ABSTRACT: This essay explores the dialectics of theory and practice in terms of argumentation theory. Adapting Jonsen and Toulmin’s (1988) notion of a Theory-Practice spectrum, it conceives Theory and Practice as extreme ends of a continuum and discourses as falling at various points along the continuum. Every theoretical discourse has essential practical aspects, and every practical discourse has essential theoretical aspects. Practices are theorized to varying degrees but every practice is theorized to some degree. Reflective discourse, which is discourse about practice, moves to and fro along the Theory-Practice continuum. Reflective discourse involves argumentation. Practical argumentation connects theory to practice: it appeals to general warrants, which may be simple or may tap into elaborate conceptual structures, in order to establish grounds for practical judgments. A practical discipline is a relatively coherent intellectual-professional enterprise that cultivates a field of social practice by engaging within itself and with practitioners in a reflective discourse. The argumentation of a practical discipline, like ordinary practical reflection, moves to and fro along the Theory-Practice continuum but in more methodical steps informed by systematic methodological reflection on the reflective process itself.

KEY WORDS: Theory, practice, practical reflection, reflective discourse, practical discipline, methodology, communication

Argumentation theory has traditionally been concerned with argumentation in practical discourse, which has been distinguished categorically from theoretical discourse. Jonsen and Toulmin (1988), for example, distinguish Theory from Practice on the grounds that they characteristically involve different kinds of argumentation. Theory employs formal arguments in which particular conclusions are deduced logically from universal principles. Practice, in contrast, employs informal or practical arguments which ‘involve a wider range of factors than formal deductions and are read with an eye to their occasion of use’ (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 35).

As an illustration of argumentation in everyday practical discourse to which I will refer throughout this essay, consider a hypothetical conversation between two friends, Ann and Bill, in which Bill has been complaining that a mutual acquaintance, Cal, has inexplicably become unfriendly to Bill and has been expressing intense but vaguely grounded negative feelings about Bill to other acquaintances. Ann finally interrupts Bill’s tirade to exclaim, ‘Well, why don’t you just talk directly with Cal about the problem? Otherwise, you’ll never understand what’s going on!’ Ann’s argument can
be reconstructed as follows: Ann claims that Bill should communicate face-to-face with Cal for the reason that doing so will produce better understanding between Bill and Cal. Ann’s inference is warranted by an implied generalization: that face-to-face communication produces greater understanding between people (which is good). Although it thus implicates a universal principle, the argument is essentially practical rather than theoretical because it appeals not purely to the logical form of the inference but rather to Bill’s judgment of the particular situation in all its complex contingency. That direct communication (usually) improves interpersonal understanding (usually to good effect) may be a plausible generalization, but its applicability to the present case may nevertheless be questioned by Bill on any number of grounds. Cal may predictably refuse to talk with Bill or may be expected to equivocate or evade the issue. Bill or Cal may become so angry or defensive that direct conversation between them will lead to an emotional blow-up that will only further damage the relationship. Direct communication between Bill and Cal on such a matter may be culturally inappropriate for some reason, or perhaps Bill merely wishes to avoid a predictably unpleasant or even dangerous experience. Bill may be able to learn about Cal’s motives in other ways and may already know enough to guess at them. On the other hand, considerations of personal honor, for example, may weigh more heavily than either safety or interpersonal understanding in Bill’s judgment. Bill, then, may be aware of good reasons, some incompatible with the one Ann has provided, either for speaking directly to Cal or against doing so. In short, the persuasiveness of Ann’s argument in this particular case would be a matter of judgment potentially involving an indeterminate range of factors that could be explored in further conversation between Ann and Bill, although, in the end, much of the basis for Bill’s judgment of what to do in this situation would remain tacit, for that is the way of Practice (as distinct from Theory, in which conclusions are deduced formally from explicit premises).

As Jonsen and Toulmin acknowledge, however, Theory and Practice so conceived are not totally divorced from one another (1988: 36). They are ideal types that mark the extreme ends of a continuum. Actual discourses are never purely theoretical or practical but combine elements of both in varying proportions.

Pure mathematics and logic are certainly very close to the theoretical extreme, but even these formal disciplines in practice depend upon tacit knowledge and embodied skills and express intellectual passions without which such disciplines would cease to make any sense as human activities (Polanyi, 1964). Physical sciences further depend upon practical activities of experimentation and observation. Moreover, as Kuhn (1970) famously showed, physical scientists, when deliberating about alternative fundamental theories, unavoidably must resort to ‘persuasion’ and efforts to ‘convert’ one another. Although ‘good reasons’ may be found for choosing