Argumentation, Cooperation, and Disagreement

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Abstract: To get a better comprehension of the nature of argumentation, we need to understand the context in which this practice produces its particular benefits. I hold that this context consists basically in the presence of two conditions: 1) the need for cooperation, and 2) the possibility of dissent. I argue that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the particular benefit argumentation is able to produce in this context and that obtaining this benefit constitutes its main function. Thus, the main function of argumentation is not epistemic. Truth is important when we argue, but epistemic improvement is not the main aim of argumentation, even if this benefit may be a common result of it.

Résumé: Pour mieux comprendre la nature de l'argumentation, il est nécessaire de comprendre le contexte dans lequel cette pratique produit ses bénéfices particuliers. Je soutiens que ce contexte repose essentiellement sur la présence de deux conditions : 1) le besoin de coopération ; 2) la possibilité de dissidence. Je soutiens que contribuer à la coordination de l'action collective est le bénéfice particulier que l'argumentation est capable de produire dans ce contexte et que l'obtention de ce bénéfice constitue sa fonction principale. Ainsi, la fonction principale de l'argumentation n'est pas épistémique. La vérité est importante lorsque nous argumentons, mais l'amélioration épistémique n'est pas l'objectif principal de l'argumentation, même si ce bénéfice peut en être un résultat courant.

Keywords: adversariality, collective action, coordination, function of argumentation, reasons, testimonial injustice, truth

1. Introduction

In a fascinating study on the origins of human socio-political systems, Herbert Gintis, Carel van Schaik, and Christopher Bohem (2019) argue that, at an early period in the evolutionary history of the human species, conditions emerged that favored the selection of

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individuals with abilities to communicate and persuade in a moral context. Two of these important conditions were the existence of strong interdependence relationships among the members of the group and the development of lethal weapons. Availability of lethal weapons had the effect of balancing the ability to harm others, since the existence of these instruments offered individuals, regardless of their physical strength, the possibility of annihilating any other member of the group. As a result, mere physical strength ceased to constitute a crucial advantage favoring forms of organization based on the dominion of a single individual. This situation contrasts with that of other primates which did not develop such instruments (or, at least, not for that purpose). Among chimpanzees, for example, it has been observed that leaders tend to survive attacks by other individuals, even when these individuals are organized and take the leader by surprise (Wrangham and Peterson, 1996). So, the need for cooperation among the members of the group for the accomplishment of collective tasks beneficial to all of them, together with the particular balance of forces created by the development of lethal weapons, diminished the advantages of domination through physical bodily force and, at the same time, favored individuals with better communication, persuasion, and negotiation skills. As Gintis and his collaborators put it, "two million years of evolution of hyper-cooperative multi-family groups that deployed lethal weapons to hold down hierarchy gave rise to the particular cognitive and socio-political qualities of *H. sapiens*" (Gintis et al. 2019, pp. 25-26).

The need for cooperation and an adequate balance of forces not only were factors that contributed to the emergence of the human capacities for persuasion and negotiation, but continue to be crucial conditions for their successful exercise. The persuasion we are talking about here, of course, is not persuasion by means of threats or violence, which is only in a very degraded sense a form of persuasion, but persuasion by means of reasons, that is, argumentative persuasion. In this paper I defend the idea that, to get a better comprehension of the nature of argumentation, we need to understand the context in which this practice produces its particular benefits. I hold that this context consists basically in the presence of two conditions: 1) the need (or desire) for cooperation (which exists in every human group), and 2) the possibility of dissent (which is created by an adequate balance of forces). The central claim of this paper is that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the particular benefit argumentation is able to produce in this context and that obtaining this benefit constitutes its main function. I understand the function of argumentation as a sustaining condition, that is, as the main factor that explains why people engage in argumentative practices and, consequently, why these practices are reproduced and persist in our social life.

In section 2, I address the question of cooperation and disagreement. My aim is to explain how the need for cooperation and the possibility of dissent come together to create a context that favors and sustains the practice of argumentation. In particular, I will try to show that, even if norms (implicit or explicit) are an important factor in the coordination of collective action, argumentation plays a fundamental and distinctive role due to the possibility it offers of solving disagreements among participants in a collective task without damaging their cooperative bonds. In section 3, I discuss the relation between disagreement and adversariality in order to show that the fact that argumentation has the possibility of dissent as one of its favoring factors does not imply that this activity is fundamentally adversarial, uncooperative, or aggressive. Finally, in section 4, building on the considerations presented in the previous sections, I propose some arguments in favor of the idea that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation—and so that the main function of argumentation is not epistemic—and I respond to some important objections that can be raised against this view.

2. Cooperation and disagreement

The importance of cooperation for human beings can hardly be exaggerated. In addition to the crucial role of cooperation in the evolutionary development of the human species (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Gintis 2017; Gintis et al. 2019), it is clear that the most important achievements of human civilizations, as well as their more ordinary but no less fundamental activities, including unfortunately their greatest crimes, are due to the remarkable organizational capacity of individuals for the accomplishment of collective tasks whose execution processes can widely expand through space and time. This is an undeniable fact. But what are the mechanisms that enable participants in a collective task to coordinate their individual actions in order to achieve their common goals? One important factor is the existence of norms that regulate our collective activities (Bicchieri 2006). A clear example of this is vehicular traffic: It is because there are norms every driver (more or less) knows and respects that we can anticipate the behavior of others and coordinate our individual actions and responses with the actions and responses carried out by them.

Many norms are explicitly stated in legal documents that define the rights and obligations of individuals in a social group. Many other norms, however, are implicit in our social interactions: They regulate those interactions without being established in official documents or acknowledged in verbal agreements. Norms that regulate interactions between members of a family are an example of such implicit norms. That parents have authority over their children is an implicit norm that is observed in different families belonging to different cultures.[1] The degree of authority parents can exercise over their children (or the degree of respect children must observe for parental authority) is, however, something that tends to vary between different cultures, or even between different families belonging to the same culture. Nonetheless, once implicit norms are established, we can anticipate the behavior of others and coordinate our collective activities.

Concerning explicit norms, however, we must note that they are generally the product of coordinated collective activities, either of general agreement among the members of the group to adopt a certain normativity or of deliberations of a subgroup that hierarchically imposes the norms on the rest of the members. Explicit norms cannot, therefore, constitute the ultimate explanation of our ability to coordinate complex forms of collective action. But what about implicit norms? Can they provide this ultimate explanation? How should we understand these norms, however, in the first place? One plausible way of understanding implicit norms is as principles of coordination derived from the exercise of more basic capacities. For instance, consider what in cognitive science is known as theory of mind or mindreading (Baillargeon et al. 2010; Goldman 2006; Malle 2004). Mindreading is a cognitive capacity we develop at a very early age (Onishi and Baillargeon 2005). This capacity allows us to identify the mental states of others (beliefs, desires, intentions, expectations). Explicit norms that apply in a particular situation are an important factor that determines people's mental states in that situation, and so our knowledge of these norms is useful for identifying those mental states, but there are other important and more basic cues, such as facial expressions, tones of voice, and instinctive reactions. Our general expectation that people would respect basic principles of rationality and self-preservation is also a useful guide.

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[1] Of course, parents (or children) can make the norm explicit, or the norm can be explicitly stated in legal documents. The crucial point is that it is not because it has been made explicit that the norm applies.

In virtue of mindreading, we can anticipate the behavior of others, for once we succeed in identifying what people we interact with believe and desire about a particular situation, we can infer what they intend to do—or the reactions they may have—in that situation (Dennett 1987). For example, it is not difficult for family members to identify the mental states of each other at a given moment. They can also identify the general convictions of each member, what they enjoy, what they hate, their habits, their usual ways of reacting to different circumstances, etc. All this information allows them to anticipate with significant accuracy each other's behavior in different contexts, so as to have appropriate reactions. Family members can also use this information to adopt strategies for addressing an issue, announcing a decision, or making a request. In this way, they can succeed in coordinating their collective activities. Of course, these capacities are also used in other social contexts, such as at work, or with friends and neighbors. It is thus possible to see implicit norms (maybe not all, but at least some of them) as principles of coordination derived from the exercise of basic cognitive capacities such as mindreading. These principles need not be taken as norms in a full-fledged sense, but can rather be seen as useful rules of interaction that we derive from our knowledge of the mental and behavioral dispositions of others. If implicit norms are understood in this way, they might be helpful in formulating an ultimate explanation of our ability to coordinate complex forms of collective action. We can, first, use implicit norms to explain the coordinated social activity that enables us to establish norms in an explicit way. Implicit norms could thus be viewed as the explanatory basis for all the coordinated collective activity made possible by explicit norms. Given that implicit norms (or at least some of them) are derived from basic individual capacities (such as the cognitive capacity to identify the mental states of others), and not from some form of coordinated social activity, it may be possible to conclude that these norms provide an ultimate explanation of our ability to coordinate collective action.

But before we endorse such a conclusion, we must consider the fact that success in carrying out coordinated collective activities requires, not only anticipating the behavior of others, but also *adjusting* our behavior to the behavior we anticipate others will have. There are situations, however, in which we do not want to adjust our behavior to the behavior of others, or situations in which the actions we want to carry out with others are actions they do not fully agree to carry out with us. What happens in those cases? Let us consider an example from everyday life. A practice adopted by a family to keep the house in good conditions is to thoroughly clean it on Sunday mornings, and all the members must participate in this task. But the daughter, or one of the daughters, has an invitation from her friends for an activity she very much wants to do, and this activity will take place next Sunday morning. She knows that her parents' expectation is that next Sunday morning she will be at home to help with the cleaning, and she also knows that it is very important to them that each member of the family takes this responsibility seriously. What are the daughter's options in this situation? One option is simply to adjust her actions to her parents' expectations and stay at home next Sunday morning to help with the cleaning. Another option is to try to modify her parents' own opinions and expectations.

Modifying the opinions and expectations of the parents may not be a very viable option if they have rather authoritarian tendencies, that is, if they consider that their decisions cannot in any way be questioned by their children. If the parents definitely do not admit the possibility of dissent, the only option available to the daughter, if she wants to avoid conflict or rupture, is to adjust her behavior to her parents' demands. But suppose the parents have a certain degree of tolerance for children's dissent. The daughter can thus hope to modify their opinions and expectations. But how can she achieve this result? An effective strategy is to formulate *reasons* that make her parents see that it is appropriate, or at least not inappropriate, to let her go next Sunday morning to the activity she wants to do with her friends. Reasons are (among other things) instruments that enable us to have an influence on others' mental states (Norman 2016; Mercier and Sperber 2011). In virtue of reasons, we can coordinate our collective activities without this coordination depending solely on our adaptation to the beliefs, desires, intentions, or tendencies of others. Moreover, by themselves, reasons do not harm cooperative bonds, since they influence others by appealing to their own capacities for understanding and judgment. If the daughter formulates reasons that convince her parents of the acceptability of her desire to go out with her friends next Sunday morning, while also offering some form of compensation for not having participated with the others in the clean-up chores (e.g., doing her part later when she returns from her activity), then the family will succeed in carrying out a coordinated collective activity in which both the daughter's and the parents' goals are satisfied.

This very simple example illustrates the two conditions that I consider crucial for the viability of argumentation in our social interactions: 1) the need (or desire) for cooperation, and 2) the possibility of dissent. A family is a group whose members stand in different relations of mutual dependence. They need to cooperate with each other in order to achieve their goals and preserve the ties that bind them together. One possible way of succeeding in carrying out this cooperation is by establishing a hierarchical organization in which the children must simply adapt to the decisions and expectations of their parents. This hierarchical organization can be established in an implicit way through the parents' reactions to different actions of their children, making them understand that parental expectations and decisions are not questionable. In such a hierarchical organization, argumentation is very unlikely to arise. Things change, as we have seen, when the possibility of dissent exists. But dissent must not turn into a strong and systematic opposition, or be simply countered with stubbornness, for family members, by adopting such attitudes, run the risk of causing something that, at least in principle, none of them desires: the erosion of their cooperative bonds.[2] The need for cooperation and the possibility of dissent must complement each other in order for family members to attain an adequate balance between, on the one hand, successful collective life and action and, on the other, satisfaction of their individual (and sometimes disruptive) goals. In the attainment of this balance, reasons can play a fundamental role.

When people have no need or desire (or are not under the obligation) to carry out joint activities or cooperate in any collective project, there is no need for discussion in order to achieve social coordination. In such cases, people can normally be expected to ignore each other, unless conflicts exist that keep them alert to each other's actions. Nor is there a significant need for discussion to achieve social coordination when people are involved in a collective project for which there are generally accepted norms and expectations that define in a precise way the role everyone should play. The need for discussion arises when people have the need or desire to cooperate (or are under the obligation to do so), but there are no norms or general expectations determining each participant's role, or when the existing norms and expectations are not completely accepted by all. In such cases, participants must define their respective roles without imposing them on others, for this would run the risk of breaking their cooperative bonds and causing the collective task to fail. But the key to achieving this is not simply to adapt to others' expectations, desires, and convictions. Expectations, desires, and convictions are not always the same for everyone. Given their potential to modify the mental states of others by appealing to their own capacities for understanding and judgment, reasons are useful in determining the different roles of participants in a collective task without damaging their cooperative bonds. In this way, reasons can decisively contribute to successful collective action (Mercier and Sperber 2017; Norman 2016; Tomasello 2014).

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[2] I am not at all suggesting that family relations cannot be dysfunctional or even destructive. The point here is simply to characterize the conditions that favor the practice of argumentation and make it viable.

Let us summarize the main points of this section. The ability to coordinate complex and very diverse forms of collective activities is a distinctive characteristic of human beings. In many cases, the achievement of such complex activities requires the establishment of cooperative links that extend widely across space and time. Trade, industry, government, legal systems, education, scientific research, urban developments, international air traffic, telecommunications, among many other things, are tangible examples of what human beings are able to do when they coordinate their efforts. This coordination cannot be explained by appealing only to explicit norms, for these norms result themselves from coordinated collective action. Our ability to identify the mental states of others is also an important factor. This ability allows us to anticipate the behavior of others and adjust our actions and responses to the actions and responses we anticipate others will have. However, this ability is insufficient when we have the desire, or need, to cooperate with others, but do not completely agree with their opinions and expectations. This problem can be solved if we have the means to influence others' mental states, that is, their opinions, desires, and expectations. Reasons are precisely one possible and important means to achieve this result. But reasons can be adequately expressed only when people are allowed to dissent. So, the need for cooperation and the possibility of dissent are the two central conditions that favor the practice of argumentation, and this practice is a crucial ingredient of our ability to coordinate complex forms of collective action. Later, in section 4, I will defend the idea that the main function of argumentation is to enable individuals to coordinate their collective activities, which is not to say that argumentation will always succeed in bringing about this result, or that it cannot serve any other purpose. But first, in the next section, I will try to show that the fact that the possibility of dissent is one of the two central conditions favoring our argumentative practices does not presuppose, or imply in any way, an adversarial conception of argumentation.

3. Disagreement and adversariality

A current debate in argumentation theory is the one concerning the relation between argumentation and adversariality. The question is whether there is something in the nature of argumentation that somehow implies that people who participate in an argumentative exchange, simply by doing so, become adversaries. Authors who claim that there is an essential link between argumentation and adversariality (or at least between argumentation and a minimal form of adversariality) usually begin their considerations by drawing our attention to the relation between argumentation and disagreement. For example, Trudy Govier (1999) holds that, in order to understand the purpose of an argument, it is necessary to understand how its conclusion is being challenged, or how the arguer thinks it might be challenged. According to Govier, arguing in favor of a proposition implies arguing against its negation, or against the premises that could support its negation, and such a situation already involves a form of adversarial relation between those who argue for the proposition and those who deny or doubt it. For Govier, "In seeking to support a claim with evidence or reasons we are denying other claims. We have, then, necessary oppositional elements in argument, which is to say that we have a necessarily adversarial element" (2021, p. 535). Govier points out, however, that there is no reason to associate the essential adversariality of argumentation with aggressiveness or oppression, since this is a minimal form of adversariality that does not entail displaying any kind of hostility toward those who disagree with us and argue against the propositions we defend (1999, 2021).

Another author who holds a similar view is Scott Aikin (2011, 2017). According to Aikin, the mere fact that someone argues for a proposition implies that the proposition is controversial, or potentially controversial, and that the arguer's purpose is to resolve this controversy (2017). If the proposition is controversial, or potentially controversial, there must be someone who doubts the proposition, or there must be a reasonable perspective from which it can be held that the proposition is false or questionable. This implies, at least from the point of view of Aikin, that when a person is arguing for a proposition, she is specifically targeting those who deny or doubt it, or those who potentially would do so. Given this situation, an adversarial relation is established between those who argue for the proposition and those who question it. For Aikin, however, this kind of adversariality is merely a matter "of weighing the force of the better reasons, and so this is minimal and only dialectically adversarial" (2017, p. 16). Aikin concludes that this dialectical form of adversariality is "an essential part of argumentation" (ibid.).

A somewhat different proposal equally defending the existence of an essential link between argumentation and adversariality is that of John Casey (2020). According to Casey, when we argue, our central aim is to influence others' beliefs. On his view, beliefs are psychological states over which we have no direct voluntary control (although there might be indirect forms of control). Moreover, for Casey, not only is it impossible to exercise direct voluntary control over our own beliefs, but changes in our beliefs imply certain epistemic and social costs for us. Anyone who tries to modify our beliefs cannot thus hope to count on our willingness to accept the changes, but should rather expect to face our resistance. Given that influencing others' beliefs is "what arguments are all about even at the most rational level" (Casey 2020, p. 98), we cannot avoid, when we argue, forcing the psychological tendencies of our interlocutors. Arguing is to expose our interlocutors to evidence that gives them "*no voluntary option* but to change [their] mind" (ibid.).This unavoidable way of forcing changes in our interlocutors' beliefs when we argue is, according to Casey, that in which the essential adversariality of argumentation consists. Casey also holds that rational argument "may be the *least* invasive way" of acting on others' beliefs and that the fact that there is an adversarial element essentially linked to argumentation "does not entail that non-forceful options even exist, or, if they do exist, that they are any better" (2020, p. 100).

From Casey's point of view, this form of adversariality bears no significant relation to disagreement. Even those we consider allies or collaborators must face our resistance when they try to modify our beliefs through their arguments (or by other means). As Casey puts it, "It is not because I have a *different* belief from you that we are adversaries, it is because of the lack of direct control I have over my own beliefs and you over yours" (2020, p. 101). However, it is difficult to see how someone could resist changing her beliefs in a particular way if the change in question is something with which she fully agrees. Resistance to changes in our belief system seems to stem, not only from the fact that we have no direct voluntary control over our own beliefs, but also from the fact that, at least initially, we *disagree* with the proposed modifications. Of course, we may not realize that a certain proposition is presupposed in our belief system and resist its acceptance because we falsely think it contradicts what we believe. In such cases, we resist forming a belief that, at least in some sense, we agree with. What is difficult to understand is not this kind of situation, but a person's resistance to the formation of a belief she does not disagree with and for which reasons are offered that seem acceptable to her, or even that make her see that the belief in question is presupposed in her belief system, or is a rational consequence of it.[3] Resistance results from disagreement, and not simply from lack of voluntary control. A clear example of this is belief acquisition through testimony. If someone we consider sincere and reliable provides us with a particular piece of information, we generally accept this information without any major resistance (or without any resistance at all), unless it seems to contradict previously acquired beliefs. So, despite Casey's remarks, disagreement seems to play a crucial role in his conception of the essential link between argumentation and adversariality.

The thesis of the essential adversariality of argumentation seems to be in conflict with the idea that the need for cooperation is one of the two central conditions favoring the practice of argumentation (the other being the possibility of dissent). If it is true that, simply by arguing, people become adversaries, then it is difficult to understand how arguers, in spite of this adversarial relation, can also have the intention or the desire to cooperate with each other. The mere existence of an adversarial relation seems to exclude cooperation. More precisely, if people need or desire to cooperate with each other, they cannot be adversaries, or at least they cannot be adversaries about those situations with respect to which they need or desire cooperation.[4] According to my proposal, however, the situations about which people argue are precisely those with respect to which they need or desire cooperation. Since we cannot be both adversaries and allies with respect to the same situations, if we claim that the need for cooperation is one of the two central conditions favoring the practice of argumentation, we cannot agree with the thesis of the essential adversariality of argumentation. My proposal implies the rejection of this thesis.

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[3] Of course, for various reasons, people may resist publicly admitting the formation of a particular belief, or the holding of a certain conviction, but this is a different kind of phenomenon.

But the problem seems to get worse when we consider the fact that the second condition is the possibility of dissent. As we have seen, theorists who support the thesis of the essential adversariality of argumentation usually base their claims on the idea that disagreement is a constitutive part of argumentation. For these theorists, argumentative exchange begins with the use of reasons to support a claim that is being (or could be) questioned, or with the use of reasons to question a claim, thereby challenging its acceptability. Since disagreement is seen as a kind of adversarial relation, the essential adversariality of argumentation is inferred from the essential role of disagreement in argumentative exchange. But if disagreement is a kind of adversarial relation and adversarial relations exclude cooperation, then the need for cooperation and the possibility of dissent cannot both be conditions that favor the practice of argumentation. These conditions are mutually exclusive. From such a perspective, my proposal is seriously mistaken. The need for cooperation may be a condition that favors the practice of argumentation, or perhaps the possibility of dissent can be such a condition, but not both. At least one of them must go.

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[4] For instance, despite being adversaries, chess players cooperate with each other in different ways: They play the game according to the rules and conform to other conventions of the competition. But, certainly, given that they are adversaries, they are not trying to help each other to win the game. This situation contrasts with that of, for example, two cooperative chess partners trying together to win the game against someone (or something) else, but being in disagreement about the next move. Similarly, in some contexts, the practice of argumentation may require respecting certain norms and conventions, but if we see arguers as adversaries, then it seems that we cannot expect them to help each other to "win the argument". It is in this particular sense that I think adversarial relations exclude cooperation. A different situation, in my view, is that of two (or more) arguers trying together to find a solution to a problem, but being in disagreement about which one among the available options is the best. I thank two anonymous reviewers for comments that help me to clarify this point.

Fortunately, the solution to this problem is rather simple: We must deny that disagreement is a kind of adversarial relation. Several authors who reject the thesis of the essential adversariality of argumentation pursue this course of action. For example, Mario Gensollen describes the inference from disagreement to adversariality as an unjustified leap from an epistemic situation to a dialectical one (2020). Another author who expresses a similar view is Phyllis Rooney (2010). Rooney agrees with Govier on the idea that "argumentation is typically based in differences and disagreements about claims or positions" (Rooney 2010, p. 211). However, she also says that "we need to carefully examine the move from difference and disagreement to opposition and adversariality" (ibid.) According to Rooney, this inferential move "misconstrues the epistemic role of good argument as a significant tool of rational persuasion in the acquisition and communication of truths or likely truths" (ibid.). A third author who criticizes the inference from disagreement to adversariality is Catherine Hundleby (2013). For Hundleby, disagreement "need not entail entertaining contradictory propositions", as Govier seems to think, but "may merely involve contrary possibilities" (2013, p. 253). So, if we disagree, the fact that you are wrong does not necessarily entail that I am right. If our disagreement is due to the adoption of contrary positions, then showing that you are wrong is not sufficient, but I need to adopt a more constructive attitude and try to explain the positive reasons I have for holding my own particular view. As Hundleby puts it, "Doubt and even disagreement need not involve considering contradictions and can take the form of open-mindedness and exploration, compiling data, or casting about for further information" (ibid.).

I strongly agree with these authors on the idea that disagreement does not necessarily entail adversariality, let alone aggressiveness. We can disagree with each other even if we are partners in a collaborative project and it is possible to discuss our disagreements without displaying any form of aggressive behavior. So, the need for cooperation and the possibility of dissent are not mutually exclusive: They can both be conditions that favor the practice of argumentation. However, I think it is a mistake to describe disagreement as a kind of epistemic situation, that is, as a situation fundamentally involving different views about the *truth* of a statement, or about what is *the case* concerning a particular problem. Disagreement can be epistemic, of course, but it is not always epistemic. We can disagree about values, for example, and disagreement about values is not necessarily reducible (or at least not in a straightforward way) to disagreement about the truth of a statement. It is one thing to disagree about the effects of a vaccine on our body. It is quite another thing to disagree about our responsibility to get vaccinated in order to protect our community. A different example is abortion. People can disagree about when (or whether) the embryo or the fetus must be legally protected from voluntary termination of pregnancy, and so about when it can be considered a person, at least from a legal point of view. This disagreement is not only about facts, but also about values, and we cannot just assume, as I have pointed out, that disagreement about values is always reducible, in a non-trivial sense, to disagreement about the truth of a statement.[5]

An example of such a problematic reduction can be found in Rooney (2010). To be fair, this is not an example of an attempt at an outright reduction, for Rooney recognizes that there are arguments "that don't readily fall within the epistemic purview" (2010, p. 219). This is the case of arguments about "which action to take or which policy to adopt" (ibid.). Rooney adds, however, that these arguments "often have an epistemic component" concerning the truth of "claims to the effect that action or policy A is likely to be more effective than action or policy B (where there is some prior agreement about what constitutes effectiveness in the given situation" (ibid.). If we agree about what counts as an effective action or policy in a given situation, it could indeed be a matter of fact whether a particular action or policy is more effective than another in that situation. But disagreement about which action to take, or which policy to adopt, is not simply (or not always) a matter of the effectiveness of the different actions or policies we are considering in the situation. It is also, and more importantly, a matter of which values we think we should promote or defend. And disagreement about values, that is, about which values should be promoted or defended, is not necessarily reducible to disagreement about the truth of a statement. Moreover, agreement about what counts as an effective action or policy in a particular situation presupposes, not only agreement about some purely factual criteria, but also agreement about what counts as a morally acceptable means to achieve our aims. We can reject a particular means if we consider it morally wrong, even if it completely satisfies the rest of our criteria for effectiveness. Thus, agreement about what counts as an effective action or policy in a given situation involves agreement about values, and not merely epistemic agreement about certain facts.

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[5] Some people might think that the answer to the question of when exactly the embryo (or the fetus) becomes a person is a matter of fact. However, it is far from obvious that our ordinary notion of person can be a useful guide to find a solution to this problem and, consequently, that this problem has a clear sense at all (at least from a factual point of view). Other technical notions could be proposed, but then the problem would be significantly altered.

Another example of a problematic reduction of disagreement about values to disagreement about the truth of a statement can be found in Castro (2022). Following Jacobs (2003), Castro holds that argumentation has an epistemic goal (as well as a social one), which consists in reaching "epistemically correct conclusions as close as possible to what [arguers] consider *the case regarding an issue*" (2022, p. 20). But then, in a footnote, he explains that his use of the term 'epistemic' "may include normative disagreements or disagreements about values" (ibid.). So, according to Castro, what arguers can claim it is the case regarding an issue under discussion may include statements such as "abortion is a crime" or "tax heavens should be banned". However, take the disagreement about whether abortion is a crime. To make this disagreement epistemic in a non-trivial sense, that is, to make it a disagreement about the truth of a statement, it is not enough to say that it is a disagreement about whether or not it is the case that abortion is a crime. To be clear, the disagreement is about whether or not it is acceptable to *judge* that abortion is a crime, but the content of this judgment contains a normative concept (the concept of being a crime), and we cannot simply assume that such concepts always have factual conditions for their application.[6]

Of course, we can be realists about values and think it is a matter of fact whether abortion is a crime. It is well known, however, that realism about values has very serious epistemic problems (How are we supposed to know "moral facts"? Do we have a sort of "moral sense"?). In any case, claiming that a statement about the primacy of a given moral value over other moral values is an authentic factual statement, and so that disagreement about values is always reducible to disagreement about the truth of a statement, seems to imply a strong commitment to moral cognitivism. I think it is a considerable advantage of the conception of argumentation I will propose in the next section, over other more epistemic views, that it does not depend on the way the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists turns out.[7] Disagreement about values may turn out to be always reducible to disagreement about the truth of a statement, or it may not. My proposal does not require a commitment to the view that disagreement is a kind of epistemic situation.[8]

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[6] But what about deflationary accounts of truth? Take *p* to be a sentence containing at least one moral term, such as 'freedom is more valuable than equality.' From a deflationary point of view, judging or asserting that it is true that *p* is equivalent to simply judging or asserting that *p*, and this is all that we can significantly say about the truth of a statement. If deflationism is right, then disagreement about whether it is acceptable to judge that *p* might be equivalent to disagreement about whether it is true that *p*. It may thus seem that, from such a perspective, disagreement about values is always reducible to disagreement about the truth of a statement. But is this really a form of reduction? On a deflationary view, applying the term "true" to a statement does not imply attributing a sort of substantive truth property to the statement. There is no such thing as a truth property. The term "true" is seen only as a useful linguistic device for expressing endorsement of a statement. If asserting that it is true that *p* is no more than endorsing *p*, then I can agree with the idea that disagreement about values is always reducible to disagreement about the truth of a statement, that is, about the endorsement of a certain moral statement. But I suspect this is not what partisans of epistemic conceptions of argumentation have generally in mind when they talk about the truth of a statement. I thank an anonymous reviewer for very valuable comments on this point.

[7] Some of the authors taking part in this debate are: (Blackburn 1998; Gibbard 1990; Köhler 2017; Schroeder 2010; Shiller 2017; Silk 2013).

[8] Comments of two anonymous reviewers have been very helpful in clarifying this point. I thank both of them.

As we have seen in section 2, argumentation plays a major role in the coordination of collective action. When we carry out a collective task, disagreements with others can occur. The fact that we need or desire cooperation does not exclude disagreement, but it constitutes a strong motivational factor prompting us to seek a solution. The use of reasons is crucial when we face such a situation, for reasons can influence others' opinions and expectations without damaging cooperative bonds. However, we have also seen that, for reasons to be adequately expressed, the possibility of dissent must exist. That is, there must be an adequate balance of forces among participants in the task that protects them from impositions and creates for everyone the possibility of expressing reasons through which they can hope to influence others. To the extent that breaking the cooperative bonds and causing the collective task to fail is considered an undesirable outcome by all the participants, they will stay motivated to be united and relatively open to others' points of view and arguments.

Given this conception of argumentation, if we assume that argumentation has a function, there is no reason to see this function as something particularly epistemic. Disagreements between participants in a collaborative project can concern the truth of a statement, but they can equally concern the morality or fairness of their particular aims, or of the specific ways in which they try to achieve those aims. All these kinds of disagreements may turn out to be epistemic, or they may not. The point is that, even if epistemic disagreements are only a subset of all possible disagreements, there is no reason to see epistemic disagreements as more fundamental than other kinds of disagreements, or more essentially linked to argumentation. In the following section, I will defend the idea that argumentation has a function and that this function is not epistemic. Truth in argumentation is important, of course, but it is not the central purpose of our argumentative practices. The function of argumentation must be thought of as a sustaining condition, that is, as the production of those benefits that not only result from argumentation, but also, and crucially, that generally explain why people engage in argumentative practices and why these practices are, therefore, reproduced in our social life. This sustaining condition is to be found in the central role of argumentation in the coordination of collective action.

4. The function of argumentation

According to Jean Goodwin, a "function claim"—that is, a theoretical statement that argumentation has a particular function—is composed of the following assumptions:

> a) The context of an argument should be conceived as a joint activity.
> b) That joint activity has the function of achieving a social good.
> c) The norms of argument include those rules (principles, values, standards, etc.) an argument must follow (live up to, instantiate, meet, etc.), in order for the joint activity in which it is embedded to achieve its function (Goodwin 2007, pp. 70-71).

In this paper, I have been claiming that argumentation is a social practice in which reasons are exchanged and that this practice produces a social benefit, i.e., the coordination of collective action. I have also been claiming that reasons are able to influence other's opinions and expectations without damaging cooperative bounds, and that this characteristic of reasons explains why they are particularly well suited to the aim of producing the social benefit in question. We can then conclude that, when we argue, we must follow the rules or standards that enable us to formulate good reasons, but also to accurately evaluate the reasons others offer to us, if we want to obtain the social benefit that the practice of argumentation is able to produce. So, according to Goodwin's view, my proposal amounts to a function claim.

Goodwin is skeptical about function claims, however, and offers several arguments against them. First, she points out that, typically, theorists do not provide evidence for such claims, but appear to treat them "as so obvious as to need no defense" (2007, p. 75). Goodwin holds, moreover, that there is evidence of other possibilities, such as engaging in the practice of argumentation for its own sake (Schiffrin 1984; see also Morado 2013). She also refers to our ordinary experience of argumentation, claiming it shows that argumentation often has dysfunctional consequences. According to her, "The most salient consequence of the joint activities involving arguments is to make participants mad", which increases hostility among them (2007, p. 76). And, as she rightly points out, hostility "is not a social good but a social ill; we do not want to promote hostility by establishing norms" (ibid.). Goodwin also considers some plausible speculations. For example, argumentation might be a practice imposed by the rich and powerful, given that they have "more access to the education, information and self-confidence necessary to argue well", and so that argumentative exchanges "are games they are likely to win" (ibid.). The rich and powerful might then maintain "an ideology or false consciousness" according to which argumentation is a rational practice that benefits all the members of the society and, in this way, "when the powerless lose the argument—as, being handicapped, they often will—they will blame *themselves*, not the social injustices, for their defeat" (2007, p. 76-77). In such a situation, argumentation clearly has social consequences, but these consequences can hardly be seen as social benefits for all the arguers.

How can we respond to these important arguments? First, the question of evidence: What could count as evidence for the claim that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation? As I have pointed out, I understand the function of argumentation as a sustaining condition, that is, as the production of those benefits obtained through argumentation that generally explain why people engage in argumentative practices and why these practices are, therefore, reproduced in our social interactions. This notion of function is akin to the notions proposed (for other purposes) by evolutionary oriented philosophers of mind and language (Millikan 1984; Neander 2017; Shea 2018).[9] It can help us understand how and why the practice of giving and asking for reasons could have emerged in the evolutionary and/or socio-cultural history of the human species, and why it continues to exist in human groups. In other words, it can help us understand what purposes argumentation has served that explain the retention of this practice and its current existence in our social life. So, when I hold that the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation, what I am claiming is that this form of coordination is a benefit, possibly among others, that argumentation actually brings about, but also that the production of this benefit is what generally explains why people engage in argumentative practices and, consequently, why these practices are reproduced in our social interactions. What evidence could be presented for such a claim?

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[9] Although this notion of function is inspired by evolutionary ideas, I think it is an intelligible and useful notion even outside—and independently of—the framework of evolutionary theory.

As we can see, our function claim is composed of two assertions: 1) contributing to the coordination of collective action is a benefit, possibly among others, that argumentation actually brings about; and 2) the production of this benefit is what generally explains why people engage in argumentative practices and why these practices are, therefore, reproduced in our social interactions. I will not discuss the first assertion: I think it is not particularly contentious to say that the coordination of collective action is to be counted among the benefits that argumentation actually produces, even if disagreements could exist about how often this practice succeeds in bringing about this result. I will, then, focus my attention on the second assertion. But before we start our discussion, we must note that the assertion we are going to consider is a statement of an empirical kind. More precisely, it is a statement about a historical fact, that is, the fact that the contribution of argumentation to the coordination of collective action has been the main factor (but probably not the only one) in the reproduction and persistence of this practice in our social life. Establishing the truth of such a statement requires collecting a significant amount of data about the development of our practice of giving and asking for reasons, as well as considering alternative explanations in a detailed way and justifiably excluding them. I do not have at all the ambition of accomplishing such a laborious task in this paper. Nevertheless, I think strong reasons can be offered showing that my proposal is a promising one, worthy of further attention. It can thus be considered a viable empirical hypothesis. I do not see this as a weakness of my position, however, for I think any plausible statement about the function of argumentation must fulfil the same evidential requirements. In my view, the question of the function of argumentation is an empirical question, not a question that can be solved through pure a priori reflection or methodology.[10]

Having clarified this point, one important thing we can say in favor of my proposal is something we have already discussed in section 2, that is, the fact that there are certain conditions under which exchange of reasons is particularly well suited to the aim of coordinating collective action. These conditions are the following:

1) The need (or the desire) to cooperate exists
2) There is an adequate balance of forces among participants in the task that inhibits imposition and makes it possible to express dissent
3) Disagreements arise
4) Failing to perform the task is considered an undesirable outcome by all the participants

But a first objection that can be made to this point is that it is not because argumentation, in these specific circumstances, is well suited to the aim of coordinating collective action that the production of this benefit is what argumentation is for. It is difficult to think, however, about an alternative means of obtaining the benefits that argumentation is able to produce in this context, i.e., avoiding failure of collective action without damaging cooperative bonds. The suitability of argumentation for this aim might have had in the past the effect of increasing its use when the adequate conditions obtained, and so this fact might have decisively contributed to the retention and proliferation of this practice in our social interactions. If the current presence of argumentative exchange in our social life is due to its usefulness in the coordination of collective action, then a plausible conclusion we can draw from this is that the production of this benefit is what argumentation is for, that is, that contributing to the coordination of collective action has been established as the function of argumentation.

A different objection might be that conditions 1-4 are so favorable that we cannot expect them to obtain very often. My approach may be viewed as unrealistic, or too optimistic. One might hold, as Dutilh Novaes does, that "*conflict* is an inevitable and ineliminable component of human lives" (2020, p. 875), that is, that human societies are so constituted that there is a permanent background of conflicting interests pursued by different individuals and different groups. Given that "argumentation does not seem to be a particularly suitable means to reach consensus in situations of conflicts of interests" (Dutilh Novaes 2020, p. 881), if such situations prevail in human societies, the usefulness of argumentation might be significantly diminished, and so it would seem implausible to claim that obtaining the benefits that result from argumentation in conditions 1-4 is what explains the presence and proliferation of this practice in our social life. Something else might be needed in order to explain this fact.

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[10] I thank an anonymous reviewer for remarks helping me to clarify this point.

The existence of conflict in human societies cannot be denied. Given that conflict undermines cooperation, when conflict prevails, argumentation becomes a less viable option. The practice of argumentation between antagonistic groups having no need or desire to cooperate with each other in order to achieve a common goal can even result in polarization (Sunstein 2002; Yardi and Boyd 2010). But the undeniable presence of conflict should not make us overlook the enormous amount of cooperative work human beings accomplish every day. As I have emphasized in section 2, human beings cooperate all the time in all sorts of collective activities. Cooperation is so present in our lives that we can fail to notice how much we rely on the work of others—not only family, friends, and colleagues, but also people we do not know at all—for the accomplishment of our daily activities. So, even if the presence of conflict in human societies is very significant, the claim that "human sociality is characterized by strong levels of cooperation *as well as* strong levels of competition and adversariality" (Dutilh Novaes 2020, p. 874) may not be completely accurate. If we take into account all the collective work made by human beings every day in every sector of social life, levels of conflict may be vastly outweighed by levels of cooperation. No doubt, the complexity of human societies creates situations of conflict. We should not forget, however, that this complexity is largely the result of cooperation.

Conditions 1-4 constitute a form of shared decision-making context. Michael Tomasello characterizes such contexts in the following way:

> Prototypically, we may imagine as an example collaborative partners—or even a council of elders—attempting to choose a course of action, given that they know together in common ground that multiple courses of action are possible. Given their equal power in their interdependent situation, they cannot just tell the other or others what to do; rather, they must suggest a possible course of action and back it up with reasons (Tomasello 2014, p. 109).

All our conditions 1-4 are present in the context described by Tomasello. There are collaborative partners (1) trying to accomplish a collective task for which there are multiple courses of action, and so disagreement about which of these courses of action is the most convenient can arise (3). Due to their interdependent situation, participants in the task have equal power (2). This power protects them from impositions, but also allows them to propose their own view about the most viable option in the situation and to express reasons to justify that view. Finally, it is presupposed in the description given by Tomasello that failing to accomplish the collective task is considered an undesirable outcome by all the participants (4). One crucial point is that, according to Tomasello, shared decision-making contexts played a major role in the evolution of human thinking. At an early stage, ancestors of modern humans lacked the linguistic resources needed to formulate reasons explicitly, but because they "typically had much in common ground, they could point and pantomime in ways suggesting reasons implicitly" (Tomasello 2014, p. 109). As collective tasks became more and more complex and crucial, the capacity for making reasons explicit was increasingly favored, and so a selective pressure was created for the development of the thinking mechanisms and linguistic resources necessary for such a capacity to emerge. If Tomasello is right about this, we can plausibly hold that there has been a process of mutual development between the capacity for giving and asking for reasons explicitly and the capacity for coordinating collective action: The one has crucially contributed to the establishment and improvement of the other and vice versa. This sort of mutual development between these capacities constitutes a strong additional reason to claim that the coordination of collective action is the benefit obtained through argumentation that generally explains why people engage in argumentative practices and, consequently, why these practices are reproduced and persist in our social life.

But what about other purposes argumentation can serve? Or what about the idea, pointed out by Goodwin, that people can engage in argumentative discussion for its own sake? Concerning these questions, it is important to note that the fact that argumentation has a main function does not entail that it cannot serve any other purpose. Some people may sometimes engage in argumentative exchange simply because they enjoy this intellectual activity, or the purpose of arguers on some occasions may only be to test the acceptance of certain ideas. Our purpose as arguers can also be to know if others agree with us about a particular controversial situation, and if they do agree with us for the same or similar reasons. Identifying people that share our opinions and values can be useful for selecting our cooperative partners. Of course, the main purpose of arguers on some occasions can also be to know the truth about a particular situation. Obtaining the benefits that we have just mentioned can constitute an alternative function of argumentation if those benefits are not merely serving as a means of satisfying its main function, and if they are able to explain, by themselves, the reproduction and persistence of our argumentative practices (or at least of a subset of those practices). Given the ubiquity of collective action in human life and the great importance of succeeding its coordination, it is not unreasonable to claim that, in the great majority of cases, truth and other alternative benefits resulting from argumentation simply serve as a means of satisfying the main function of this practice—i.e., contributing to the coordination of collective action—even if, sometimes and in some particular contexts, those other benefits can be what arguers are mainly pursuing. Truth is thus important when we argue, but that does not mean that the main aim of argumentation is truth (Goldman 1994; Lumer 2005), or that, in our argumentative interactions, "epistemic resources" are what we primarily exchange (Dutilh Novaes 2021b). These views may seem plausible if what we have in mind is argumentation in such activities as scientific research or journalistic inquiry, but they seem much less plausible when we focus our attention on argumentation in everyday life.

Objectivity and truth are essential for the success of any form of action, individual or collective, but coordinating collective action requires more than simply having beliefs that are true: It requires agreement, not only about the facts, but also about the role everyone should play and the fairness of the distribution of costs and benefits among participants, not to mention agreement about the morality or legitimity of the aims pursued and the means employed. Disagreement about any of those aspects of collective action puts at risk the success of the task, and so it must be solved. As we have seen, if there is an adequate balance of forces among participants in the task that protects them from impositions, the only available option enabling them to avoid failure (apart from simply deciding, despite their disagreements, to adjust their actions to others' expectations) is to try to influence others' opinions and expectations. That is precisely what argumentation can offer: influencing others' opinions and expectations without damaging cooperative bonds. The point is that, even if we think that there is an essential link between argumentation and truth (a point of view that I do not feel inclined to endorse), the specific contribution of argumentation to the coordination of collective action has mainly to do, not with the connection between reasons and truth, but rather with the power of reasons to influence others' mental states. And even if we assume that these two aspects of reasons are essentially related, they are nonetheless different aspects that produce different benefits. My view is that, concerning specifically the contribution of argumentation to the coordination of collective action, the central factor is the power of reasons to influence others' opinions, desires, and expectations (without damaging cooperative bonds).[11]

To end our discussion, let us see the last objection we have cited from the work of Goodwin. This objection concerns the fact that argumentation not always produces benefits, but it can also have dysfunctional consequences. One of these consequences is, as Goodwin puts it, "to make participants mad". More importantly, as we have seen, Goodwin considers the possibility that argumentation may be a practice imposed by those in position of power with the only aim of preserving their privileges. In such a situation, what results from argumentation can hardly be seen as a social benefit. What can we say about this possibility? First, we should note that argumentation is not only a social practice, but also a cognitive capacity, and the idea that a cognitive capacity as such can be imposed on people does not seem to make much sense.[12] That does not exclude the possibility, however, that certain *uses* of this cognitive capacity may be imposed on some groups with the aim of exercising a form of social control over them. It is clear that, in some contexts, argumentation can have uncooperative uses in which some individuals exploit their position of authority and their knowledge of argumentative conventions to impose the points of view and decisions that better serve their own interests. Some of these situations of domination can even be structural, as is the case of epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007). Testimonial injustice, for example, involves prejudices held by hearers (often unconsciously) resulting in speakers receiving more credibility (credibility excess) or less credibility (credibility deficit) than they otherwise would have. Those prejudices systematically benefit some groups (mostly white males) and affect others (women and racialized minorities). Arguers belonging to favored groups thus have an unfair and systematic advantage over those belonging to other groups, since their claims and reasonings will generally be perceived as better justified or more legitimate. While this unfair argumentative situation is explained by the pre-existing relations of domination between groups in our societies, these pre-existing relations of domination can in turn be reinforced and perpetuated by our own biased argumentative practices.

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[11] I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for comments that (I hope) helped me to improve the formulation of my view on this question.

The existence of relations of domination in our societies and the negative effects of these relations on our argumentative practices must certainly be recognized. When we claim that the viability of argumentation requires an adequate balance of forces, we are not supposing that this balance does not come in degrees. The balance of forces among participants in a collective task can be more or less disproportionate, and so the question concerning the adequacy of this balance in a particular situation is always a matter of degree. In some cases, even if the existing balance of forces precludes plain imposition—and so favors argumentation—it may still be disproportionate enough to allow other forms of unfair and abusive behaviors in the argumentative exchange itself. My view is that something like this is what happens in the case of testimonial injustice in argumentation. In testimonial injustice, prejudices due to pre-existing relations of domination cause an unfair and systematic disproportion in the balance of forces that favors arguers who belong to groups that receive an excess of credibility, and affect those who are the recipients of a credibility deficit. Given that those prejudices are generally unconscious, or viewed as obvious truths about the identity of the groups they concern, the unfair disproportion created by them in the balance of forces is not clearly perceived (or not perceived at all), and so people affected by a credibility deficit systematically suffer from a hardly detectable situation of domination in the argumentative discussion itself. And this particular form of domination clearly contributes to the perpetuation of the general situation of domination in the society.

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[12] When we engage in the social practice of argumentation, we certainly make use of cognitive capacities such as producing reasons (those we offer to others) and evaluating reasons (those others offer to us). My claim is that the idea that cognitive capacities such as those can simply be imposed on people does not seem to make much sense. I thank an anonymous reviewer for comments on this point.

We must note, however, that the undeniable fact that our argumentative practices are negatively affected by testimonial injustice does not really undermine the idea that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation. When disagreement arises among participants in a collective task, interdependence favors argumentation, because it contributes to the establishment of an adequate balance of forces. However, as we have just seen, the adequacy of a balance of forces can be undermined by pre-existing relations of domination in the society. In such situations of domination, we can only expect the temptation of imposition to increase, for one of the two conditions favoring the practice of argumentation—i.e., the possibility of dissent created by an adequate balance of forces—has been affected. That does not necessarily mean, of course, that the collective task will fail. As we have seen in section 2, imposition is also a possible means of succeeding in coordinating collective action. In situations of imposition, what is lost is the particular benefit argumentation produces: avoiding failure of collective action without damaging cooperative bonds. Even when imposition succeeds in the coordination of collective action, it increases the risk of rupture in the cooperation relations and has other negative effects, such as anger and social resentment. Far from being a problem for the conception of argumentation I have presented in this paper, we can see that the negative effects of testimonial injustice on our argumentative practices can even be explained by it. Thus, despite Goodwin's important objections to function claims, we can conclude that there are good reasons for holding the view that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended the idea that contributing to the coordination of collective action is the main function of argumentation. Argumentation is very well suited to this aim when the following conditions obtain: 1) the need (or the desire) to cooperate exists, 2) there is an adequate balance of forces among participants in the collective task that inhibits impositions and makes it possible to express dissent, 3) disagreement arises, and 4) failing to perform the task is considered an undesirable outcome by all the participants. Avoiding failure of collective action without damaging cooperative bonds is the particular benefit argumentation is able to produce in this context. I have also argued that, even if truth has a central place in some of our argumentative practices, given the ubiquity of collective action in human societies and the importance of succeeding its coordination, we can plausibly claim that, in the great majority of cases, truth in argumentation simply serves as a means of satisfying the main function of this practice. So, the main function of argumentation is not epistemic. The conception of the function of argumentation I have presented here has also some implications for the debate on the adversariality of argumentation and for our understanding of the effects of testimonial injustice on our argumentative practices.

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