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Forget the Toulmin-Scheme, Remember the Epicheireme!

Mika Hietanen

Although never intended as a tool for argumentation analysis, the scheme of Stephen Toulmin (2003 [1958]) gained huge popularity and is still today one of the most used methods for argumentation analysis. One of the reasons for this is the short learning-curve which is due to the lack of elaboration on method or theory. The problems of the method have been argued already decades ago (van Eemeren et al. 1996, pp. 154–60).

Toulmin's scheme is conspicuously similar to the classical argument scheme called the epicheireme. The Toulmin model presents the basic structure with claim, warrant, and grounds, with backing as a support to the warrant. The epicheireme similarly presents the complexio, propositio, and assumptio, with the assumptionis approbatio as a support to the assumptio. After this similarity, the two methods diverge. Toulmin further includes a qualifier and a rebuttal and the epicheireme a support for the propositio, the confirmatio (there are, however, variations).

Toulmin's method has been further developed, e.g. by Hitchcock (2003), Hitchcock & Verheij (eds. 2006), and Goodnight (2006, in Hitchcock & Verheij). The epicheireme has a long history of development, from Theophrast to Ad Herennium, Cicero, Quintilian, and others (Klein, 'Epicheireme').

I argue that the unique elements of Toulmin's model, the qualifier and the rebuttal, are seldom useful in the analysis of argumentation and that, for the rhetorical critic as well as for a simpler argumentation analysis in general, the epicheireme is a better instrument since (1) the elements of the epicheireme are easier to use, (2) the epicheireme is more flexible, and (3) the epicheireme both historically and organically connects with neo-Aristotelian analysis whereas the Toulmin-model is based on a different theoretical concept.

Hitchcock's efforts to develop the Toulmin-model notwithstanding, for the purpose of clarifying the basic structure of an argument, the epicheireme is a better choice, and for more complex analyses there are more developed methods available. Thus the epicheireme should be remembered as the first argument form to go to, after the enthymeme, together with the (poly)syllogism and the sorites, whereas the Toulmin-model is best forgotten in the context of rhetorical criticism.

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