


Charles Arthur Willard (1945–2021): In Memoriam

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Accepted: 12 January 2022
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Charles Arthur Willard, the prominent and highly influential argumentation theorist, died on November 22, 2021, at his residence in Orlando, Florida.

Charlie, as he was known to everyone he met, followed a standard pathway into the field of argumentation studies: competing in high school and then intercollegiate debate. After earning his B.A. at Kansas State Teachers’ College in 1967, he began graduate studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he served as an assistant debate coach under the leadership of Joseph Wenzel. He earned his masters and doctoral degrees there before taking a position at Slippery Rock State College in Pennsylvania and then as Director of Forensics at Dartmouth College. After leaving Dartmouth he taught rhetorical and argumentation theory at the University of Pittsburgh and then the University of Louisville, where he was named a University Scholar.

During his graduate work in the Department of Speech at the University of Illinois, the program developed a distinctive commitment to interdisciplinarity in rhetorical and communication theory, an approach most fully realized in Karl Wallace’s signature seminar on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Wallace’s thesis was that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* could not be understood apart from the rest of Aristotle’s thinking, and thus the course involved forays into Aristotle’s treatments of ethics, politics, metaphysics, and so on.

Charlie’s dissertation, *The conception of the auditor in Aristotelian rhetorical theory*, had its origins in this seminar. As he explained in his acknowledgements, “Professor Wallace frequently lamented the fact that no one had ‘tied together’ Aristotle’s various comments about the nature of audiences. Professor Wallace argued that some of the difficulties in understanding Aristotle’s rhetorical theory might be resolved if someone would codify and explain Aristotle’s conception of the auditor.” The central thesis of Charlie’s dissertation was that “Aristotle’s conception of the auditor cannot be determined on the basis of the *Rhetorica* alone.

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A full understanding of his conception requires an examination of the metaphysical, biological, and psychological principles which underlie his analysis of human behavior.”

Charlie's dissertation can thus be seen as the first draft of his broad transdisciplinary approach to rhetoric and argumentation. For Charlie, the commitment to situate rhetorical theory in the context of contemporary thought about knowledge, language, meaning, and social interaction was specific, muscular, and consequential—and so different from the obligatory lip service commonly given to interdisciplinary scholarship. This exemplary project prefigured the direction of his life and work—his scholarship, his efforts at building a productive international community for argumentation, his teaching, even his character and moral imperatives.

His scholarship shifted away from its early focus on the audience to a far more significant and ambitious project: reconstructing our understanding of how discourse, and especially scientific and technical discourse, can help societies achieve their social policy goals. As he undertook what came to be a career-spanning project, he maintained two key commitments: first, to understand rhetoric holistically and foundationally within the human sciences: and second, to have faith that communication—and perhaps only communication—contains within itself the capacity to reconstitute reason in democracy.

Thus Charlie took on what has become a core, leading-edge project for the human sciences. Over the past fifty years, reconstituting rational discourse has increasingly been identified as an urgent challenge for globalized, diverse, modern societies. Dealing with pressing problems like economic inequality, climate change, and pandemic illness requires building fact-based consensus, and it seems harder each year to achieve such consensus within our fragmented polities. There is a sense that those among us who have dedicated their lives to understanding problems, locating their etiology, and devising creative solutions should be able to lead change more effectively. But instead, the authority of experts, institutions, and elected leaders continues to erode in the public mind, and segments of the population remain uninformed or committed to folkways. Across a broad span of commenters, representing many disciplines, this “rhetoric of trauma” (as Charlie characterized it) has come to be a consensus of sorts among analysts who are centrally engaged with the study of language and discourse in human affairs generally and democracies specifically.

In a series of three monographs, Charlie tried to show us a way out of this tangle. His first book, *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* (University of Alabama Press, 1982), situated argumentation studies in the sociology of knowledge by offering an analysis of “our present epistemic situation”: the balkanization of knowledge into “argument fields.” It called for argumentation studies to emphasize description and explication rather than evaluation—studying “how actors grapple with knowledge, how they pass muster on claims and use standards of verification and judgment” (p. 20).

His second book, *A Theory of Argumentation* (University of Alabama Press, 1988), treated argument not as a sort of logic but as a communicative form: conversation based on disagreement. Thus he offered a theory of communication as a backdrop against which to examine argumentation, suggesting that this pointed to new ways of thinking about familiar topics: rationality, knowledge, fallacies. And

he emphasized attending to the complex realities of flesh-and-blood arguments, not pristine abstracted elements.

His final book, *Liberalism and The Problem of Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), returned to “the problem of knowledge” in modern democracies, when questions involve many disciplines and competing expert claims. It emphasized the challenging task of adjusting the specialized discourses of experts to the needs of the public—hoping to point to ways in which academic specialists might rethink their beliefs about how knowledge should function in public life.

The development of his thinking paralleled—and often responded to—the work of Stephen Toulmin, who was engaged in a similar project. From *The Uses of Argument* to *Human Understanding, Volume I: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts*, Toulmin sought to locate a path between overweening certainty and bottomless skepticism. Charlie’s search for an alternative set of rhetorical expectations and practices was not inconsistent with Toulmin’s development of an ecological and historicist approach to knowledge and reason, but led him to identify the study of real arguments as the place to begin that search.

Charlie recommended study of actual cases of argument to learn from them how best to manage the process of resolving differences. He warned against any a priori expectation about what will or will not produce useful results—understanding the argument practices of social actors in situ demanded a dynamic and complex treatment. Not for him the sterility of propositional logic or the abstraction of an argument diagram. As one of his article titles had it, “propositional argument is to argument what talking about passion is to passion.”

Thus, in the final phase of his career, Charlie came to focus less on argument theory and more on specific cases of rhetorical success and failure and what might be learned from them. One of the late chapters in *Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge* discusses the Challenger disaster, the explosion of a NASA manned shuttle shortly after takeoff in 1986. In this event he found a clear and chilling example of how the complex interaction of many different technical and organizational failures can lead to incompetent decision-making. The same monograph ends with the fall of the Berlin wall, and the way in which destabilization throughout Eastern Europe was providing opportunities for both creative reorganization of continental Europe and the rise of ethnic violence and authoritarianism.

Like Toulmin, Charlie was able to persuade many of us that an epistemics grounded in observation and analysis of the dynamics of communication offers great possibilities for understanding and even rebuilding the role of reason in public decision-making. His insistence on grounding argument analysis in actual observation and appreciation for the contingency in resolutions has been an important corrective to past approaches; and his analysis of the special responsibilities of experts in entering public debates is both original and salutary.

But unfortunately, he left us with no fully worked examples of the method he envisioned. We believe the case for developing and applying such a method has been well made, and we hope that scholars now entering the argumentation community will take up the challenge—as Charlie himself did with Wallace’s lament—and begin to expand our understanding with detailed case studies of arguments in situ, in line with his models.

We think it is no accident that Charlie put at least as much energy into building the community of argumentation scholars as he did in authoring monographs and articles. He was an aggressive recruiter and a central collaborator in the development of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, a vibrant, global, and multidisciplinary community. He attended and promoted a stable of conferences in this area and constantly encouraged his vast network to join him. He welcomed young scholars and encouraged their work.

The result was that he managed to build a prototype of the world he hoped could be created, in which experts from many different backgrounds could come together productively to address key issues—indeed, the most critical and foundational issue for our lives in modern societies.

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