Dialogue and Disputation: Towards an Ethics of Academic Discourse

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Abstract This paper considers how to harmonize the demands of good scholarship with professional and ethical courtesy towards our colleagues in written and unwritten academic work. In the nineteenth century, W.K.Clifford and William James introduced the notion of an ethics of belief: a set of quasi-moral rules governing the formation of opinions. Using the Clifford/James debate plus J.S.Mill's discussion of freedom of speech as points of departure, this paper takes some first steps towards formulating an ethics of argumentation: a set of principles governing the ways scholars critically dialogue with the views of others. Candidates for such principles in the philosopher's or logician's repertoire include the principle of charity, playing author's or devil's advocate, and injunctions against attacking 'straw man' arguments. The paper considers how to reconcile our duties towards certain intellectual positions with our duties to those persons proposing these positions.

Key Ideas

- There is such a thing as the ethics of belief: a set of quasi-moral dos or donts governing the way we form beliefs.

- The ethics of belief provides a model for developing an ethics of argumentation.

- The so-called principle of charity is an obvious candidate for a principle underlying the ethics of argumentation.

- The good intentions underlying the principle of charity sometimes lead to patronising interpretations of the arguments of other people.

- The principle of charity must be used sensitively if we are to balance the interests of arguers against the interests of the intellectual positions that people propose to us.

Discussion Question 1: How do we balance our duty to engage in inquiry against our responsibilities in handling the writings and ideas of others?

Discussion Question 2: Do our moral and professional duties extend beyond the people proposing arguments to the arguments themselves?

Discussion Question 3: Does the principle of charity in interpretation help or hinder our efforts to understand other people's positions or points of view?

Discussion Question 4: Is it possible to be too 'charitable' in interpreting the arguments of others?

This paper makes an exploratory foray into a relatively unexamined academic nook: the ethics of academic discourse. We will be posing and attempting to answer questions of the following kind. Does it make sense to speak of an ethics of argumentation? If so, how might the ethical principles governing good handling of argument shape the ways in which we as academics report and respond to the written words of other people? Are there implicit principles that we adopt in ethically conducting ourselves in relation to the words, writings and discourse of other people?

What I am hoping to achieve here under the heading of the Ethics of Argumentation finds a precedent in what has come to be known as the Ethics of Belief. An Ethics of Belief talks about what it is right or wrong to do, what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, when it comes to forming and expressing beliefs. An Ethics of Belief was most famously propounded in William Kingdom Clifford's 1877 essay 'The Ethics of Belief'.

It is a relatively small step, from recognising the existence of an ethics of belief, to recognising the existence of an ethics of argumentation and academic discourse. An ethics of argumentation does for argumentative discourse what an ethics of belief attempts to achieve in the area of belief-formation: identifying principles governing good (ethical) practice in framing and proposing arguments, plus describing appropriate behaviour to adopt when answering the arguments and reasoned opinions of other people. Both believers and arguers must go through similar intellectual labours whenever they undertake the processes of sifting, weighing and assessing evidence. Therefore, one of the questions we might expect an ethics of belief and an ethics of argumentation to answer is, what constitutes an adequate or exemplary effort at evaluating evidence? When have I done enough to 'earn' my professed opinion? Of course, there is one obvious difference between the two ethics. For whereas an ethics of belief serves to determine when (if ever) I have earned my *belief*, an ethics of argumentation serves to determine when I have done enough to establish the *conclusion of a line of reasoning*. Whereas belief implies commitment on the part of the believer, the conclusion to an argument may or may not be something that the speaker consciously subscribes to herself. Along the way to proving her main thesis, an academic might test, briefly entertain and endorse, then ultimately reject, a series of sub-arguments. We cannot expect equal intellectual commitment to every claim that is supported by argument in the course of an academic paper.[1]

Section I below discusses some of the considerations that might fall under the remit of an ethics of academic discourse. Here I consider what we understand by the terms 'academic discourse' and 'disputation'. Section II sketches our intuitive understanding of exemplary behaviour in the realm of written academic dispute. To illustrate the significance of the term 'ethics' in the phrase 'ethics of academic discourse', section III provides a brief sketch of Clifford's attempt to provide an Ethics of Belief. Philosophers working in the area of informal logic are accustomed to discussing principles governing practices in handling and responding to other people's arguments. Most commonly invoked here is the Principle of Charity (in interpreting arguments and texts); and related to this, the principles of playing

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[1] This claim is at variance with the view expressed in Schreier, Groeben and Christmann (1995:274) which suggests a sincerity condition for argumentation whereby participants in an argumentation must 'express only such opinions and convictions (and argue in their favour) which they themselves regard as correct'. Points of agreement and variation between Schreier, Groeben and Christmann's social definition and a more philosophical definition of argumentation will emerge in the discussion below. There is no tension between the two views once we realise that an academic who is considering and rejecting arguments in the course of a paper is advocating views on behalf of absent participants in an ongoing academic debate.

author's advocate and devil's advocate. Of these, the principle of charity has received widest coverage and discussion. Sections IV and V discuss popular uses of the Principle of Charity within two philosophical arenas:

(1) The arena of argument interpretation or argument reconstruction within the realm of informal logic.

(2) The area of what philosophers and social scientists following W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson call radical interpretation (Davidson) and radical translation (Quine).

Throughout these sections, I shall be considering how the principle of charity might function as a principle governing the ethics of academic discourse. Finally, Section VI briefly summarises and brings together the threads of argument.

I

Many people will have encountered some notions of informal logic through studying a short course in critical thinking or argumentation. If so, they will be familiar with the received wisdom that an argument is an attempt to provide evidence for some point of view (Groarke and Tindale, 2004:2). An argument is a set of claims some of which lend support to another claim. The claim receiving support is dubbed the conclusion to the argument–whilst the statements providing reasons for accepting a conclusion are the argument's premises.

Philosophers who define argument as offering reasons in support of a conclusion have sometimes overlooked the fact that the notion of argument functions as a social, pragmatic and rhetorical device, as well as a rational/logical one. Writing from a psycholinguistic point of view, Schreier, Groeben and Christmann (1995: 272) define an argumentation as a form of social interaction whereby

> the participants attempt to find a solution to a controversial issue by means of a partner-/listener-oriented exchange of views that is based on (*good*) *reasons and made acceptable to all participants (in a cooperative manner).*

A purely philosophical definition of argument and the definition offered by Schreier et al. do not amount to different perspectives on a single phenomenon. We cannot brush over the difference by observing that 'argumentation constitutes both a sequence of arguments – i.e. of products – and a communicative process' (Schreier et al. 1995: 273). This is because the two notions of argumentation can have mutually conflicting goals. The goal of argument as reason-giving is, in the words of Schreier et al., to create results of 'generalizability' (1995: 275). The goal of argument as a (rational and co-operative) exchange of opinion is to arrive at a conclusion that is acceptable to all parties, doing this in a way that offers relatively equal floor-time to participants to shape and express their own opinions. In other words, argument as co-operative exchange relies upon some notion of procedural justice (Schreier et al. 1995:275), a notion largely missing from the concept of argumentation as reason-giving. From a purely logical point of view, arguments which give insufficient reasons for accepting their conclusions

should not receive equal airing with those good arguments which offer compelling evidence for their conclusions. Once we have satisfied ourselves that an argument is bad, we should quickly move on to more promising forms of reason-giving.

In light of these two very different notions of argumentation, it is perhaps not surprising that recent books on informal logic and critical thinking tend to stress the *dialogic* nature of argument. Under this more recent conception of the matter, an argument is not something static on a page, but the real words of real people looking to persuade others, with the words on the page functioning as a written record of real or imagined exchanges of opinion. According to Walton (2006:1) the conclusion to an argument makes a claim that is "seen as open to doubt, and the reason for giving the reason is to remove that doubt. For Walton, "the notion of an argument is best elucidated in terms of its purpose when used in dialogue". Throughout this paper, I will call this dialogic understanding of argument *disputation*, distinguishing this from the more traditional definition of an argument.

The dialogic view of argumentation (argument as disputation) provides a better model for academic discourse than the static reasons-in-support-of-a-conclusion model. It is possible to view an argument on the page as self-contained and complete. However, to the extent she is providing reasons for her views, the academic writer is anticipating the needs of a potential audience for her writing. It is important to remember too that most academic writing is embedded in a context of previous scholarship and disputation upon a topic. In the ideal case, the prime purpose of conducting a literature review should not be to display prior reading on the topic (though for many academics, this becomes the purpose of the exercise).[2] Instead, a literature review should locate one's current contribution against the background of a particular academic debate. The purpose of academic enquiry is to show that something is in doubt or dispute, and to find ways to resolve that doubt or dispute. Any published academic paper is the writer's contribution to a moment in that debate. The fact that this contribution is frozen in time in a written article should not distract us from the essentially dialogic nature of academic enquiry.

Concentrating upon the dialogic nature of argument helpfully reminds us of the different stakeholders whose interests we must take into account when deciding how to ethically discharge our duties as writing and disputing academics. These stakeholders in the arena of academic debate include

- The writer herself

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[2] And perhaps not even this much. Harris (1994:440) deplores a style of citation whereby authors "follow the writing of an ordinary sentence with a string of names in parentheses that refer the reader without comment to a set of texts listed at the end of the article". Harris theorises that "such listings of names are a kind of paying of rent, a granting of rights to certain terms or ideas, as well as proof that the author has done some homework." As well as denying to the writers listed the rights of "agents making claims whose particulars are now being disputed, extended, or qualified", "the names in parentheses serve as a metonymy for a bank of knowledge that the author hopes somehow to enlarge". Of course, because this style of citation fails to engage with the texts it invokes, it fails to position the current writer's contribution within a larger debate.

- The person or persons whose views she is amending, extending, or replacing with her own

- The immediate academic audience of the writing

- Our students

- The wider public

- The argument or theoretical position being argued for.

I shall have more to say about the role and interests of these various stakeholders as the paper proceeds. All of these seem uncontroversial bar the last. Some might wonder whether an argument or a theoretical position is the sort of thing that we can be said to have duties towards. In his discussion of freedom of speech, John Stuart Mill comes close to suggesting that we have a duty to the opposing argument in any dispute:

> Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition …. they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and, consequently, they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess…. Nor is [the truth] ever really known but to those who have attended equally and impartially to both sides and endeavoured to see the reasons of both in the strongest light. So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects that, if opponents of all-important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up. (Mill, 1978:35-36).

What Mill presents as a duty to the argument itself - a duty to envisage and anticipate the best reasons that can be put for the opinion opposed to your own - really collapses into an indirect duty to the believer (to provide a firm foundation for one's own belief, by equipping oneself with the means to defend that belief) and to an opponent's argument (to represent that argument fairly and fully before disagreeing with it). The exercise Mill describes here of conjuring up an imaginary opponent suggests that the practice of presenting carefully and fully the arguments we oppose en route to refuting these, can also service the needs of students whom we must train to negotiate the quagmires of academic discourse.

II

As we saw in the previous section, we operate with two different notions of argumentation: the rational/logical and the rhetorical/social. There is a sense in which writers of academic papers (philosophers included!) are engaging in both notions of argumentation. A paper cannot be well-reasoned unless it positions itself within a debate, via a well-framed literature review that fairly reports intellectual positions previously taken by other academics on the same or similar

topics. Attention to the rhetorical/social dimension of academic writing demands that we operate with some notion of good conduct in academic writing.

What constitutes good conduct in academic writing? In a rare paper providing advice to those looking to publish a refutation of a scientific paper, Hyman neatly summarises good ethical practice in academic refutation:

> A good reply is one that amends, elaborates, or otherwise clarifies and expands issues raised by the target article without disparaging the contributions of the original author (Hyman, 1995:182).

Hyman's paper discusses the 'dos' and 'donts' of written disputation. In *passim*, Hyman identifies a number of potential motives of persons writing rebuttals. I list these motives in descending order of intellectual and moral merit: [3]

(a) To add to the understanding of an issue

(b) To make a constructive contribution to the topic of the original paper

(c) To persuade interested, but previously neutral readers, to your position

(d) To set the record straight

(e) To clear one's name

(f) To demonstrate your intellectual superiority to your opponent

(g) To humiliate your adversary

Those looking for normative principles governing the good conduct of academic discourse will not find these in Hyman's paper. This is because what Hyman offers is practical advice, based upon personal experience, for authors looking to have their refutations published. Any principles drawn from Hyman's paper constitute what Immanuel Kant dubbed hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives.[4] That is to say, Hyman's principles will not be rationally binding upon all would-be moral agents; these rules will only influence the actions of those who possess a particular desire. So following Hyman, we might say: "If you desire to have your refutation published in an academic journal, then you ought to write a paper which makes a constructive contribution to the topic of the original paper and adds to the understanding of the original issue, with a view to persuading interested but previously neutral readers to your position. You ought not to be motivated purely by the desire to set the record straight and clear your own

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[3] Some readers may be uncertain that motives (a) to (d) reflect a descending order of merit. The ordering here implies that interests in persuading to one's position, and setting the record straight, are more personal and therefore less 'academically worthy' than the relatively disinterested desires to add to the understanding of an issue or to make a constructive contribution to a topic.

[4] "Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills (or that one may will)….. A hypothetical imperative thus says only that an action is good for some purpose or other, either *possible* or *actual.*" By contrast, a categorical imperative is a moral rule that commands a form of conduct "without being based on, and conditioned by, any further purpose to be attained by a certain line of conduct" (Kant, 2002:44, 46). Thus a moral rule is a categorical command to 'do x' regardless of the particular desires or motives of the agent.

name, by writing a paper which demonstrates your intellectual superiority to your opponent in a way which humiliates your opponent." To the extent that all academics may be presumed to share the broad aims which Hyman describes (to find an audience, and have their opinions recognised through publication in a way which leads to career advancement), this suggests that Hyman's imperative should be rationally binding upon all academics. Alas, in the real world, people often lose sight of these worthy goals. Too many academics engaged in disputation allow themselves to be governed by motives (d) through (g); and for this reason, we perhaps require real rules and principles to regulate the bounds of decent behaviour in disputation.

Some confirmation that Hyman is articulating our intuitive sense of good argumentative conduct can be found in the empirical study undertaken by Schreier et al. (1995). In this study, subjects were asked to evaluate rhetorical argumentative strategies according to unfairness and to classify them into groups. *Inter alia,* Scheier et al.'s eleven-cluster solution offers the following standards of unfair argumentation:

8. Do not, even by negligence, discredit other participants.

9. Do not intentionally act towards your adversary in the matter at hand as though he were your personal enemy.

10. Do not intentionally interact with others in such a way as to impede their participation.

In what follows, I will adopt Hyman's recommendation as a broad outline of the territory to be covered by an ethics of academic writing, and a description of the broad destination our enquiry should lead to. To paraphrase his summary, adding reference to good and bad motives for publication,

> Good academic discourse is writing that adds to the understanding of an issue and makes a constructive contribution to the topic of a previous paper by amending, elaborating, or otherwise clarifying and expanding issues raised by the target article with a view to persuading interested, but previously neutral readers, to your position. Such writing achieves all of this without disparaging the contributions of the original author(s).

Hyman's paper describes nothing more or less than our sense of what constitutes fair discussion for the purposes of academic disputation. As such, Hyman's paper offers a clear sense of what we believe to be the ideal in academic writing. However, the hard work lies in finding rules and principles to enforce this behavioural ideal. At the end of chapter two of *On Liberty,* in a discussion that mirrors much of the ground covered by Hyman, John Stuart Mill considers the view that the limits of freedom of expression of opinions should coincide with our notion of what constitutes fair discussion. Mill notes the difficulty of determining where the bounds of fair discussion should be placed.[5] If we are governed by the

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[5] The difficulty of specifying the limits of fair discussion points to a weakness in Schreier et al.'s specification of four conditions that contributions to an argumentation should meet if they are to count as both rational and co-operative (1995: 273-275). Conditions 3 and 4 are 'justice on the content level: arguments must be just towards other participants' and 'procedural justice/communicativity'

thought that a fair attack on an opponent is one which does not cause offence, then Mill points out that "offence is given whenever the attack on an opinion is telling and powerful", a point Hyman attests through his personal experience (Mill, 1859:50; Hyman, 1995:178).

Arguably, the ideal that Hyman describes applies not simply to cases of intellectual disputation, but to good discussion and discourse in a broader sense. This suggests that the rules governing academic discourse might prove to be nothing more or less than the rules of good discourse, period. To help understand what the rules of good disputation would look like, I now explore the parallels between an ethics of argumentation and an ethics of belief, by considering Clifford's famous essay on the Ethics of Belief.

III

Prima facie, there are three different dimensions along which we might be tempted to judge a belief; and therefore three possible sources for the subject matter of an ethics of belief. These dimensions are:

1. *The matter of belief.* The matter of belief describes the what-believed: whatever follows the word 'that' when we report the content of a belief. Thus when we say "She believes that the earth is flat", the clause 'the earth is flat' describes the content or matter of her belief.

2. *The manner of belief,* where this describes the process or method by which the belief was acquired.

3. *The manner of expression*, describing where or when, on what occasions, we choose to share our beliefs with other people.

Starting with J.S.Mill, it is a doctrine of modern liberalism that it is not the belief held, but the manner of its expression, that makes the believer morally culpable.[6] Viewed as a proposition or thing said, the content of my belief can be judged true or false, but not moral or immoral. The language of moral culpability takes hold in the area of belief only when we think about the *manner* in which we acquire belief (responsibly or irresponsibly; carelessly or carefully; scrupulously or unscrupulously) and the *occasions* upon which *we choose to express beliefs*. This suggests that as a first approximation, we wish to say that the proper subject matter of an ethics of belief is 2. In other words, an ethics of belief is an ethical assessment of the activities of belief-formation and belief-expression, as opposed to an ethical assessment of the *content* of what is believed. Clifford does not so

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whereby 'all participants must equally have the opportunity to contribute towards a solution' to the point in dispute. To this writer at least, it is not clear how justice on the 'content level' differs from procedural justice. If content level justice amounts to the view that we should not misrepresent the meaning or logical force of our interlocutors' arguments, then Mill's concerns re fairness in discussion become relevant.

[6] Degenhardt (1998:333) suggests that "at first glance, the idea of an ethics of belief (content) may seem unattractive – all right for medieval inquisitors or for modern advocates of political correctness but hardly palatable to enthusiasts for liberal democratic values."

much condemn people for the beliefs they hold, as for the manner in which they acquire their beliefs.[7]

W.K.Clifford set the stakes for ethically acquired belief very high when he wrote that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (Clifford, 1947:77). According to Clifford, our prime epistemic obligation is to withhold belief wherever we detect an insufficiency of evidence. Some commentators would interpret a Cliffordian position as simultaneously obliging us to *commit* to belief in the presence of sufficient evidence. This implies that withholding belief from insufficiently determined propositions is the same thing as forming belief in the presence of sufficient or compelling evidence.[8] If we treat these as the same, we are attributing to Clifford the position that we should be led wherever the evidence takes us. However, it is by no means clear that these amount to the same thing. If for no other reason, the fact that Clifford couches his overriding thesis re belief in negative terms, as duties of withholding belief, leads one to assume that a Cliffordian could fulfil his epistemic obligations by withholding belief wherever there is insufficient evidence, whilst as a matter of policy maintaining his epistemic caution to such an extent that he allows his belief to remain underdetermined by otherwise impeccably strong evidence.

What Clifford offers is an extreme form of the view known as evidentialism, which says that belief in a factual issue may legitimately be based only (solely and wholly) on considerations of evidential fact (Meiland, 1980:15). The notion that belief should be based on sufficient evidence is at one level uncontroversial. Meiland describes this doctrine as "one of the cornerstones of modern Western thought" (Meiland, 1980:15); whilst Gale (1980:1) dubs Clifford's principle 'the Scientific Credo'. However, the vehemence with which Clifford states his principle[9] masks the fact that in making this claim, Clifford fails to offer any realistic practical guide or rule of thumb that will aid in identifying our duties in the area of belief-formation. This is because believing on insufficient evidence can correspond with a number of specific failures of our epistemic duty.

(1) In the first place, forming belief in the absence of sufficient evidence may be a matter of *believing too hastily*. We believe too hastily wherever we form hasty generalisations, or where we justify isolated beliefs through nothing more

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[7] Dagenhardt (1998:333) distinguishes *an ethics of belief (content)* from *an ethics of belief (manner)*. What Dagenhardt places under the heading of *an ethics of belief (content)* includes examples of racist views, and other views people generally find to be unacceptable. Whether the moral offence associated with these beliefs reflects their content, or whether the offence arises from the manner or occasion of their expression, is a matter beyond the scope of this paper to decide.

[8] Thus Meiland (1980:15) reduces evidentialism (the doctrine held by Clifford) to two normative principles: (i) one ought not to believe on insufficient evidence; and (ii) one ought to believe whatever is backed by sufficient evidence. This paragraph challenges the view that (i) entails (ii) or that (ii) is tantamount to (i), on the ground that (ii) involves greater epistemic commitment, on the part of the would-be believer, than does (i).

[9] Degenhardt (1998:335) describes Clifford's ethics of belief as simultaneously 'bland' and 'demanding'.

substantial than an appeal to authority. Cases of appeal to authority are cases where we choose to believe something because the source of that belief happens to be an established authority figure. Those who accept urban myths demonstrate an extreme version of the latter, when they uncritically accept what many people wrongly regard an adequate transmission line of evidence: the word of a "friend of a friend of a friend".

(2) Clifford's essay introduces the story of a fictitious shipowner who doubted the seaworthiness of his craft but managed nonetheless to persuade himself that all was well:

> He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also…. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart … and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales. (Clifford, p.70)

Clifford's imaginary shipowner's fault is one of *evidence suppression,* for he formed his belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation.

(3)   Further cases of believing upon insufficient evidence involve a form of *belief inertia*. This describes what happens when an individual indulges the natural human tendency to protect the beliefs one already possesses, by not allowing these to come into conflict with contravening evidence. Thus Clifford describes the individual type who

> holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it. (Clifford, 1877: 74)

Whereas Clifford talks about believing on insufficient evidence, most of his examples would be better described as cases of *evidence suppression*. This is not surprising, since the notion that we might lack sufficient evidence upon which to form our belief goes against our experience of modern life. Far from having too little evidence at our disposal with which to form adequate belief, we often find ourselves weighing up too much information. In a world of increasing technocratic complexity where we have access to so much information, it is impossible for any one individual to know or investigate many topics in real depth. The proliferation of information in recent times therefore has created a *division of cognitive labour*, whereby we trust recognised experts to investigate particular subject areas on our behalf. In many cases, this division of cognitive labour extends beyond the lay-person to the semi-expert.[10]

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[10] Hyman (1995:178) notes that even the readers of journals are not interested in the minutiae of technical detail, but are content to trust the handling of such details to the disputants themselves.

The presence of a proliferation of experts and proliferation of evidence raises uncertainty in the lay-person's mind re the relative weight to assign to different principles and lines of evidence. Current debates on global warming are a good illustration of the perplexity that may arise as we read the views of so-called 'experts'. A recent review of Ian Plimer's book *Heaven and Earth* describes well the current layperson's dilemma.[11]

In recommending that individuals have a duty to investigate the grounds of their beliefs for themselves, both Clifford and Mill apparently defy this principle of the *division of cognitive labour.* The reason for this denial is because both Mill and Clifford see risks in failing to think matters through for ourselves. For Mill, the risks primarily are to the individual, whose failure to confront the full position of his opponents would leave him ill-equipped to defend his beliefs in the face of opposition,[12] but also leave the individual with no real understanding of the nuances of his own position. What Mill describes in the quote given above are risks which seem real to academics as opposed to laypeople. For Clifford even moreso than for Mill, there is a risk to society as a whole whenever we fail to adequately form our beliefs. This is because Clifford stresses the social consequences of belief, the fact that belief is not an individual possession, but something impacting upon all of humanity:

> Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age…..

> It is not only the leader of men, statesman, philosopher, or poet, that owes this bounden duty to mankind…. Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces. No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe. (Clifford, 1947:74-5)

Beliefs have social consequences and for that reason, must be held 'ethically', on the basis of the best evidence to be obtained through conscientious investigation (Hollinger, 1997:76). Society as a whole pays for lax standards of belief. Clifford is unequivocal on this point: the person who fails to scrutinise his beliefs commits an offence against society, and that offence is tantamount to 'theft':

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[11] According to the review,

> Plimer sets out to refute the scientific consensus that human emissions of CO_2 have changed the climate. He states in his acknowledgements that the book evolved from a dinner in London with three young lawyers who believed the consensus. As Plimer writes: "Although these three had more than adequate intellectual material to destroy the popular paradigm, they had neither the scientific knowledge nor the scientific training to pull it apart stitch by stitch. This was done at dinner."

Not surprisingly, the reviewer (Ashley, 2009) goes on to throw doubt upon Plimer's claim that he could demonstrate this much over dinner:

> If Plimer is right and he is able to show that the work of literally thousands of oceanographers, solar physicists, biologists, atmospheric scientists, geologists, and snow and ice researchers during the past 100 years is fundamentally flawed, then it would rank as one of the greatest discoveries of the century and would almost certainly earn him a Nobel prize. This is the scale of Plimer's claim.

[12] See quotation from Mill in Section I above (p.4).

> If the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves [*sic*] by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind (Clifford, 1947:75).

According to Bergeron's interpretation, Clifford's ethics of belief begins from the premise that we have a *prima facie* obligation to avoid risk to ourselves and others. Clifford condemns lax habits in the formation of belief because there are real risks to society as a whole wherever we fail to form adequate beliefs; and this means any policy of forming our beliefs lightly contradicts our duty to humanity to minimize the risks of our actions (Bergeron, 2006:75).

Clifford's and Mill's essays have a very dated air to modern ears. As Dagenhardt notes, Clifford's essay belongs to a culture "where truth and knowledge were taken seriously and had not become words to be put in apologetic scare quotes" (Dagenhardt, 1998:335). In a world of relativised truth and belief, we have grown inured to the possibility of real diversity of opinions; and now we only hope to exercise control over the circumstances in which these differences are expressed. As a result, people today are more exercised by the rules governing belief expression (i.e. identifying those contexts where it is or isn't suitable to express certain beliefs) and less concerned to identify rules governing the process of belief formation. Yet however strident we might find the expression of Clifford's and Mill's views, that stridency of tone points to the high moral stakes that some people believe are involved in belief formation. Whilst the way in which he expresses his views may seem quaint to us, nonetheless Clifford's discussion of an ethics of belief points the way to the forms of language we would expect to find in an ethics of academic discourse (talk of duties and what we must or must not, should or should not do).

IV

Clifford's ethics of belief utilizes the language of *duty* when describing the formation of our beliefs. In a similar way, an ethics of academic discourse should specify our duties as good disputants. And, although Clifford's essay offered little advice re how we might meet that duty, ideally an ethics of disputation should provide some practical principles that will help us to meet our duties *qua* academic disputants. Just as Clifford described the policies that should inform our manner of believing, so too an ethics of disputation should offer policies which shape the manner of our reporting and commenting upon the viewpoints of other academics.

With a little rewording, Hyman's description of the terrain of disputation generates a description of the 'duties' of an academic writer:

> Those engaged in disputation have a duty to write something which adds to the understanding of an issue and makes a constructive contribution to the topic of a previous paper by amending, elaborating, or otherwise clarifying and expanding issues raised by the target article with a view to persuading interested, but previously neutral readers, to their position. Academic

disputants have a further duty to achieve all of this without disparaging the contributions of the original author(s).

This still leaves us with the task of describing the principles that guide us in the pursuit of this duty. Given the prominent role played by argument in academic discourse, it makes sense to start looking for the ethical principles governing academic writing by considering the rules which govern the handling of arguments. Within the realm of logic, we find a number of such principles of a more or less formal nature. Candidate for rules of good logical conduct include the injunction to try and understand your opponent's argument, rather than attacking a *straw man* argument or weak imitation of your opponent's view; plus the injunction to attack the position and not the person (i.e. avoid argument *ad hominem*).[13] Perhaps the informal principle of good argument that has received most philosophical attention is the so-called Principle of Charity. The remainder of this paper focuses upon this principle to see what lessons it holds for an ethics of disputation.

In its broadest terms, the Principle of Charity is a principle of leniency in judging others (Hyman, 1995:181), which calls upon us to give people 'the benefit of the doubt'. As such, the principle of charity has application in various walks of life. Because the person operating the principle of charity in a given context will generally have some aim or goal in mind the use of this principle can be differentiated according to the underlying purpose of the person who applies it. For example, in the case of a primary school teacher the principle of charity might amount to the injunction that, until she has evidence to the contrary, she may assume that children generally tell the truth. In the political arena the principle might tell us to excuse the manner in which a political conviction is expressed (i.e. the vehemence of the sentiment), and attend only to the policy or practical proposal offered.

Within a philosophical context, the Principle of Charity is applied by people whose primary academic goal is to understand and evaluate arguments, positions and points of view. Within this context, the Principle of Charity is at the very least a form of academic good manners in the matter of interpreting arguments. All things being equal and until we have evidence to the contrary, we assume that the person who is arguing with us or presenting a case sincerely holds a coherent position and also can offer some reasons for that position. When a philosopher attacks that position, she first takes pains to ensure that she understands the position properly and hasn't misrepresented it (by arguing against a 'straw man' rather than the full position). Secondly, she probes the strength of the reasons given for holding that position, but also the consistency of the claims made within the position. Exposing inconsistencies is done, not with a view to scoring points off someone or making them look bad, but with a view to advancing the sum of human knowledge for everyone, and not only the person whose view is being attacked.

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[13] For a quick overview of good versus bad uses of ad hominem argument, see Warburton, 1996:3-4. For fuller discussions, see Groarke and Tindale, 2004:369-372; Tindale, 2007:81-97; and Walton, 2006:122-128.

Viewed as a tool for logical interpretation, the Principle of Charity may be formulated in different ways. According to Alec Fisher (2004:17-18):

> [the Principle of Charity]says that if interpreting as reasoning a passage which is not *obviously* reasoning yields only bad arguments, assume it is *not* reasoning. (The rationale for this approach is that we are interested in finding out the truth about things rather than in scoring points off people.)

Quite often, the thought underlying the application of this principle is to ensure fairness in attributing positions to other people. Groarke and Tindale (2004:18) and Tindale (2007) treat the intention underlying the Principle of Charity as one of not misinterpreting other people's arguments in a way that misrepresents their intentions (e.g. finding bad or fallacious arguments that the person never intended to bring forward).

Few of the arguments encountered in daily life take the form of well-structured strings of premises which logically compel assent to their conclusions. Most 'argument' we hear is truncated, offered in snatches with incomplete lines of reasoning apparently supporting conclusions; or else we discover sets of reasons in support of conclusions which we can't identify. An example of an argument with missing premises would be:

> Everyone should learn self-hypnosis because it's one of the best ways to reduce stress.[14]

The inference from the premise ('self-hypnosis is one of the best ways to reduce stress') to the conclusion ('everyone should learn self-hypnosis') can only be made via the bridging assumption 'reducing stress is a worthwhile goal for everyone'.[15]

In other words, many or most natural language 'arguments' are really enthymemes, incomplete arguments with missing (unstated) premises or conclusions, or both (Walton and Reed, 2005:339). Walton suggests "an enthymeme, in current usage, is an argument that has one or more premises, or possibly a conclusion, not explicitly stated in the text, but that needs to have these propositions explicitly stated to extract the complete argument from the text." We can call the missing premise(s) or conclusion(s) *nonexplicit assumptions* (Walton, 2001:93). In other words, for much of the time we are responding to arguments, the task of interpretation turns into that of argument *reconstruction*. And where more than one interpretation or reconstruction is possible, the Principle of Charity comes into its own, giving us grounds to choose between competing interpretations of an argument (Walton & Reed, 2005:341).

One extreme approach to argument reconstruction is the view known as Deductivism in logic. Deductivism says that all naturally occurring arguments

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[14] The example is from Walton and Reed (2005:349).

[15] As is the case here, quite often the missing premise in an argument is a statement about the things we find valuable. For many people (including academics) the things we value are so self-evident to us that we don't think to state these explicitly in the course of making an argument.

should be understood as more or less successful attempts at formulating deductive arguments (Groarke, 1999:2, 1). A deductive argument is one where it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. This view lays up a certain notion of argumentative success. Fully successful arguments are all and only the deductively valid ones (i.e. arguments where we feel compelled to believe the conclusion wherever the premises happen to be true). All other argument types, whether they be (unsuccessful) deductive forms, or inductive arguments or defeasible ones, fall short of this standard and so are said to be *invalid.*[16]

Under Deductivism, the act of argument reconstruction involves identifying non-deductive arguments as *failed* deductive arguments. These are treated as *enthymemes*, arguments with one or more suppressed premises which must be identified to help reconstruct the arguer's real 'deductively valid' intent. The assumption is made (via the Principle of Charity) that all arguers are interested in one thing – producing successful arguments. The only thing holding them back in this respect is their capacity to execute such arguments. Had they the capacity to do so, all arguers would produce deductively valid arguments, and it is the task of the argument interpreter to charitably uncover this intention. The two things holding them back are either lack of skill in logic or else the paucity of the materials to hand for constructing premises.

The would-be Deductivist justifies this approach to argument reconstruction with the thought that

> Any arguer is committed to the statement that 'If the premises of my argument are true, then the conclusion is true.' This follows directly from the implications of the speech acts 'argument' and 'assertion.' For an arguer who argues for some conclusion C on the basis of some set of premises purports to believe both that C is true and that her proposed premises *justify* this belief. (Groarke, 1999:6)

When faced with arguments that are not transparently deductive, the would-be deductivist looks for acceptable premises that will fill out that argument (Groarke, 1999:9). The pay-off for adopting a deductivist approach to argumentation, recognizing assumptions as unexpressed premises, is that we further "the dialectical exchange which is the key to resolving differences of opinion" (Groarke, 1999:9). However, what do we say to the people whose views we are reinterpreting in this way? What is the preference of our opponents in dialectical exchanges: to be credited with potentially valid deductive arguments they never made, utilizing premises that they never explicitly (and perhaps never implicitly)

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[16] In addition to Groarke (1999), Skyrms (1966) offers something like an early statement of proto-deductivism when he denies the doctrine that there are two different types of arguments, inductive and deductive, dividing the world of arguments between them in such a way that every argument falls under one and only one category. Instead, there is only one sort of argument, and this is evidenced by the fact that all inductively strong arguments are deductively valid. For Skyrms, deductive and inductive arguments are not distinguished by the different types of arguments with which they deal, but by different standards against which they evaluate arguments. For another description of Deductivism, see Blair (1988:17).

accepted?[17] Or would these people prefer to be credited with flawed arguments that flow from their avowed statements? The gain to the 'dialectical exchange' may entail a real loss to the person whose views are charitably misrepresented. In looking for the strongest and best theoretical positions, we stand to lose sight of real people and real positions.

Tindale (2007) suggests that someone invoking a Principle of Charity decides "that it would be unfair to attribute an argument to an individual when it is unclear that the person intended the argument and the attributed argument would be clearly fallacious." Argument reconstruction is a useful pedagogic tool, and one which helps the student see how cases can be built up, and premises aligned to support conclusions. However, there are real sensitivities involved wherever argument interpretation is taken to the extreme described under deductivism. Reconstructions should be handled responsibly, and in such a way that we don't patronise the individuals into whose mouths we are putting words. The person reconstructing an argument must ask herself, which would she prefer to have attributed to her? Would she prefer to be credited with the intention to produce a deductive argument that she lacked the wit or the materials to complete? Or would she prefer to be assigned the intention to produce a complete but logically flawed argument? And does the fact that an argument offers reasons for its conclusion that are less than compelling make that argument in some way 'deficient' or 'flawed'? The question that all of this raises is, 'whose arguments' does the reconstruction reveal? Informal logicians wielding the principle of charity run the risk of putting the interests of the argument before the interests of the arguer. It may be more appropriate to do this in the classroom, as part of an informal logic demonstration, than it would be to do this in an academic paper, with Hyman's words ringing in our ears ("academic disputants have a duty to write something which adds to the understanding of an issue .... without disparaging the contributions of the original author(s).")

V

As well as playing a role in the realm of informal logic, the principle of charity will be familiar from discussions of radical translation. As discussed by W.V.O.Quine and Davidson, the radical translator is the field anthropologist confronted with an alien tribe speaking an unfamiliar language. *En route* to studying the tribe and their ways, the anthropologist sets about devising a translation manual for the tribesmen's language. A translation manual will assign a one-to-one mapping between sentences of our language and sentences of the target language (Risjord, 2000: 36). In cases of radical translation the target language is totally unknown and the translator cannot interrogate the natives as a means of finding points of agreement. Instead, the translator must construct his manual using the

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[17] What we have here is a clear violation of the social notion of argumentation identified in Section I above. See pages 2-3 above.

behavioural evidence that comes with the natives assenting or dissenting from sentences in various environmental circumstances (Henderson, 1988:356). In such circumstances, where the translator has nothing but the behaviour of the natives to guide the mapping of sentences, he has little choice but to operate with some principle of charity in assigning beliefs to the natives he studies:

> What matters is this: if all we know is what sentences a speaker holds true, and we cannot assume that his language is our own, then we cannot take even a first step towards interpretation without knowing or assuming a great deal about the speaker's beliefs. Since knowledge of beliefs comes only with the ability to interpret words, the only possibility at the start is to assume general agreement on beliefs. (Davidson, 1984:196)

In the context of radical translation and radical interpretation, the Principle of Charity functions as a criterion allowing us to choose between variant translations or interpretations. Where one or more of rival translations attribute apparent irrationality to the subjects under study, by identifying a set of mutually incompatible beliefs held by those subjects, choosing between translations or interpretations becomes a sensitive but tricky operation. According to Davidson, the Principle of Charity "counsels us quite generally to prefer theories of interpretation that minimize disagreement" (Davidson, 1984:xvii) or "maximize agreement" (Davidson, 1984:101) between ourselves and those we are interpreting. Given the indefinitely large number of sentences we might find ourselves assenting to, Risjord suggests interpreting the Davidsonian Principle of Charity as the injunction to minimize disagreement (Risjord, 2000: 39). As such, the Principle of Charity becomes the principle of minimal disagreement, enjoining us to 'choose the translation that minimizes disagreement between the interpreter and native speakers' (Risjord, 2000: 39). Davidson's principle of charity exhorts us to interpret another speaker's words in such a way that under the assigned interpretation, what the speaker asserts is true by our own lights (Ebbs, 2002: 525) and the beliefs of the alien other resemble what our own beliefs would be in the circumstances. In what is only a slight departure from Davidson's view, Quine imagines a radical translator constructing translation manuals in a way that (a) saves the obvious, and (b) leads us to attribute psychologically plausible beliefs to the natives (Henderson, 1988:363).

Both Quine and Davidson stress that translation and interpretation are impossible unless we accept some variant of the principle of charity which assures us of the rationality of the persons we study. Thus, whatever else it does, the principle of charity invites the would-be translator to assume that the natives operate under the same rules of logic as herself. As Risjord points out (2000: 38), this runs the risk of exaggerating the natural logical ability of human beings, many of whom lack the capacity to maintain large sets of mutually consistent beliefs. As Quine pointed out, if a native culture were operating under a prelogical mindset, we would not be in a position to discover this as long as we were applying the Principle of Charity (Quine 1960: 58).

 The rationale underpinning the use of the Principle of Charity is plain. Davidson makes the assumption that the anthropologist hopes to really understanding the alien tribe, their way of life and how they think. This involves assuming (until we have evidence to the contrary) that these people share with us a number of beliefs, and that we will discover more points of agreement than disagreement in our respective world views. Davidson stresses the notion that any points of real disagreement between cultures can only emerge once we have focused upon

points of similarity across their worldviews or positions. For Davidson, the translator's purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible and this will only happen where there is a foundation in agreement (Davidson, 1984:196-7). So the field anthropologist who fails to operate with the principle of charity (by stressing the alienness, the 'otherness' of these people) will actually defeat the purpose of the exercise of trying to understand what is unique to these people. This goal, of understanding other people's views, is one that we as academics readily share with the radical translator. Like the would-be radical translator, academics who uncharitably misrepresent the beliefs of others engage in behaviour that is self-defeating. For uncharitable reconstructions of others' views either offer us no opponents to argue with; or else these give us opponents so unlike ourselves and so irrational that they are not worth arguing with. This suggests that academics in search of real opponents and real theoretical positions to dispute would be well- advised to adopt some principle of charity as part of the process of disputation.

Davidson is confident that we can attribute rational consistency of belief to strangers; and this is simply because we have no reason to count anyone as having beliefs unless we can construct his beliefs as forming dense and consistent clusters (Davidson 1984:200; Glüer, 2006:345). For according to Davidson,

> To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about. (Davidson, 1984:153)

> The more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus. (Davidson, 1984:168)

Given the holistic nature of belief content, massive error becomes impossible – a fact which, in the minds of its defenders, confirms the correctness of the Principle of Charity as a criterion of radical translation (Risjord, 2000: 43).

As applied in the realm of radical translation/interpretation, the Principle of Charity is not without problems. Henderson (1987:226) argues that Davidson's use of the principle methodologically rules out the possibility of serious irrationality or serious disagreement on the part of alien cultures. This is because any radical interpreter operating with the principle of charity who found himself attributing inconsistent beliefs to the tribesmen would abandon that particular manual and begin again. For Henderson, the notion that there could be no serious disagreement between ourselves and alien cultures is both empirically implausible and contradicts the findings of the social scientist working on the ground. Contrary to what Davidson argues, some cultures may be radically unlike us in their presuppositions; and we would have no way of recognising and respecting this as long as we were operating with Davidson's understanding of the Principle of Charity. Risjord argues that the Principle of Charity functions best as a tool in the early stages of translation, but is of limited utility as translation becomes 'mature and broadly based' (Risjord 2000:38 ff.).This is because, in the earliest stages of translation, it is correct to assume that any 'mistakes' (in the form of logically inconsistent clusters of belief-statements generated by the translator) are the translator's own, rather than those of native speakers. However, as

Risjord points out, even competent speakers make mistakes; and so the presumption that a translation must always eliminate native speaker error is dubious (Risjord, 2000: 45).

Ebbs makes the following observations regarding the concept of charity:

> Unlike trust, charity is something we think of ourselves as exercising only if we take ourselves to be in a position superior in some respects to the position of the person to whom we aim to be charitable. Given Davidson's conception of what a theory of interpretation is and how such a theory can be tested, *we have no choice but to regard ourselves as ultimate authorities on truth,* and to interpret others in such a way that what they say or write is compatible with what we already believe. (Ebbs, 2002:539; emphasis in original).

Davidson's use of the principle of charity in the context of radical translation raises once again a problem encountered in the previous section. The problem is briefly this: how far can we plausibly go in putting words and beliefs into the mouths of others? In imposing maximal rationality upon our opponents, do we make them so much like ourselves that we cannot capture genuine difference?[18] If our own set of beliefs determines the bounds of rationality and consistency for persons of other cultures or different intellectual backgrounds, does this rule out the possibility that we could ever learn anything from these people? As we found in the previous section, the principle of charity can always be taken to a point where it becomes a tool for patronising those whom it was meant to aid.

The two notions of the Principle of Charity developed here – as a heuristic device in the interpretation of arguments, and as a criterion of acceptable translation – are of limited applicability in the arena of academic disputation. In both cases – translating arguments or investigating beliefs in a more or less alien society – there are important asymmetries with standard academic discourse. As previously mentioned, the task of radical interpretation raises particular sensitivities related to intercultural contact. In the context of radical translation, the would-be translator is an outsider and cultural interloper. The lack of a pre-existing translation manual dictates that where our efforts to understand another culture are mistaken, those we interpret lack the means to set the record straight. It is therefore incumbent upon the would-be radical interpreter to 'get it right' the first time, and to err on the side of caution by laying potential errors at the door of the interpreter rather than the interpretee. By contrast, those writing within the academic community always enjoy the prospect of opening up a debate, and one with people who are their equals or who can otherwise stand up for themselves. The proliferation of academic journals means that academics enjoy the right of reply, and can set the record straight on behalf of themselves and others. It is because the subjects of radical translation are not (yet) in that fortunate position relative to ourselves that we must impose unusually stringent standards of fairness in our dealing with alien others.

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[18] Quine's variant of the principle of charity directs us to attribute to alien others beliefs which are psychologically plausible where this is a matter of plausibility-for-the-subjects, not plausibility-for-us (Henderson, 1988:359, 358). As such, the objection raised here does not apply to Quine's use of the principle of charity.

Radical translation/interpretation is predicated on a scenario whereby the people whose views we are dealing with either are not entirely like ourselves; or else we as yet lack the evidence that would allow us to presume that these people are like ourselves. By contrast, most academic discourse is between people entirely like ourselves. To assume that our academic interlocutors or audience are unlike ourselves constitutes a form of academic bad manners. Where there was a richly-textured background context of assumptions unavailable to us, our attempts to recreate and respond to an original paper or argument would be doomed to failure. However, academic writers themselves almost always form part of that rich contextual background. Where there has been a genuine failure to understand the full context of interpretation, any errors of interpretation will be quickly corrected in the ensuing literature.

To some extent, similar comments apply when moving from the arena of radical translation to that of informal logic. Here the Principle of Charity enjoins us to attribute the best possible arguments to an opponent, even where this involves reconstructing an argument using assumptions that are not explicitly stated. This procedure is no doubt regularly followed in the informal logic classroom, where students new to logic require assistance in dealing with argument and learning to make their reasoning explicit. However, helpful measures that win the gratitude of undergraduate students would receive a somewhat different reception if applied to the written output of one's colleagues! What seems helpful in one context only runs the risk of patronising (belittling) our peers.

VI

This paper set out to identify and delimit the proper subject matter of an ethics of academic discourse. We discovered the territory that such an ethic must range across in Hyman's practical suggestions for those writing refutations. Recasting Hyman's words slightly revealed our primary duties in the area of disputation:

> Those engaged in disputation have a duty to write something which adds to the understanding of an issue and makes a constructive contribution to the topic of a previous paper by amending, elaborating, or otherwise clarifying and expanding issues raised by the target article with a view to persuading interested, but previously neutral readers, to their position. Academic disputants have a further duty to achieve all of this without disparaging the contributions of the original author(s).

This paper also speculated where we might go in search of the principles governing fair academic discussion and good disputation. In order to achieve this, we considered some of the rules underpinning the good use of argument:

- You should attack intellectual opponents in such a way that you do not cause offence. (J.S.Mill)

- In discussing the views and arguments of others, we should operate under some form of the principle of charity.

These principles were found to be ultimately inadequate in different ways. We also noted important asymmetries between the arenas in which the Principle of Charity is typically employed and the arena of academic discourse. These asymmetries raise some doubts re the usefulness of this principle as part of an ethics of academic discourse. At the very least, we should exercise extreme caution in applying the Principle of Charity to academic disputation. Thus, as befits such a preliminary investigation, our results have been somewhat inconclusive. The hard lesson that has emerged at each stage of the enquiry is the importance of treating our interlocutors as rational beings. We conclude that, whatever else it attempts to do, an ethics of disputation directs us to respect the rationality of all participants to an academic debate.

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Page 22 of 23

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