue often boil down to an aimless and gossiping exercise; there are many believers in dialogue, few practitioners. And whoever practices it and knows how to agree with an opponent remain unchallenged. A debate whose adjudication is limited to evaluating the participants' dialectical abilities is maimed, mutilated, and restricted. It decrees not which thesis is superior but who has been able to defend a thesis better. It does not enter into the merits of the issue on the table. And if you can get clever ways to defend your thesis, it's your dialectical ability that prevails, you win and not your idea. *Formative* evaluation has existed for some time; it is the one intended not to judge but to record performance; the one which, when evaluating, does so not only in order to certify winners and losers but to improve winners, losers, and maybe even the judges themselves. Even greater improvements can be made in debate performance and judging with *deliberative* evaluation.

The *Palestra di botta e risposta* («Back and Forth Gym») promoted by the Association for a Culture and the Promotion of Debate wants to promote a debate format that is not purely antagonistic but more cooperative-comparative. The jury does not limit itself to deciding the team that best defended the assigned position, but evaluates the team that has been better able, when possible and useful, to reconcile/mediate, and, when not possible, to grasp the demands (values, principles, aspirations) of the other party.

A good debater's real virtue is not to win over the opponent but to comparatively assert one's position's superiority/preferability by recognising the strength also of the opposite position.

We want a sort of debate that evaluates not only the two contenders' ability, but also the merit of the matter; a new type of dispute that includes a final acknowledgment of the opposing team's best reasons; a kind of dispute in which we analyse problems, discuss solutions, and evaluate the preferable one.

We have a little dream that, miraculously, someone may be convinced or persuaded by the antagonist's arguments and change their mind at the end of a debate. This aspiration is the solemn Promise of the courteous arguer, which participants in the *Palestra* pronounce before the meeting:

Aware

- that on everything there can be different points of view;
- that truth and justice spring from civil confrontation and fair debate;

- that generally there is not a reason which is opposed to a wrong, but several conflicting reasons;
- that it is always preferable to discuss even without deliberating, rather than to deliberate without discussing;

I promise

- to commit myself to research the best arguments in favour of my position;
- to assess, at the same time, the reasonable objections to that position;
- to reply to you firmly and calmly, identifying the weaknesses in a position and recognising, at least in my heart, strong arguments that require an answer, in order to reach a better understanding of the topic, the issues, and those involved in the controversy.

I will do my best to convince and at the same time to coexist (Cattani 2018 114-15).

The international workshops organised by the Association for a Culture and the Promotion of Debate aim at this goal. The first two took place in 2017 and in 2018 at the University of Padua. The first, on November 24, 2017, was entitled: *Winning a Debate: Award Principles and Rules*. On December 7, 2018, the second gathered trainers and debate judges from Chile, France, the United States, China, Poland, Spain, and Italy. It dealt with «Problems and Critical Issues in the Evaluation of the Regulated Debate». The aim was to create an evaluation framework that was as shared as possible, comparing the different award criteria and the judge's role in a regulated debate. The third was organised jointly by the Association for a Culture and the Promotion of Debate and by the University of Florence, Department of Literature and Philosophy and the Master's Program in Institutional Advertising and Multimedia Communication. It was entitled, as this book *Competing, Cooperating, Deciding: towards a Model of Deliberative Debate*. It took place online on March 28, 2020.

Deliberating means deciding, resolving, concluding. There is discussion among lexicographers whether 'deliberate' derives from 'liberate' or 'libra' (weight scale): whether 'de-liberate' relates to 'set free', because we deliberate when we can choose between alternatives; or whether it relates to 'de-liberate', that is to remove something from the scale and deliver it to the buyer after weighing it. Both etymologies fit the figurative sense of 'deliberate', which means to think and compare what leads us to decide, to conclude after having considered. Both etymologies are, therefore, not only compatible but even complementary.

The real sense of deliberating is the weighing of the alternatives, that is, recognising them thanks to the listening to the others' positions (and to the exercise of one's freedom). It is the *contemplation of difference* that gives 'happiness' to the dispute (Mastroianni 2021). Isn't it precisely that irreducible recognition of freedom that allows a free evaluation of one's choice? «We deliberate using attention and will, that is, the freedom to seek and select the best counsel». And again: «One can decide even without mature thinking; but one deliberates by using, or by making it look like one is using, freedom to the full extent» (Tom-

maseo 1973). This means that one can decide lightly, but not deliberate lightly, without thinking.

It is also possible to decide not to deliberate. The conclusion of a discussion depends on the nature of the dispute. If either rival position proves unsustainable based on data, facts, or logic, it will be abandoned.

We can solve a political dispute when there is the will, in a 'political' way, that is to say, with a compromise reached between the positions in the field, perhaps after some negotiation and based on practical needs.

We can solve an ethical dispute by referring to shared values or to a higher body, to an authority, or to an institutional decision that defines one of the field's positions as 'right'.

A philosophical controversy may very well remain unresolved: if philosophy is 'perennial', its discussions can be perennial, and no one is scandalised by this. Sometimes, rather than being resolved, the dispute can be dissolved, indicating it might have never existed in the first place.

We may not even come to a conclusion, without this being considered a failure. The manner in which we deal with discussions favours their solution, and if we don't arrive at one, it at least guarantees the safeguarding of the relationship. As in the courts for truth and reconciliation wanted by Nelson Mandela in South Africa, even a trial can end without a sentence.

Indeed, mediation is possible, suitable, and necessary in social, family, work, and commercial conflicts; with regard to cultural, ideological, and religious conflicts, it may become impossible, unnecessary, or inappropriate. In the ideological and spiritual spheres, the aim could be the reduction of the severity of the conflict, rather than the solution of the conflict.

In the cultural and scientific fields, the objective could even be to enhance the theoretical conflict, either to carry out a sort of quality control of the opposing theses, or to generate a third way through the active opposition of the theses, as we said initially. This is third way which Carlos Santana effectively exemplifies with a life experience: «My son Salvador and I rebuilt a relationship by playing together, closed for hours in the same room. The first time, we tried to overwhelm each other, to go over each other's notes: these were the unresolved tensions between us; it was a clash between paternal authority and the recriminations of a son who felt sidelined. He was banging on the piano keys; I was pulling the guitar strings to the maximum; both at a crazy volume – total war. Then, progressively, we toned down the volumes and started to create harmonious sounds, like two people who stop screaming and start talking. And we entered the era of mutual respect» (Poglio 2012).

Will the «happy dispute» (Mastroianni 2017) ever return? That would be a debate between people with different opinions, in which the opponent does for you the job that you should do yourself (tester and judge), and in which the ending is not always the immovable fidelity of each of the two parties to the initial idea, but an unthinkable «I changed my mind!»; this would be a miracle, maybe only in their hearts, as the oath of the *courteous arguer* says (Cattani 2001, 128-30). A good debate is like a slingshot: first we stretch and drag the

elastic towards us and then we release it, trying to hit the best spot or at least avoid missing the target.

One way to go must be education, focusing on a redefinition of the quality of the relationship among the actors of the ecosystem that characterises the interconnected society (Dominici 2014, 144). The tool can be that of training practices for deliberative debate through regulated activities that develop rhetorical and dialectical skills (knowing how to convince, practiced in competition), as well as the attitudes of critical thinking and open-mindedness that enable us to listen and recognise the other (coexistence, cooperation).

In reflecting on our theme, the contributions in this volume are divided into two thematic sections. The first, that of ideas, addresses fundamental questions relating to the functions of debate and the possible educational consequences. The second, the theme of applications, offers models and studies on creating discussions and analytical tools to verify their effectiveness.

The first section opens with a contribution by Bruno Mastroianni, who proposes the criterion of happiness – the *happy dispute* – as an engine that can transform the activities of regulated debate into gyms where one learns how to face real unregulated discussions. The proposal is to develop not only argumentative skills, but also virtues of argumentation. It is to make the arguers dedicated to the theme, detached from themselves, and able to contemplate differences of opinion, as a prerequisite for any genuine deliberation. Mastroianni revisits the relationship between competition and cooperation, in the sense of valuing the ‘contemplation of differences’ as the foundation of any possible deliberation between divergent ideas.

In his paper, Stephen Llano proposes a rhetorical model of the debate centred on the image of a labyrinth, more suitable than the metaphor of a game in describing the benefits of arguing in front of an audience. The labyrinth best expresses that proceeding by successive choices, coming and going, and sometimes retracing one’s steps, typical of the debate activity. The basic thesis is that arguing is a continuous adaptation of one’s speeches according to the audience that listens. In fact, in the labyrinth, what matters is not only arriving at the outcome – the exit or reaching the center of the structure – but the path you choose to get there is equally important. More than the definitive and winning argument, which rarely occurs in discussions, the labyrinth teaches us to recognise the plurality of approaches adopted when faced with an issue.

In her paper, Maria Załęska focuses on the theme of the educational risk of the debate. Through the educational model developed by Biesta, she analyzes the three main functions (qualification, socialization, and ‘subjectivation’) that characterize regulated debate activities. In particular, she considers the Oxford Debate methods and proposes a version adapted for these functions. This analysis identifies some limitations of the model, such as the participants’ tendency to manage the conflict by trying to have their vision prevail, instead of considering others’ points of view. This is a practice in which the logic of victory takes precedence over the search for the best solution. A debate should not function as an implementation of ‘learnification’, i.e., a pure exercise in argumentative

techniques; it should not become a mere tool for reproducing the social system. Instead, it should be considered an invitation to students to ask fundamental questions about the content, direction, and purpose of the learning practices in which they participate.

The applications section is opened by Claudio Fuentes and Julián Goñi Jerez, who present a project that brought the Critical Debate Model into the digital context. This regulated debate model was tested in an online initiative that in 2020 involved Chilean citizens on a large scale called to express their views on the South American country's future. The idea, entitled *Tenemos Que Hablar de Chile* (We Must Talk about Chile), made use of automated tools for analysing Natural Language Processing, and highlighted some aspects such as the importance of opposition and competition for the success of debates. The intent is to devise formats of regulated debate that are increasingly suited to the context of online exchanges, to educate future citizens to democratic participation and deliberation.

The challenge of online discussions is also addressed by Jan Albert van Laar's paper, which evaluates their opportunities and advantages for students' educational activities. The essay starts by considering two types of argumentative dialogue: *persuasive dialogue*, which requires critical arguments and remarks to resolve a disagreement on the merits of an issue; and discussion based on negotiation, which requires debates and criticism to arrive at a reasonable compromise solution. After tracing the possibilities and advantages of these dialogue models, the essay explores two software applications useful for carrying out digital format debates according to two paths: *Deliberative Debate* and *Middle Ground*. These applications create structures within which argumentative exchanges occur, making participants aware of the objectives to be pursued and how to reach them in a given time frame. Finally, the paper also considers a third application, *Design a Discussion Yourself*, which allows students and teachers to design *ad hoc* debate procedures to structure discussions and evaluate their outcomes.

Foteini Egglezou, in her essay, illustrates the results of the '*Odyssey*' *Scientific Debate* project for Greek students, designed to cultivate debate skills in scientific-technological subjects (STEM). The project concerned paths of deliberative debate on current scientific controversies in accordance with procedures borrowed from the Oxford and the Debate Public Forum models. The project allowed students to grow in the awareness that scientific assumptions are not absolute, objective, and immutable, and that, to be discussed, they need to be supported by convincing arguments based on relevant evidence. The first results observed confirmed how much the project had increased the participants' skills of reasoning, communication, and argumentation, demonstrating the importance of the rhetorical turn in the teaching of scientific subjects.

The essay by Goffredo Guidi and Gianmarco Tuccini addresses the topic of the debate on social media. Through an analytical model, they studied discussions on Change My View, a Reddit channel in which specific rules govern the persuasive nature of exchanges among users. The results of their study highlight the central role of emotions in the success of debates. In particular, the analysis

shows that *anticipation* and *joy* usually characterise the most successful arguments. The authors interpret these emotions as components of a more general emotional dimension that includes both: engagement. These characteristics lead to consider the persuasive experience on social media in analogy with the playful experience: as in a game, the persuasive experience requires a commitment to respecting the rules and, at the same time, joyful participation.

Gianluca Simonetta's contribution presents the RApP project, *Ragazzi e Ragazze Apprendono tra Pari*, namely «Boys and Girls Learn Among Peers») carried out at the Gobetti-Volta ISIS in Florence to develop activities of debate and public speaking. The scheme applies the IDEAM framework, which takes its name from the five canons of ancient rhetoric (*Inventio*, *Dispositio*, *Elocutio*, *Actio*, and *Memoria*). By means of grids and diagrams, it allows the visualisation and modification of the process of the design and composition of a persuasive speech, as well as its memorisation and pronunciation in public. This amounts to an applied training platform combined with a set of preparatory exercises conceived according to the ancient *progymnasmata*, as a gradual path aimed at strengthening language as an individual skill aimed at the acquisition of socialised skills in the debate.

The debate experience can also become a stimulus for teaching, as Caterina Gabrielli explains in her paper, applying the methodology of debate to the deepening of a philosophical text structured in an argumentative way in the form of deliberation with oneself. The text is that of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*, and the class involved in the activity was a class of the Liceo Classico Alessandro Manzoni in Lecco. Gabrielli has shown how, in a pedagogical context, an argumentative line is more understandable when it is challenged and problematized. In this manner, the students could appreciate the problems proposed by Descartes and the arguments within which they are formulated.

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