

In Memoriam J. Anthony Blair (1941-2024)

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In Memoriam J. Anthony Blair (1941-2024)

J. Anthony Blair, who died in March of this year, may yet be remembered as the scholar who was instrumental in creating, developing and popularizing informal logic in the 1970s, and who then spent the rest of his career trying to decide what exactly it was he had discovered.

In a late paper, delivered in 2020 and currently unpublished,¹ Blair insisted that a general mistake was to see informal logic as a kind of logic when in fact it is a term that describes the philosophy of argument. For Blair, informal logic was neither informal nor a logic. He explained that “informal logic” was originally used to describe the analysis and critique of arguments expressed in natural language. Such arguments involve the relation between premise and conclusion (P-C) offered to an audience by an arguer. But, while logic then can be characterized as the study of the justification of such relations, this merely means that logic is involved in argument analysis and evaluation, *not* that it is a defining property of it. Studying the logic of anything does not mean that what is being studied is a kind of logic. And so, Blair came to hold the view that informal logic was a name for the study of arguments expressed in natural language.

In another unpublished paper delivered in November of 2021 (and revised in 2023),² he addressed several criticisms of informal logic from the rhetoric quarter, criticisms that found important features of argumentation overlooked by informal logic. His response to these criticisms was to insist that the fault lay not with informal logic itself but with some of its theorists (himself included). The critics had emphasized the importance of hitherto ignored perspectives on argument, perspectives that Blair agreed were important. What informal logicians had failed to provide was good theory of what counts as an appropriate interpretation of communications containing or expressing arguments. To that end he believed that what informal logic needed was a good hermeneutics of argument, and he was working on such an account in his final years.

One important indication of Tony Blair’s commitment to the development of informal logic was his work on this journal. He was one of the founding editors and publishers, serving it in all capacities since its inception in January 1984 until the last year of his life. That’s 40 years of commitment, guidance and influence with this publication alone. And this does not take into account the prior years working on the *Informal Logic Newsletter*. He was the most dedicated of editors, working with authors to improve their prose, mentoring editorial assistants in the publishing process, and gently nudging co-editors towards the right decisions.

One of his more impressive “failures” at the University of Windsor was an attempt to describe a programme that he wanted to call the “Windsor School” of argumentation. For this, he had to convince his colleagues, including Hansen, Hundleby, Johnson, Pinto, Tindale, and Walton to sign on to a common theoretical approach. While unsuccessful—as each scholar insisted on the priority of one or another feature and the removal of some other—the attempt again indicated Blair’s deep belief that there was a common thread to the thinking of those with whom he worked, and the belief that this could be captured, formulated, and taught. There is a slight irony in that Tony was

¹ “Leo Groarke on How to Define an Informal Logic.”

² “Informal Logic and Rhetoric’s Critique.”

one of the strongest dissenters a few years later when Italian scholar Federico Puppo identified a Canadian school of informal logic. “Perhaps I am too close to see it, but I must confess to an inability to recognize anything distinctively Canadian about our contributions” (Blair 2019: 59). But even there he acknowledged the University of Windsor as the catalyst for the Canadians’ activities. So if some ideas belong to a place, future scholars may come to recognize Windsor and what Blair contributed to building there as inseparable from a philosophical perspective that became recognized across the world.

The Puppo volume contains a must-read intellectual autobiography of Blair, detailing his pioneering work in the field from 1967 when he arrived at Windsor and became a colleague of Ralph Johnson. He described how they began to design a course in “Applied Logic” together, and how they reflected on what theoretical issues would underlie such a course. It was a productive collaboration during exciting times for the field. Within a decade, the first edition of *Logical Self-Defense*³ appeared, followed in 1978 by the first Symposium on Informal Logic. His story continues with the inauguration of this journal, and a fateful meeting with two Dutch scholars which led to Blair’s crucial role in the International Society for the Study of Argumentation.

A constant occupation, beside informal logic, was the nature of critical thinking and its relationship to the study and teaching of argument. This interest grew to a passion that resulted in the editing of *Studies in Critical Thinking* in 2021. He cared deeply about this project, working with his friend Michael Scriven to fund and curate a collection of papers that would represent the state of the art, as he judged it. His own paper in the collection (Blair 2021), an original work on the many judgments involved when dealing with arguments, is notable for his hallmark attention to clarity and the precision of analyses. It shows a mature scholar still working at the height of his powers, sifting materials that others have produced and finding new insights in them.

Evidently, Tony Blair did not rest on his laurels, as impressive as they were, and as justified as he might have been in doing so. He was an original thinker to the end, forging fresh ideas and shedding new light on old ones. He wrote like he thought, with precision for detail and careful attention to meanings. And in addition to his own careful essays, he worked almost five decades as editor, cultivating a wealth of papers that determined the direction in which informal logic would proceed.

His final presentation, at the 10th ISSA conference in Leiden, built on a joke from an old Peter Sellers’ film, in which Sellers, as Inspector Clouseau, is bitten by a dog he takes to belong to a person who had just told him that his dog didn’t bite. After he is bitten, an outraged Sellers complains “You said your dog didn’t bite!” to which the man replies: “That’s not my dog.” Tony tells the joke well, including an exaggerated French accent to imitate Clouseau. But in the end, getting the right identification was no laughing matter for Tony; he cared deeply about how informal logic was understood in the world, because without a clear understanding, it would not be as effective as it could be. When people talk of informal logic in the future, will they be speaking of the right animal? We trust that at least Tony had found clarity on this issue when he stepped back from the screen for the last time.

³ The second edition appeared in 1983, and the third a decade after that.

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