The Other Toulmin Model: Concepts, Topoi, Evolution

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The analytic philosopher Stephen Edelston Toulmin—author of some 22 books between 1950 and 2001 on topics from moral reasoning to the philosophy of science to philosophical history—is most famous among rhetoricians for his 1958 title *The Uses of Argument* and its so-named "Toulmin model" of partitioning and diagramming arguments into claims, data, warrants, qualifiers, rebuttals, and backing (*Uses* 89-105). Teachers and scholars in communication and composition have found this schema—a sort of exploded view of the cultural syllogism—useful in the systematic analysis of argumentative structure for some time, dating back to Wayne Brockriede and Douglas Ehninger's 1960 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article "Toulmin on Argument: An Interpretation and Application" and, years later, Charles W. Kneupper's parallel "Teaching Argument: An Introduction to the Toulmin Model" from a 1978 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Both articles, alongside a formidable body of subsequent work, posit Toulmin's schematic terminology as a handy toolbox for speech communication and writing pedagogy.[1] None of this, ironically enough, was Toulmin's intention. His self-professed interest in writing *Uses* and dismantling syllogistic structure was not to systematize argument, but to rebuke analytic philosophy's rigid, pseudo-Euclidian epistemology itself (*Uses* vii).

In this essay, I am unconcerned with explicating, lauding, or criticizing the Toulmin model, apart from highlighting its rather constrictive magnetism among rhetoricians. I am not the first to suggest that rhetorical studies

1. For useful bibliography syntheses of how rhetoricians have appropriated and applied the Toulmin model, as well as this model's relationship to similar disciplinary ideas, see Jasinski 24-55; Bizup.

has appropriated Toulmin a bit myopically. More than anyone, I owe this observation to Joseph Bizup, whose meticulous 2009 essay "The Uses of Toulmin in Composition Studies" charts the historically selective use of Toulmin by compositionists and their frequent misunderstanding of Toulmin's larger commitments (an occasional myopia rhetorical studies in general no doubt shares).[2] As Bizup documents, compositionists through the years have approached the Toulmin model both approvingly and reproachfully, as either a useful heuristic or an oversimplistic, quasi-positivist relic. They have also cited Toulmin's 1972 book *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* to theorize the disciplinary formation of rhetoric and composition itself, while constructivist compositionists leaned on Toulmin (alongside Foucault, Geertz, Rorty, and others) during their debates with the cognitivists in the 1980s (Bizup W5-W10). More recently, though, books like *Human Understanding* have waned from composition and rhetorical scholarship; the Toulmin of composition studies has again more or less flattened into his so-called "model" from *The Uses of Argument*, often deployed as a foil to introduce alternative models of argumentation friendlier to the conditions of postmodernity (W15-W17).

Like Bizup, I urge rhetoricians to broaden their view of Toulmin to include his more recent, comparatively neglected works. I will, in particular, draw from *Human Understanding* and Toulmin's 1991 title *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* to forward what I'll call, at least for now, the *other* Toulmin model—this one less a model of argumentative structure than organic rhetorical invention and evolution. In addition to advancing a useful heuristic framework, I hope this essay exemplifies the sort of Janus-faced inquiry rhetoricians might pursue on the occasion of RSA's 50th anniversary, the sort that looks to thinkers from our scholarly past while also gazing forward toward future challenges. Toulmin's work, which, as Bizup notes, one might assume to have "run its course" within rhetorical studies (W14), can be resuscitated and reinterpreted through the refractive lens of rhetorical postmodernity: we can return to Toulmin's past, motivated by the present and the modern demands of increasingly rapid, fragmented rhetorical practice.

This model I'm working toward begins with *Human Understanding*, which is most obviously a work in the philosophy of science—a thick, richly-textured study that shares Toulmin's antipathy toward positivistic certainty in *The Uses of Argument* and theorizes how disciplines change through the

2. Fulkerson's article on Toulmin in *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, for instance, is itself an article on the Toulmin model and says close to nothing about the author's other works. My observation is not an indictment of this article itself, but rather an illustration of how the Toulmin model has, in rhetorical studies, eclipsed the rest of Toulmin's scholarly corpus.

gradual process of conceptual evolution. Concepts, for Toulmin, are particulate units of human intellectual development (*Human* 41-130). In what Toulmin calls "compact disciplines," or those with well-defined collective ideals or goals (like curing leukemia or verifying the Higgs boson), well-defined loci of discussion (universities, professional associations), and well-defined fora for discussion (journals, conferences), concepts circulate in association with each other but also with some particulate autonomy (145-73, 378-95). This perspective puts Toulmin at odds with, for example, Thomas Kuhn's lauded model of punctuated equilibrium through paradigm shifts that bring about new rules of "normal" scientific thought (see Kuhn 10-51; Toulmin, *Human* 98-117). Contra Kuhn's "revolutionary" model of scientific change, Toulmin envisions an *evolutionary* model:

> Instead of being introduced at one and the same time, and all of a piece, as a single logical system with a single scientific purpose, different concepts and theories are introduced into science interdependently, at different times and for different purposes. If they still survive today, this may be because they are still serving their original intellectual functions, or else because they have since acquired other, different functions .... This means recognizing that an entire science comprises an "historical population" of logically independent concepts and theories, each with its own separate history, structure, and implications. (130)

Toulmin's talk of populational differentiation, of course, stems deliberately from the theory of evolution via differential fitness pioneered in *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, who himself, in *The Descent of Man*, characterizes competition among words as itself a form of natural selection (ch. 3; 445-46). Toulmin's engagement with Darwin leads to perhaps the single boldest, most compelling insight from *Human Understanding*: evolution as Darwin described it, through variation, transmission, and differential fitness, is not exclusively a matter of biology. As Toulmin puts it, "Darwin's populational theory of 'variation and natural selection' is one illustration of a more general form of historical explanation; and ... this same pattern is applicable also, on appropriate conditions, to historical entities and populations of other kinds" (135). These other kinds include—for Toulmin's purposes—scientific concepts, of which "evolution" is, ironically or fittingly, one particularly good example. Concepts like "evolution" undergo processes of innovation and selection, the demands of which, as Toulmin tells it, "comprise both the immediate issues that each conceptual variant is designed to deal with, and also other entrenched concepts with which it must coexist" (140). Being true or otherwise scientifically demonstrable might help a concept's fitness,

but these qualities do not guarantee fitness insofar as disciplines are cultural, ideological formations that impose *their own* conditions of fitness—though these, too, can evolve.

To be clear, then, Toulmin is no biological determinist. He is not repeating the canard that human culture—and here, humankind's creation of scientific concepts—is finally reducible to its effects in the arena of biological sexual selection. Toulmin is, in fact, flipping the script to suggest this argument would commit a category mistake: that is, animal, biological selection by reproductive fitness is not itself synonymous with evolution itself but *only one example* of a larger evolutionary phenomenon. I'll say more about other evolutionary units soon.

Toulmin's also differs, notably, from the approach to evolutionary epistemology espoused by Karl Popper, who suggests the evolution of knowledge is convergent rather than divergent. For Popper, the systematic criticism of theories leads to their refinement and, eventually, their unification, like thickets of bramble collapsing into a single, smooth stem (261-63). Toulmin's disciplinary focus allows more epistemological plurality. Efforts toward knowledge-making, for Toulmin, are *rational* (as opposed to positivistically *logical*) insofar as they advance to the needs, goals, and ideals of their disciplines; this rationality is internal and *contextual*, and therefore not quite synonymous with the quest for Truth one detects in Popper's epistemological vision (Toulmin, *Human* 83-86). As Toulmin puts it, "Questions of rationality are concerned . . . with *the conditions on which, and the manner in which,* [*people are*] *prepared to change* [*disciplinary*] *doctrine as time goes on*" (84; italics in original). Rationality, in other words, means responsiveness to change; it is the capacity for disciplines to evolve based on conceptual innovation and shared ideals.

At this juncture, it is reasonable (or rational!—I write, after all, for a disciplinary audience of rhetoricians) to ask what any of this has to do with rhetoric. In some sense, no doubt, Toulmin is speaking about the rhetoric of disciplines, about what we might call specific discourse communities and their rhetorical commitments and conventions. But this is a tame, sanitized rhetoric, especially when contrasted with the unmoored fracas of postmodern, public, political deliberation in the age of trending, Twitter, and Trump. Toulmin acknowledges this limitation in passing; he notes that, for example, that a politician's speech might prove significant for numerous factors—its advancement of an idea, its display of the speaker's oratorical skill, its reflection on the speaker's party—or precipitate any number of effects in the speaker's own personal life (401-02). Some of these factors—for instance, calling into question what we mean by "border security" or "estate tax"—mirror the process of conceptual change in compact disciplines, albeit with-

in a much larger, messier sphere of terminological circulation. But here, it's worth noting that, say, Ted Cruz berating estate taxes in a stump speech will qualitatively differ from a consortium of economists deliberating the merits of that same term at an academic conference. The latter process reflects Toulmin's understanding of conceptual evolution. The term "estate tax" (or its dyslogistic cousin "death tax") in a politician's hands, I will now argue, better resembles a rhetorical *topos* than a Toulminian *concept*—though the relationship between this pair of terms proves valuable.

So, here is one thesis: topoi in public rhetoric are analogous to concepts in disciplinary rhetoric. Like concepts, topoi—or "places" of argument, which I understand as charged discursive nodes of cultural and rhetorical connectivity[3]—retain some individual autonomy, but also derive contextual significance in relation to each other. Like concepts, I would argue, topoi are also evolutionary units. A topos like "fake news," for better or worse, derives fitness from its provocative relevance to current political conversation and displays a historically variant meaning depending on how it's used, by whom, before what audiences, in what purposes, and so on. For better or worse, the circulation of terms like "fake news" also contribute incrementally to *cultural* evolution on a broader scale, inasmuch as American culture, for instance, is constituted in no small part from its manifestation in language and semiotics via the pens, tongues, and smartphones of American politicians and celebrities and at least one notable celebrity-turned-politician. Topoi circulate as part of rhetorical culture, and their use, reuse, and arguable misuse contribute to the evolution of rhetorical culture. We might pose one further analogy: compact disciplines and their conceptual evolutionary processes resemble something like a climate-controlled biome; rhetorical culture and its topical evolutionary process resemble the ecology of the wild.

I am, of course, not the first to associate rhetorical topoi with Toulmin's work. In a 1961 review of *The Uses of Argument*, Otto Bird labels Toulmin's project a "rediscovery of the topics," noting similarities between Toulmin's claim-data-warrant schema and the topical system of the Roman logician Boethius (Bird 536-38). This is an ironic alignment because Boethius, as Michael Leff has astutely noted, sought to convert topics into a consistent, logical, philosophical system and, in doing so, collapse rhetoric into philosophy (Leff 38; see Boethius, *De topicis differentiis* bk. 4, 79-95), while Toulmin's self-professed goal in *Uses* and beyond was to unyoke language, argument,

3. I elaborate on this understanding of topoi, which takes inspiration from Burke's sense of rhetorical "orientation," or location among "a bundle of judgments" in ideological space (*Permanence* 14), in Wetherbee, "*Dystopoi*" 120–22, "Picking Up." Similar conceptions of rhetorical topoi appear in Miller, "Aristotelian"; Muckelbauer 123–41.

and other cultural particularities from the strictures of formal logic. In his preface to the 2003 updated edition of *Uses*, the amused (and perhaps still bemused) author confesses that he had "never set out to expound a theory of rhetoric or argumentation," but reflects, "If I were rewriting this book today, I would point to Aristotle's contrast between 'general' and 'special' topics as a way of throwing clearer light on the kinds of 'backing' relied on in different fields of practice and argument" (viii).

Let's dwell on this distinction for a moment. Aristotle's *koinoi topoi* are ostensibly universal heuristics or avenues of argument that rhetors can deploy in diverse circumstances (*Rhetoric* 2.23 1397a-1400b). The *idia* or "special topics," by contrast, are particulate bits of information about Athenian culture, politics, and psychology that the rhetor internalizes and which Aristotle catalogues at great length in books 1 and 2 of the *Rhetoric*.[4] Toulmin notes this distinction, I assume, because it corresponds to a major thread in his work: the tension between the universal and the particular. Toulmin's preference, especially in *Cosmopolis* and his other late work, has been for the sort of epistemology evoked by the special topics: the specific, the contingent, the human (c.f. Miller, "Aristotle's").

If rhetoric discovered Toulmin in the 1960s, Toulmin finally and fully discovered rhetoric in the 1990s with *Cosmopolis*. In this book, he traces Western human thought back to the crossroads of Modernity where the Renaissance and Enlightenment met, where Rene Descartes, as Toulmin tells it, begat what Toulmin calls a "'theory-centered' style of philosophy" concerned with permanent, classifiable, and immutable knowledge (11). The moniker "cosmopolis"—the combination of "cosmos," which connotes universal cosmic order, and "polis," or the social city-state—is Toulmin's shorthand for the mistaken idea that human life, culture, and politics can be forged in the mold of universal order (67-69). Toulmin contrasts Descartes with Michel de Montaigne, the prolific essayist whose works, in Toulmin's view, represent a sustained, multipronged effort to get at the manifold strange, messy, and seemingly contradictory facets of human being—not to synthesize them all into one theory, but to appreciate and understand their very diversity and individuality (36-42). Taking inspiration from Montaigne, Toulmin aligns rhetoric with what he calls practical philosophy, linking both with the quest

4. In *The Abuse of Casuistry*, Albert R. Jonsen and Toulmin persuasively attempt to recover Aristotle as a sort of proto-pragmatist centrally concerned with the contingent problems of *phronesis* (36-37, 63-74). Had they covered the *Rhetoric* in more detail, the authors might have noted that Aristotle devotes far more space to discipline-specific and culturally contingent *idia* (1.4-15 1359a-1377b, 2.2-19 1378a-1393a) that he does detailing the *koinoi topoi*, which are predominately condensed into a single chapter (2.23 1397a-1400b).

not for what is *stable* but what is *adaptable* (186-88; see also Jonsen and Toulmin 73-74, 83-88, 257-58). He notes four criteria of focus: (1) not the written (or simply recorded) but the oral (or discursive, performative); (2) not the universal but the particular; (3) not to the global but the local; and (4) not the timeless but the timely (*Cosmopolis* 186-92). Returning to the arena of public rhetoric and the circulation of individual topoi, we find, I think, that Toulmin's four criteria of good practical philosophy are equally apt criteria of topical assessment.

Regarding topoi as adaptive, evolutionary units—wild cousins to Toulmin's disciplined concepts—we can ask how individual topoi are replicated through discursive performance; how they stand out, apart from, but in relation to, other pertinent topoi; what localities or specific audiences these topoi speak to; and how these topoi become timely or kairotic. In these schema, topical fitness means rhetorical utility in context. So, I am finally poised to pin down what I'm calling the *other* Toulmin model. This model describes topoi as

> (A) particulate, replicable discursive units that circulate within and help shape rhetorical culture and as
>
> (B) devices one can analyze and assess according to
>
> (i) their ease of replication through discursive performance,
>
> (ii) how they stand out as individual units but adhere to their contexts,
>
> (iii) how they affect specific audiences and localities, and
>
> (iv) how they function in a timely (kairotic) fashion.

Examples of such topoi might include "binders full of women," "fake news," "the free market," the Obama "hope" poster, "covfefe," "stable genius," and countless other bite-size but rhetorically potent fragments of discourse. In a sense, we are describing what Kenneth Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, calls a "*timely topic*," or "commonplaces of a transitory nature" such as one would assemble into a political cartoon (62; italics in original). Toulmin's criteria, though, equip us to analyze such an idea in considerably more detail than Burke's provocative but brief sketch provides.

I'll wrap up with one more terminological comparison. Readers might characterize my description above as a mere iteration of a preexisting concept: the meme. Those readers would be right—sort of. In *The Selfish Gene*, we ought to remember, Richard Dawkins coins *meme* to refer to particulate "unit[s] of cultural transmission," analogous to but significantly different from genes (192). Philosophers like Daniel Dennett have pushed the concept further, arriving at a position similar to Toulmin's when he expands evolu-

tion into something bigger than biology (see Dennett, *From Bacteria* 205-47; *Darwin's* 335-69; Blackmore); and scholars in rhetoric and communication have begun to probe the frankly persuasive and inventive functions of memes (Shifman 122-27; Jenkins; Huntington; Hill; Wetherbee, "Picking Up"). I enjoy the comparison between memes and topoi, which highlights both the pseudo-organic proliferation of textual fragments across media ecosystems and the rhetorical utility those fragments might hold for human rhetors, and I think this terminological intersection proves exceedingly useful as we approach the increasingly fragmentary mediascape that Michael Calvin McGee famously identifies with postmodernity. However, we should cautiously avoid collapsing one term into the other. Rather, if we are to describe topoi as memes, or vice versa, we should do so in an intellectually robust way that highlights how rhetorical utility itself creates important conditions of cultural fitness; in other words, we should cautiously infuse "meme" with a rhetorical sensibility while preserving its connotations in the area of cultural evolution. Toulmin's work in evolutionary epistemology and the "other model" of topical evolution I describe here should help bring such a terminological intersection into relief.

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