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Argumentative Reason

in a modernization-theoretical perspective[1]

This text has in the following structure.

First, as an introduction, there are three background theses that might be referred to by three catchwords: (i) history of philosophy, (ii) theory of science, (iii) modernity theory.

Then three main theses follow: (i) argumentative reason conceived as self-critical reflection, to be extended to arguments from absurdity, from Apel to Ryle, as it were, (ii) argumentative reason conceived as a mutual search for better arguments, ideally with mutual recognition and personal improvement, a meliorist approach, and (iii) argumentative reason conceived as socially situated learning-processes, over time, with text and speech.

Finally, I point at two implications: first, (i) the need for theory of the sciences (*Wissenschaftstheorie*) and for co-responsible citizens in modern societies, and then, (ii) the anomaly, in modern societies, of those who are 'half-modern' and 'argumentophobic'.

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[1] This is a revised English version of a public lecture given in memory of Professor Harald Grimen (1955-2011), in Oslo in September 2016. Norwegian original, in *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift* 1-2/2017: 57-71. Translated by Judith Larsen.

Preliminary Remarks

Reason can be multifarious. For instance, we have reason by logical inferences and reason by game-theoretical deliberations. Reason as fair judgment, reason as social awareness, and reason in dealing with practical tasks. To name a few.

Then there is lack of reason, in different versions – well known to everyone, and well known from psychology and social sciences: Freud with rationalization. Marx and Mannheim with ideology and alienation. Sociology with group thinking, tunnel vision and unintended consequences. Furthermore, we have Daniel Kahneman on fast and slow thinking, Nassim Taleb on "black swans" and unpredictable complexity,[2] and many others. Altogether, quite overwhelming.

Nevertheless, or precisely therefore: in this paper I shall make a case for reason, for argumentative reason – that it is needed, and that it exists after all, under certain circumstances: argumentative reason as a versatile phenomenon, though with certain basic features, and differing transitions.

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[2] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2011. Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York, Random House 2007.

First background thesis

Important features in Western *history of philosophy* may (to some extent) be conceived as learning processes in argumentative reason

The history of Western philosophy encompasses many features. Not all of it can be interpreted in terms of argumentative reason. For several reasons. Among other things, because some philosophers try to launch new concepts and ways of understanding (*Welterschließung* in Heidegger or *redescription* in Rorty), in contrast to argumentation in a more traditional sense. Besides, some philosophers tend to stubbornly hold on to their own beliefs, and some do not care that much about what other philosophers are saying.

Nevertheless, in making these points on Western history of philosophy, we find ourselves at a meta-level, where we, for our part, try to understand what great thinkers may have seen, or overlooked. (E.g., what was it that Kant did not grasp in Hume's philosophy? And what did Kierkegaard grasp or not grasp, as to Hegel's thinking?)

Moreover, when we want to learn from the history of philosophy, there is a difference between (i) learning the answer, the "answer-key", without you yourself doing your own reflection about it (as Kierkegaard points out, critically), and (ii) getting into the question

at hand and taking the issues and arguments head-on, and also taking their implications seriously.[3]

When I here make a few introductory comments on the history of Western philosophy, with a focus on early Greek philosophy, there are two reasons for this:

The reference to early Greek philosophy serves to illustrate important features in what I see as *argumentative reason*: Here, I assume, there are arguments both within and upon one's own presuppositions and also on the arguments and presuppositions of other thinkers, in a way which opens up for *productive learning processes*.

In this sense, the ancient Greeks hold a *unique position* among the early high-cultures, often referred to as the "Axial Age":[4] Greek philosophers in ancient times stand out, by arguing with each other in a productive manner; thus they take part of the formation of some of the presuppositions for Enlightenment and modernity.

Hence, this is my claim: The ancient Greek philosophers, from the Presocratic thinkers to Plato and Aristotle, gave reasons within their own perspectives, at the same time as the next generation took a critical stance to the arguments and presuppositions of earlier philosophers. Thus, argument-based learning process emerged. Or rather, this is a possible interpretation of certain features. Heidegger sees it otherwise. (The same does Gadamer.)

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[3] See for example, the set-up of the learning process in *Filosofihistorie* (*A History of Western Thought.* London, Routledge 2001), by Gilje/Skirbekk, which emphasizes throughout the text: (i) background and question, (ii) argumentation, (iii) answer, and (iv) implications – not focusing on "answers" alone.

[4] Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte,* 1949 (*The Origin and the Goal of History,* 1953). Shmuel Eisenstadt, ed., *Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations,* 1986.

With this proviso, and being aware of the fact that the textual basis from these early times is very flimsy, we may illustrate the point in this way:

Thales, the first of the so-called philosophers of nature, is said to have claimed that "everything is water". An unreasonable claim! However, if that is the answer, what was the question? In light of the discussions among later philosophers we could say: the question deals with *change*! How to understand change? What is changing and what is unchangeable? Water could then be seen as the basis for all other things, and the universe could thus be said to consist of two things, ordinary water and all other phenomena, such as steam and air or soil and animals, which are then seen as transformed water. A bold thought! However, the implications are immense: if everything is water, in different forms, and because water is something we can observe and understand, then everything in the universe is in principle understandable to us human beings!

However, if water goes into all things, and all things go into water, then is it not just by chance that we take water to be the basic element? The next man out, Anaximander, suggests that the element, that which is unchangeable within change, is *apeiron* – that which is unbounded, beyond our senses.

Moreover, how could the transition between water and everything else be comprehended? Well, since water can become steam by heating, or frozen into ice by cooling, i.e., by different

aggregate modes, these transitions can be explained in this way, according to Anaximenes, who thus, with that notion, argues inherently, within Thales' position.

The next generation, Heraclitus and Parmenides, in turn, problematizes the premises of the first generation, concerning change: According to Heraclitus, everything is in change (*panta rei*), while Parmenides claimed that change does not exist (or rather, that change is incomprehensible). Again, unreasonable stances! But this was not really what they said. In short, for Heraclitus, change is fundamental, it's everywhere, but changes occur according to certain laws. For Parmenides the problem was that the concept of change apparently presupposes that something that is, disappears, becomes non-existent, and that something that is non, appears and becomes existent. In short, the concept of change presupposes a notion of non-existence. But that which does not exist, cannot be comprehended. Thus, according to Parmenides, change is incomprehensible to human thought. Nevertheless, we do see that things change! Yes, according to our senses. Consequently, there is a conflict between thinking and sensing. What should we choose? Thinking, answers Parmenides – who held his ground, as an uncompromising rationalist.

The thinkers who came thereafter, what did they do? They try to mediate, to convey: something is immutable and something is changeable! Hence, for Empedocles, the universe consists of four

unchangeable elements – soil, air, water and fire. Each of them has immutable properties, and exists in immutable proportions. Due to an external force these basic elements enter into different constellations. This is how things arise and perish in the universe. This is how change occurs! – Fine enough, Anaxagoras seems to think, but why just four basic elements? Since there are innumerable traits, shouldn't there be innumerable elements as well? – Democritus, finally, gives the radical answer: The universe consists of indivisible and immutable particles, so small that we cannot sense them and they float around in a blank space. Atoms and empty space, that's all there is! Over time, the atoms clump together or split apart. This is how the universe is, where things rise and fall apart, some quickly, others with more lasting constellations. Surely, this is a view that points forward! However, this is still just a speculative theory, without the support of experimental science.

When the Sophists popped up, the early Greek philosophers of nature had been carrying on for around 150 years, without reaching an agreement. With the Sophists, there is a reaction: the earlier philosophers are contradicting each other! What can we know? The perception gets turned, reflexively, from questioning nature to questioning thought, and the question becomes critical: what can we really know? Gorgias, Thrasymachus, Protagoras. Man is the measure of all things! The Sophists are skeptical.

Skepticism may be healthy. However, as a philosophical position, it is problematic. The reaction came, with Socrates and Plato. Socrates refers to an inner voice, and he argues, as we encounter him in Plato's dialogues. Then, what about Plato himself? With the distinction between the world of ideas and the sensory world (inspired by mathematics and the Pythagoreans), he clears space for the true and the good, understood as immutable ideas and ideals, which in this way are immune to skeptical counter-arguments from the sensory world.

However, Plato himself supports counter-arguments against this two-world ontology. (Was he a Neo-Platonist? See his dialogue *Parmenides*.) Moreover, gradually he seems to change his point of view on legal laws: in the dialogue *The State*, he placed virtue and knowledge above the law, while later on, in the dialogue *The Laws*, he allows for the rule of law.[5]

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[5] Here we have an interesting parallel, and contrast, in view of Confucius and Confucianism in China. Confucius, like Plato, reacted to what he saw as a decaying society, and recommended virtue and education, such as Plato does in the dialogue *The State*. However, Confucius and the Confucians did not change their views of the laws: action stemming from inner deeds and virtues is what we should strive for; law understood as an external compulsion is not the best! Besides, in China there was an alternative school of thought, the Legalists, who advocated the rule of law. The two stood in opposition to each other, the Confucians and the Legalists. During The Qin Dynasty, in 213 BC, the Confucians were brutally swept away. However, they came back in full force. Confucian conceptions have influenced the education of Chinese civil servants for hundreds of years, with emphasis on virtue and education, not on the rule of law, and not on argumentation, as in the case of the Greeks. – Then, in our time, there are ongoing discussions on how to evaluate the relationship between legal regulations and deliberative decision-making, in various social contexts. See e.g. Jürgen Habermas (critically on the 'colonialization of the life world') in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 1981, and (in defense of the *Rechtsstaat*) in *Faktizität und Geltung*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 1992. See also Shijun Tong, *Dialectics of Modernization: Habermas and Chinese Discourse of Modernization*. Sidney, University of Sidney, East Asian Series 2000.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle went against Plato, with among other things a criticism of the two-world ontology, and he himself (Aristotle) worked with thought models from handicrafts and biology: Form and matter. Actuality and potentiality. Theory and practice. Moderation and the Middle-way. *Zoon politikon*, man as a political animal. The good life, and friendship, *philia*, which is essential for human life. Concepts roll out, concepts that we may not think so carefully about, but which we often use when thinking. Concepts and insights developed by extensive learning processes, where thinkers have argued, with oneself and with others, instead of rejecting or ignoring the claims and contributions of other people.

This is here my point: a reminder that there are important traits of early Greek philosophy that can be interpreted and appropriated as ongoing learning processes in argumentative reason: The ancient Greek philosophers argued, with text and talk, both within and about their own presuppositions, but also with and against other thinkers and their presuppositions; hence, complex and fruitful learning processes arose.[6]

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[6] There are learning processes that have something irreversible in them, as when we experience linguistic expressions as ambiguous. If one has first experienced it, there is no way back – provided one is dealing with a full deck. Something similar, when we work seriously with different philosophical schools of thought: We become sensitive to the multitude of terms and approaches, and this experience forms us. See John Rawls about the "burdens of reason" and Harald Grimen on irreversible learning, in Gunnar Skirbekk, ed., *On Pragmatics. Contributions to current debates*. Bergen, Institute of Philosophy, Series 2001, no. 20, pp. 130-164.

Second background thesis

Scientific and scholarly activities **encompass the entire scale of different academic disciplines, and common to all is argumentative reason**

Scientific and scholarly activities encompass quite a lot. There are many different scientific and scholarly disciplines, also different schools of thought. A complete university reflects this diversity: both the oldest university disciplines – theology, law, and philosophy – and the natural sciences, health sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Researchers at such universities do quite different things. Some are in the laboratory, others on fieldwork, or in the library, or doing research in distant areas. Insofar: a *multiversity*.

What is in common? The education of researchers in all academic fields reaches its high point with the doctoral degree, with disputation. Certainly, disputations can be different in nature, with varying quality. Nevertheless, fundamentally there is an argumentative trying-out of good reasons relative to less good reasons. The basic requirement is originality and solidity. It is not enough just to have an idea, or to collect some facts. Reasons must

be given, by arguing face to face with fellow colleagues, in an open forum.

Thus, argumentation *within* the paradigm of one's own field of research! However, when discussions go deeper, the argumentation will touch on fundamental concepts and methods: for example, what about the concept of agency in various social sciences, and what about the idea of causal explanation? Such questions open for reflection on (and possibly changes of) presuppositions for one's own discipline, possibly also for academic criticism of other disciplines.

Moreover, knowing what one knows also means that one has some idea of what one does not know. It's about going outside of one's own box. This goes for researchers and what they achieve. Moreover, learning a discipline implies that one is aware of the limits of that discipline; this is crucial for a serious university education. Recognition of one's own limitations, and of what the others may offer, is decisive as a counterweight to one-dimensional "tunnel vision". This is important in the workplace, but also in politics and in many other contexts. To quote the Norwegian sociologist and former Minister of Education Gudmund Hernes: There are two things a student should learn – learn a model, and learn that the model is not the reality.

My conclusion, at this point? No matter which way we twist and turn it, regardless of how much and how many different tasks that characterize a scientific or scholarly activity – activities that generally take most of the time – nevertheless, common to them all is a basic element of argumentative reason.

Besides. Scientific and scholarly activities have normative aspects. That too. There is good research, in contrast to less good research. There is progress, or lack of progress, for the students. Moreover, the same is true for what I have here said about scientific and scholarly activities. That too has normative aspects. It is normative and situated – and thus open to further argumentation, an activity that in itself is normative, in an epistemic sense.

Third background thesis

A definition of *modernity* should (at least) encompass all scientific and scholarly disciplines, instrumental as well as interpretative, including argumentative reason

There are different perceptions as to what we should understand as modernity. Here I assume that a definition of modernity should at least encompass the sciences. And then I have all the sciences in mind, instrumental as well as interpretative, and also argumentative reason, in accordance with what is said above.

A thought experiment: Imagine that all sciences (*Wissenschaften*) are taken away, and all technology, all institutions, and all occupations and activities which in one way or another depend on one or more sciences! If so, what you're left with is a lean definition of modernity.

However, the sciences do not whirl around in an empty space. They are situated. Historically and socially. In institutions and agents. Here we touch one of Max Weber's main points: the interaction between "value spheres" and institutions, between validity questions of different kinds and the differentiation of relatively autonomous institutions – such as the judiciary, markets, State administration, universities, the public spheres – by differentiation processes understood as formative historical processes, institutionally and culturally.

Historical processes encompass many phenomena – wars and crises, class and culture – and they may take different roads. In many cases, access to resources, special institutional developments and special collective experiences make a difference. In this way, it makes sense to talk about *multiple modernities*.[7]

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[7] Gunnar Skirbekk, *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences*. Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press 2011.

However, in these developments there are also common features, according to the definition of modernity that we have launched. This is especially the case for the development of the sciences with their various and overlapping forms of rationality. In this sense, modernity is *one*, not *multiple*.

It is not a given that all "development" is progress. Nor that history goes on without loss. Yet, for self-referential reasons, in discussing all this in a modernization-theoretical perspective, we ourselves operate within argumentative reason – also when discussing cases of crisis and loss, of anomalies and pathologies.

In talking about modernization-theoretical perspectives, I have this definition in mind: the sciences are essential for modernization processes, all the sciences as we know them from complete universities, and thus the same goes for argumentative reason.

First thesis

For self-referential reasons, we need argumentative reasoning in terms of self-critical *reflection,* in the first person, about necessary presuppositions for one's own speech-acts, and also in terms of presuppositional analyses in terms of different types of *absurdity arguments*

"There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not

been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*.[8]

In other words, we are fallible; this is a starting point for John Stuart Mill. Therefore, we need each other. Listen to each other. Meet counter-arguments head-on. We cannot say, "I know that so and so is the case, but for goodness' sake I do not want to hear counter-arguments, for then I may have to change my mind!" It is precisely through testing out and counter-arguments that we can trust our own points of view. Therefore, freedom of speech is required. In short, this is matter of *presuppositions*, for fallible people like us, and *not* merely a question of *usefulness*.[9]

There is more to be said about fallibility, about different interpretations and different contexts.[10] More later! At this point we follow up with thoughts about self-reflection in Karl-Otto Apel and the philosophical environment around him: Apel has a radical

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[8] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Ch. II, Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion) my translation.

[9] In contrast, see the current utilitarian interpretation of John Stuart Mill.

[10] For extensive discussions on these and related issues, see Gunnar Skirbekk, *Philosophie der Moderne. Vernunft, Wahrheit, Menschenwürde, Meinungsfreiheit*. Weilerswist, Velbrück Wissenschaft 2017.

approach.[11] What matters is the avoidance of performative self-contradiction! That is, a contradiction between what I claim and my act of claiming it. Between the claim and the content of the claim. Typically, for example, the claim "I do not exist!" uttered by me here and now. Or the statement "All statements are meaningless!" - what then about this statement itself? In short, in uttering such assertions we contradict ourselves. Such claims are self-referentially inconsistent. They invalidate themselves as meaningful claims in ordinary verbal communication. For language genres like irony and poetry, it looks differently.

The argument from performative self-contradiction is used *critically*, e.g. directed towards French postmodernism or scientific reductionism. In Apel, it is also used *constructively*, to point at undeniable preconditions for verbal communication. The argument is two-sided: (i) pointing out that certain utterances are meaningless (Apel: *sinnlos*), (ii) thereby making visible (or probable) that some precondition for meaningful language usage have been broken in this case. In this manner, we have an argument *through the negative* (*via negativa*), where the goal is positive: to find preconditions that are necessary for verbal communication (and to try to find out how we should best formulate these presuppositions, linguistically). In

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[11] Karl-Otto Apel, *Diskurs und Verantwortung.* Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1988, *Auseinandersetzungen in Erprobung des transzendental-pragmatischen Ansatzes*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1998. *Reflexion und Verantwortung. Auseinandersetzungen mit Karl-Otto Apel*, Dietrich Böhler, Matthias Kettner and Gunnar Skirbekk, eds., Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2003.

other words, it is a matter of constitutive preconditions for meaningful speech-acts. Therefore the name: "Transcendental Pragmatics".

For Apel, with his version of the "linguistic turn", or "linguistic pragmatic turn," it is crucial that self-reflection is conceived in the first-person (present indicative), and not as empirical utterances in a descriptive third-person perspective (even though the switch between different personal perspectives, such as first and third person, is constitutive for verbal communication).

Thus, the notion of "performative self-contradiction" is central to Apel. This is what we should avoid in our own language use! At the same time, it is through this kind of meaninglessness (*Sinnlosigkeit*) that we can reflexively grasp the constitutive conditions for verbal communication.

However, Apel uses the term performative self-contradiction about different utterances. That is not unproblematic. For example, here are some of quotes from Apel's writings:[12]

"I hereby claim that I do not exist."
"I hereby claim to you that you do not exist."

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[12] From Matthias Kettner, "Ansatz zu einer Taxonomie performativer Selbstwidersprüche", in Andreas Dorschel et al., eds., *Transzendentalpragmatik*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1993: 196-197. My translation.

"I claim as true that I do not make truth claims."

"I claim that all language use, including argumentation, is nothing but the use of force."

"I utter, as a proposal apt for consensus (*konsensfähig*), that we should in principle replace consensus as a discussion goal with dissent as a discussion goal."

However, these examples are not performative self-contradictory (and thereby "meaningless") in the *same* sense. Here we have *different* versions of performative self-contradictory claims and therefore *different* versions of pragmatic meaninglessness or absurdity (*Sinnlosigkeit*). This is an interesting observation concerning presuppositional arguments *via negativa*, where we look for necessary preconditions by reflecting on different instances of absurdity (meaninglessness). We may ask: If there are different meanings of "meaninglessness" (*Sinnlosigkeit*) in such cases, does it mean that there are also different meanings of pragmatically necessary preconditions?

At this point I would emphasize the importance of careful analyzes of *different types of examples*, different example-based thought experiments, and not (only) of general positional analyzes. Here are some examples, just to highlight this point: To say "my dog is not my dog" is self-contradictory, given usual language usage. (See the statement, "A is not A".) To say "my dog is 3 years

old", when he's actually five, is an empirical error. The statement "My dog can count to 10" is an empirical claim that could be true or false. But to 100? An empirical assertion, but hardly true. And to 1000? Still empirical, but even less credible, as to the truth question. Similarly when saying "my dog can count to 10,000"; in which case we may start to wonder if this is really referring to a "dog", and not another intelligent being, in dog-town! Correspondingly, with the statement "my dog reads newspapers". Empirical claim? And if so, would it then be seen as so untrue that it is meaningless to investigate the case empirically? Or would we in, this case, rather go for a conceptual approach, as to the meaning of the term "dog"? Dogs do not read newspapers! If this creature is reading newspapers, then it is not a dog, by definition!

What about the assertion: "My dog has a doctorate in philosophy"? Empirical? And then so hopelessly empirically wrong that is it useless to ask for financial support for an empirical investigation (e.g. from the Research Council)? Or is it simply meaningless, absurd?

Yet, "absurd" in what sense? It is possible to make cartoon films with dogs that read newspapers and have a PhD in philosophy! Disney movies are full of such things. Alright. But what about the statement: "My dog is the 3rd day of May"? Oy vey, that is even more absurd, to say it that way! We cannot even make a cartoon

about such a creature! Here we have a claim that simply is unthinkable, both as a cartoon and science fiction. Therefore, absurd and impossible, in an even more radical sense.[13]

The point is this: By playing through a set of different examples, we see that assertions may be meaningless (or absurd) in different meanings. In short, the term "meaningless" (or "absurd") appears as ambiguous.

These examples also provide a hint of gradual transitions, from simple factual errors to gross errors of fact, and further towards an increasing degree of meaninglessness. To the extent that this is the case, we can talk about gradualism, not just about pluralism.

If we maintain that the empirical sciences operate within processes of falsification, trying to find out whether empirical claims are true or false, and if we assume that philosophy (among other things) operates with concepts as to what is impossible and what is necessary, we may then, informed by the various cases mentioned above, refer to a gradual transition between empirical

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[13] Verbal expressions can be interpreted and contextualized in different manners. This is an important point, also in philosophy. See Gunnar Skirbekk, «Wahrheit und Begründung. Überlegungen zu epistemischen Begriffen und Praktiken». In: Böhler, Dietrich, Matthias Kettner and Gunnar Skirbekk, eds., *Reflexion und Verantwortung*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2003: 236-259. When this point is in place, there is no basis for a *general* criticism of absurdity-theoretical interpretations of category mistakes and other problematic formulations; but it is still important to distinguish between different types of "absurdity". This is a response to Harald Grimen and Nils Gilje, eds., *Discursive Modernity*. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget 2007: 13-16.

sciences and philosophy – and also to a gradual transition between transcendental-pragmatic presuppositional analyzes (as with Apel) and presuppositional analyzes in analytical philosophy of language (with discussions of category mistakes, as in Gilbert Ryle) and praxological action-analyzes (as in the later Wittgenstein).

Consequently, our methodical approach has conceptual-analytic features, in discussing examples and thought experiments, in contrast to a way of thinking that focuses on overall philosophical positions and predominantly works with general conceptual dichotomies (as is often the case in both Apel and Habermas).

In short, I here put in a word of defense for thinking in lines of transcendental-pragmatic points (as in Apel and in part in Habermas) by applying the analytical and argumentative skills found in analytic philosophy (as in Ryle and the later Wittgenstein). Bluntly stated: I go for an extended usage of *case-oriented absurdity arguments*, from self-reflexive arguments in transcendental-pragmatics to *reductio ad absurdum* arguments in the philosophy of language.

The second thesis

As fallible beings, we need argumentative reason in term of *discussions*, as a deliberative and mutual search for better arguments, in a *melioristic* perspective, without being bound by the strong ideal of a final consensus among "all concerned" –

that is, a melioristic learning-process involving *personal development* through role-playing and "will-formation"

Habermas assumes that speech-acts in ordinary verbal communication raise two general "validity claims" (*Geltungsansprüche*) that can be "redeemed" by argumentation, under ideal conditions: questions about *truth* and questions about *normative validity* (for fundamental moral and legal norms, not for cultural values, which are perceived as contextual).

These conditions, briefly stated, are "the forceless force of the better argument"[14] (the ability and willingness to seek and be open to arguments that compel by being better) and mutual recognition among argumentation-participants, as reasonable and fallible persons (thus it makes sense to listen and learn from each other, not least by role-taking).

The idea is that under such conditions all arguments could be heard and considered. In the long run, reasonable persons should therefore be able to arrive at well-founded opinions, on what is true and what is right.

It is assumed that the participants already are sufficiently reasonable and enlightened. However, it is also assumed that the ongoing discussions will contribute in empowering the participants

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[14] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston, Beacon Press 1975: 108.

in this respect. In short, that the discussions may have a disciplinary and formative function.

In other words, it is not just a matter of valid argumentation, with truth-seeking as a goal, but also a matter of personal formation, with emphasis on role-playing and "will-formation" – in short, concerning the ability and willingness to see the world from the others' points of view, and to be reflective and self-critical to one's own attitudes and "need-interpretations".

This is the ideal, to strive for. But real discussions may go awry. Thus, many things must be in place, in the hope to make it happen, in a reasonable way – for example: educationally and institutionally, politically and culturally.

We will never be perfect. But it is possible to aspire to improve oneself, to become a more mature and reasonable person, as a realistic regulative idea.

One additional point: Argumentation concerning truth questions differs from argumentation concerning questions which deal with normative validity. When both are referred to as "argumentatively redeemable", the personally formative element, with an ability and willingness to do role-playing, is particularly important for the discussion concerning normative validity. Consequently, the

question of consensus is somewhat different in these two cases. Put bluntly, some would say: "consensus because it is true" and "normatively right because it is consensus" – and then consensus among persons who are not only informed and reasonable, but who are also reasonably well-educated, also by role-playing, and preferably by discussions with other persons who are present, face to face.

However, it's more complicated than that. Because then we have the problems and objections, and the discussions about all this! For example, about the relationship between justification and truth, and the notion of an ideal consensus, in Apel on one side and Rorty on the other, and Wellmer and Habermas with different intermediate points of view: We refer to statements as true or false. What do we understand by truth? The concept of truth? Here we have the well-known dilemma concerning the relationship between justification and truth. A justification may prove to be inadequate or incorrect. Justifications are situated in space and time, and justifications can be lost. On the other hand, if a statement is true, e.g. the Pythagorean doctrine, it is true regardless of time and place and of who makes the statement. But if we play our cards in this way, how can we then, as fallible and searching persons, come *from* justification *to* truth?

The response from transcendental-pragmatics is self-reflexive, i.e.: self-reflection on performatively unavoidable presuppositions in epistemically serious verbal communication, under ideal conditions! For Apel, this implies (by a Kantian interpretation of Peirce) that the notion of truth is understood as a performatively inavoidable regulatory idea, in terms of an ideal consensus, in an ideal research and communication community, *in the long run.* Not as a historic event, but as a binding direction for the search for truth, and in this way as a mediation between the notion of truth and justification. The point is, according to Apel, that these presuppositions are entailed in the truth claims that we raise in epistemically serious speech-acts. If this is denied the result is performative self-contradiction, and thus, performative *Sinnlosigkeit*, according to Apel.

The discussions became extensive. Popperians (like Albert and Keuth[15]) interpret Apel's claims about performative insight in the first-person perspective, as empirical claims in the third-person perspective; they reduce pragmatics to semantics, as Apel sees it. On the other hand, Richard Rorty, with his naturalistic pragmatism, thinks that the concept of justification is enough; the concept truth is not necessary. But, then, what about this assertion itself (as Apel

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[15] Hans Albert, *Transzendentale Träumereien*. Hamburg, Hoffmann & Campe 1975; Herbert Keuth, *Erkenntnis oder Entscheidung? Zur Kritik der kritischen Theorie*. Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr 1993.

will object), in case it *is* an assertion (from Rorty's side), and if it is *not* an assertion, what is it then?

Albrecht Wellmer thinks that Apel stretches the argument of performative presuppositions too far, to the extent that Apel ends up with a philosophical *theory* (and not a self-reflexively inescapable insight) – as a God's Eye-View, with an outside glance (which mediates between subject and object, to put it that way). Besides, for Wellmer, it is important to point out that there is an irreducible battle going on, concerning language, that is, as to what language should be used. Wellmer will therefore delimit the argument to performative presuppositions in the exchange between (the grammatical) first-person perspective (where my reasons are seen as true reasons) and the perspective of the others (whose reasons appear as fallible).[16]

These are extensive and complex discussions. In this context, I can only indicate that, for my part, I find myself between Apel and Wellmer,[17] since (compared with Apel) I go for a more example-oriented and pluralistic approach in dealing with performative

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[16] Albrecht Wellmer, "Der Streit um die Wahrheit. Pragmatismus ohne regulative Ideen". In: Dietrich Böhler, Matthias Kettner, Gunnar Skirbekk, eds., *Reflexion und Veranwortung*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2003: 143-170. Apel's reply, "Wahrheit als regulative Idee", ibid., pp. 171-196. Also Jürgen Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1999.

[17] Though, at the end, closer to Wellmer. See, for example, Gunnar Skirbekk, *Rationality and Modernity*. Oslo/Oxford, Scandinavian University Press/Oxford University Press 1993. Also Gunnar Skirbekk, "Inledning". In: Gunnar Skirbekk, ed., *Striden om sanningen*. Göteborg, Daidalos 2004: 7-27.

arguments (as mentioned above). At the same time, I want to emphasize the dynamics between the two positions mentioned by Wellmer, since "my" reasons are precisely those reasons which I have arrived at by means of serious discussions with others.[18] That's precisely why we are motivated to argue, to take counter-arguments seriously and to learn by trying to see things from other people's positions. Hence, the notion of fallibility should be interpreted as pluralistic and example-oriented (see below).

In addition to these remarks, I restrict myself to some quick comments on three points:

(i)   The notion of an ideal consensus among "*those affected*", that Habermas refers to, in defense of the concept of universal norms of justice, does not only meet resistance due to all kinds of *practical* problems, when trying to find out what *all currently living people* might believe about various issues, but also in regards to *conceptual* problems to the extent that the term "those affected" (*die Betroffene*) encompasses *future generations*. And of course, they should be included in many cases; consider issues connected to climate change and ecological challenges, with consequence for future generations. However, *future people* cannot participate, here and now. Nor do we, living today, know who they are, nor how many there will be. Besides, to the extent that the usage and

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[18] Same point emphasized by Wellmer in Wellmer 2003, p. 162 (see note 16 above).

allocation of resources are involved, we immediately get the further question whether "those affected" should also include *other sensory beings*, other than *homo-sapiens*. – In short, the term "those affected" is notoriously indefinite and indeterminable.

(ii) In the discussion (in Habermas and Apel) on universal "validity claims," the question concerning *the use of concepts* has an *unclear epistemic status*. A meaningful usage of concepts is a preconditions for statements to be true, yet it is also as a precondition for meaningful statements about normative issues, whether they are legal norms, moral norms, or cultural values. Consequently, normative issues, value questions included, are not to be seen as valid merely because there is a *consensus* among those affected, since the question whether a given set of concepts is more or less adequate in a given context is a matter that *can be discussed with more or less good arguments*, in short as an *independent "validity claim"*: Is the use of a particular concept a fairer and more relevant one than the use an alternative concept, in a particular case? For example, when citizens (*Staatsbürger*) are referred to merely as customers or clients in a political debate. Of course, questions of appropriate usage of concepts are controversial in many cases. For example, there are disputes about the "power of definition" (*Definitionsmacht*), among different professions and disciplines. Nevertheless, often there may be good reasons for the claim that a certain use of concepts is too simple in a particular case (as when

students are defined as consumers of an educational product, in a research project on university life). Even when everything that is said is empirically true, it can, in such cases, be argued that the choice of concepts is too simple and that there are vital issues that cannot be conceived by using such concepts alone. This opens up for academic criticism among academic disciplines and their professions. Bluntly stated: conceptual poverty can be a fatal form of poverty.

(iii) *Fallibility* is an important term. However, there are different forms and degrees of fallibility.[19] For example, even though we as human beings, generally speaking, are fallible, there are many things we do know with reasonable certainty. Three examples:

(a) *In the sciences*. For instance, the descriptive macro-anatomy of the human body is no longer an academic research discipline. Today we know everything there is to know. Today it is an educational discipline for students in the health-care professions. Certainly, the human body may, in different groups or in general, become thinner or heavier, taller or shorter. But as long as there are no mutations, we know what there is to know: that the *clavicular* is so and so long, with these and those joints, that *musculus latissimus dorsi* has this and that cartilage and this and that inversion, and so on. Another case: Norse literature is limited, in the sense that we most likely

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[19] This is a main point in Wellmer, *ibid*. pp. 155-167, e.g. notes 14 (p. 158) and 28 (p. 165-6).

have all the texts we possibly could have. Yet here, in principle, new interpretational traditions may arise, such as when Freud in his time eventually gave a new perspective and conceptual framework for the study of literary texts. When it comes to descriptive macro-anatomy for the human body, on the other hand, the conceptual usage is given. In this case, it does not make much sense to talk about fallibility, not even in the light of new interpretations.

(b) *Simple acts in daily life*. It is not always the case that we know what we are doing. For instance, there are cases of self-deception, cf. psychoanalysis, and there might be cases of ideological narrowmindedness, cf. Marx and Mannheim, and in many cases there may be insufficient information about the consequences and implications of what we are doing. Nevertheless, in many instances we can know reasonably well what we are doing, as in cases of elementary bodily and social acts, such as walking or grabbing or greeting others, and also for elementary speech-acts in one's native language. So-called "tacit knowledge" is part of this – as when the researchers in CERN assume that the French language is the same today as yesterday, that the floor will hold them, that the breakers will work as they previously have worked, etc. - all these are preconditions so that the experiment can be carried out and theories be tested.

(c) *Speech-act inherent preconditions for argumentation*, as we have pointed out, earlier in this paper. Insofar, Apel has a good point, when he argues against fallibilism as a *universal*, comprehensive and thus self-contradictory claim.

Based on what is said above, it is my view that we can do without Apel's strong thesis of ideal consensus. However, for self-reflexive reasons we need a concept of good reasons as "my" reasons. That is, that "my" reasons are the reasons I take to be the best ones, here and now, after (among other things) listening to others. In short, we need a concept of "better reasons," in contrast to "less good reasons." Without this, learning would be impossible. In this sense, what we need is *meliorism* – an urge for epistemic improvement, to search for better reasons, under relevant circumstances.

The third thesis

Realistically, argumentative reason should be *situational*, institutionally and person-based, as a formative interaction over time, with text and talk, where we listen and speak, but also read and write, and preferably seek out other environments, with other experiences and modes of thinking

Argumentation does not merely take place in the seminar room, as an academic specialty, with the German "*Hauptseminar*" as a paradigm. That is not how it is. Nor is that how it should be. In many cases, for sure, it is *after* a conversation that we realize what

we should have said, and that we continue to think about what we ourselves said and about what others said, and maybe we read up on an unclear point, and perhaps we try to formulate ourselves in writing, in order to clarify and remember key points. Hence, written formulations are useful. Texts are important so that we can hold on to our thoughts and ideas, and also analyze them with precision. Speech, conversation, is important for argumentative reasons; but that also applies to texts – to reading and to analyzing written texts from other people, and also for the person who formulates his or her thoughts and ideas in writing. However, all this takes time; it often happens either before or after the actual conversation. Moreover, often further conversations are needed. Hence, the argumentation becomes a formative process that under certain circumstances can go on for a long period of time. For some individuals, maybe their entire lifetime! And in society, over many generations – such as, for example, what we see in Western thought, from the early Greeks to this very day.[20]

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[20] For *public* enlightenment and for *basic cultural modernization*, the printed word was important – as in the case of Norway: from Gutenberg and Luther, from Ludvig Holberg to Hans Nilsen Hauge and the popular publications, from 1814 and beyond. (Gunnar Skirbekk, *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences*. Hong Kong, the Chinese University Press 2011. Also Gunnar Skirbekk, "Processes of Modernization: Scandinavian Experiences", paper from the conference *North European and Russian Societies in the Enlightenment: Modernisation and Cultural Transfer*, Helsinki October 7-8 2016, see below. However, this was not the case in all places. For instance, the first printed book of the Quran in an Arab country was published in Egypt in 1924, close to 500 years after Gutenberg. See Ghaly, Mohammed: "The Interplay of Technology and Sacredness in Islam: Discussions of Muslim Scholars on Printing the Qur'an." In: *Studies in Ethics, Law and Technology*, 2009 (3), no. 2. References: 20-24.

Again, we recall how the ancient Greek philosophers were arguing, with their texts and spoken discussions, within and about their own assumptions and also with and against other thinkers and their presuppositions. Bluntly stated, when there are no written texts, then there is no precise argumentation, no philosophy, no science – not even in a culture with a rich, oral tradition.

Hence, the notion of argumentation and argumentative reason should be conceived as situated, as a formative interaction over time, with texts and talk, where we listen and speak, but also read and write, and also relate to other environments, both by texts and by seeking out others.

First Implication
There are various crises in modern societies, and they overlap each other. Hence, we cannot conceive them using only one type of science; one-dimensional expertise does not do the work. Besides, scientific research is often uncertain. Hence, there is a need for argumentative reason in term of *theory of the sciences and academic criticism*. Additionally, as *citizens* of a modern democracy, we have a co-responsibility; hence, there is a need for education and enlightenment.

Modern crises overlap each other. Just some key words, as a reminder: increasing social and economic disparities, with unemployment and the "working poor", new technology with the loss of traditional workplaces, social unrest and distrust, climate issues and unsustainable population growth, often in areas with

weak institutions and failing cultural modernization. In short, there are lots of crises. Moreover, they *overlap one another*, often in *complex* ways. Therefore, they cannot be grasped and dealt with by one science alone or solved by any one-dimensional expertise.

Hence, many things are needed, not least institutionally and politically, but also in terms of *open and enlightened academic criticism*, both of political actors and institutions, and of one-dimensional expertise and short-term policies, including *philosophical reflection* on current plans and strategies, e.g., with a critique of tunnel vision and conceptual poverty.

These challenges affect us all, albeit in different ways, and not just those who are politically active. Being a *citizen* (*Staatsbürger*) of a modern democracy does not just entail being a customer or a client, or just being a subject (*Untertan*). As mature citizens in a democratic state, we can elect representatives to the legislature, and we ourselves can be elected; we can organize and demonstrate, keep updated on what is happening and on what can be done, and we can ourselves participate in the debate.[21]

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[21] Institutions have constitutive preconditions, also normative ones. For instance, in modern democracies it is mandatory to go to school. That is not accidental. Institutions like democracy and the welfare state demand and presume that most people live up to certain roles and values. If we want to benefit from these institutions, we should know that there are normative implications and demands. Hence, as mature citizens of modern constitutional democracies with a universal and generous welfare state, not only do we have moral and judicial obligations, but also *political and institutional obligations*, i.e., to attempt to live up to institutional challenges, among other thing by trying to improve ourselves as enlightened and mature persons. Correspondingly, the government has,

As mature citizens (*mündige Staatsbürger*), we should not only just obey the applicable laws, but should ourselves also be a part in giving the laws. As mature citizens in modern crisis-ridden democracies, we therefore have a shared co-responsibility, though depending on our abilities and resources. Therefore, everyone is challenged, among other things to cultivate his or her ability and willingness to listen to others, to take counter-arguments seriously, and to try to improve ourselves, as mature persons and co-responsible citizens. Thus, once again, argumentative reason!

Second implication
Modern societies require cultural modernity. The constellation of modern technology and of premodern attitudes and premodern actions is an anomaly. In these cases we have "*half-modern*" persons who overlook or reject interpretative and argumentative sciences. Some could also be described as "*argumentophobic*", characterized by fear of and disgust for argumentative reason.

Modern societies require all the sciences: different natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, from historiography and philosophy to theology, law and linguistics, and also self-critical argumentation.

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among many things, the responsibility to ensure a good basic education for everyone and to facilitate free and enlightened public conversation (see § 100, last paragraph, in the Norwegian Constitution).

Modern societies require cultural modernization: awareness of the diversity of perspectives and perceptions, awareness of the fact that our conceptions are often fallible and that we can learn from each other – and that we can learn to relate to different institutions, with different roles and demands.

In contrast, we have *semi-modern* societies, with modern technology and premodern beliefs and attitudes – whether they are in the Middle East or in the Midwest. Bluntly stated, those who are in favor of modern technology, modern weaponry and means of communication, but who disregard or detest the full range of modern sciences (and who might even believe that their dead heroes enjoy a gorgeous life in a heavenly Paradise). In that sense, they are *half-modern.* A fatal constellation. Furthermore, we have those who are *argumentophobic*, with fear and disgust for open and enlightened argumentation.[22]

Modernity is a challenging project, to say the least. Nevertheless, there is no reasonable way back, to an epistemically premodern world.

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[22] Such as orthodox jihadists, as well as light-footed postmodernists; for the first category, see Gunnar Skirbekk, "Unabsichtliche Blasphemie und das Bedürfniss nach Theologie". In: Gunnar Skirbekk, *Herausforderungen der Moderne*. Berlin, Logos 2012: 9-23; for the latter, see Gunnar Skirbekk, "Bruno Latour's anthropology of the Moderns". In: *Radical Philosophy*, 2015: 45-47.

In times of crisis, with one-dimensional orthodoxy, scientistic as well as religious, on the one hand, and post-modernist relativism and fake news on the other, argumentative reason, in a modernization-theoretic perspective, is a vital, but contentious project.