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Virtue Epistemology and Argumentation Theory

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ABSTRACT: Virtue epistemology (VE) was modeled on virtue ethics theories to transfer their ethical insights to epistemology. VE has had great success: broadening our perspective, providing new answers to traditional questions, and raising exciting new questions. I offer a new argument for VE based on the concept of cognitive achievements, a broader notion than purely epistemic achievements. The argument is then extended to cognitive transformations, especially the cognitive transformations brought about by argumentation.

KEYWORDS: cognitive achievement, epistemology, open-mindedness, understanding, virtue.

1. PROLOGUE.

Virtue epistemology (VE) was consciously modeled on virtue ethics theories with the hope that some of their conceptual breakthroughs and achievements in ethics might be re-created in epistemology. The results exceeded expectations: virtue epistemologies are flourishing, having already made significant contributions to the discourse of epistemology. The change in perspective turned out to be a *broader* perspective, with good effect not only for answering traditional epistemological questions, but also for determining which questions to put on the agenda and for understanding how they relate to one another.

My contention is that a similar turn in argumentation theory could well have similar results. The overall orientation is agent-based: a good argument is one that has been conducted virtuously. But what exactly does that mean? It has to take *all* the roles that agents play in argumentation into account. As a result, it will be a *broader* perspective, capable of bringing disparate parts of the field into a larger whole and re-shaping the disciplinary agenda. I believe this kind of re-orientation can help answer a cluster of outstanding questions for argumentation theorists: *when*, *with whom*, *about what*, and, above all, *why* should we argue. And, as a corollary but of no less importance, it can help us answer *when*, *with whom*, *about what*, and *why* we should not argue.

Above all, a virtue epistemology approach to argumentation theory preserves the insights motivating traditional epistemological approaches to argument while losing its distorting obsession with justified true belief as the Holy Grail of epistemology and of argumentation alike.

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2. SOME VIRTUES OF VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

One of the great virtues of virtue *ethics* approaches is that they are better situated than their consequentialist and deontological counterparts to recognize, accommodate, and appreciate ethical but non-moral values without flattening them into moral values. Virtue ethics focuses broadly on agents and their lives, rather than narrowly on just their actions, just their motives, or just governing principles. The wider perspective is liberating. Family and friendship, for example, are immediately recognizable as ethically, if not morally, important goods insofar as they contribute to the quality and value of a life. This simply recognizes that it is valuable, it is good, to be part of strong networks of family and friends, without having to regard someone who lacks those ties as morally blameworthy on that account. It is *ethically good* but not *morally obligatory* to have friends. (Of course, if one does have friends, then the moral judgment that one is, or is not, a good friend is a separate matter.) The focus of ethics changes from *what to do* to *what to be* and *how to be*.

Although apparently not by design, something similar can be said on behalf of the virtue epistemologies that appeared following the efforts of Ernest Sosa (1980), and later, Linda Zagzebski (1996, 2000, 2001) John Greco (1999), among others. The movement was initially motivated by very traditional epistemological questions. The idea was that a change in focus from beliefs to believers could provide the resources to withstand Gettier problems and skeptical arguments. They also hoped to circumvent the debates between foundationalists and coherentists, and between internalists and externalists. If history is any guide, the effect of this re-orientation on the disciplinary agenda will almost certainly *not* be neutral. After all, virtue epistemology is perfectly situated to recognize, accommodate, and appreciate *cognitive* but *non-epistemic* values without having to flatten them into the standard epistemological categories.[1]

This last point deserves to be emphasized because it provides the starting point for what I think is an original and compelling reason to favor VE approaches. Traditional epistemologies ostensibly direct their attention to the general concept of *justification*, but what really attracts their attention is a much narrower concept: the justification *of beliefs*. What about all the other propositional attitudes we take, including doubt, consideration, and supposing? They are all things that can be justified. Can we simply assume that these get the same kind of justification that justifies our justified beliefs?

Consider doubt, a case that presents a great contrast. If, as many claim, some beliefs come with a presumption in their favor, either because they are innate or given or somehow privileged, then for those beliefs, it is *doubt* rather than *belief* that would need justification.[2] Believing is not just something we can decide to do – but neither is

[1] Rescher 1988 uses “cognitive” for the propositional attitudes most closely allied with belief and factual propositions, as distinct from practical and evaluative cognitions. Pinto 2003c preserves the distinction, using the term “doxastic” to refer to the most belief-like states, with “cognitive” pressed into duty as a broader category – but still propositional. I am using it in a still broader sense so that it would apply even to mental states, if any, that are not reducible to attitudes towards discreet propositions.

[2] Many philosophers have nominated certain classes of beliefs as having primitive or initial (i.e., non-derivative) justification. Perforce, this includes all foundationalists. Some of them do address the question of differential justifications for different beliefs directly, but few take on the issue of different kinds of justification for different propositional attitudes. Harman 1984 gets close when he considers “squatters’ rights” for our current beliefs, and thus different criteria for belief acquisition and belief retention.

doubting! Descartes understood this. We have to have at least some grounds for doubt, even if it is just a manufactured and fanciful story about an Evil Demon. Now let me ask this: Is the justification needed for doubt the same kind of justification we use for belief?[3] We may, in the end, conclude that "justification" really is used univocally for when talking about doubt and belief, but that is a pretty substantial thesis. It deserves its own justification.

As an aside, let me suggest that carefully distinguishing these differences in justification, especially the justification for doubt, is one way to put the brakes on philosophy's methodological bias towards skepticism. Everything may be arguable, but being doubtable is another matter.[4]

Things get more complicated when we consider cognitive states that are not discretely propositional. Can't they be justified? Values, for example, may be justified or unjustified; so can attitudes; but neither is easily cashed out in terms of individual propositions and distinct propositional attitudes. Virtue epistemology brings this question into squarely into focus. And it is a good question. After all, epistemological agents do more than simply believe or disbelieve true-or-false propositions, with varying degrees of commitment and justification.[5] Regardless of whether the study of epistemology is supposed to make us better epistemological agents, it ought to help us *understand* what it is to be a better epistemological agent. For that, it needs to consider everything that good epistemological agents do.

There are many *cognitive achievements* for epistemological consideration in addition to knowledge and justified belief. Wisdom and understanding, for example, are not exotic species of knowledge.[6] There are many different cognitive *abilities* leading to those achievements that are not reducible to acquired propositional knowledge. If Aristotle was right, then the ability to craft good new metaphors, that un-teachable sign of genius, is one example. We could add the ability to interpret difficult literary texts elegantly, the ability to identify different species of sparrows by their songs alone, the ability to master a second language, and even the knack for saying just the right thing in difficult social situations. (See Gardner 1993 on "interpersonal intelligence.") These are

[3] Kavka's "Toxin Puzzle" raises the possibility that having some justification may actually be a necessary prerequisite for forming an intention. If so, then the situation with respect to justifying intention, as a propositional attitude, would be markedly different from belief, as it is understood by traditional epistemologists. Kavka 1983.

[4] Apart from its role in permitting skepticism, the fact that we can argue about things we might not actually be able to doubt is an important datum about argumentation. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 479 disagree, drawing a connection between an individual's doubt and group dissensus: "All argumentation is indicative of a doubt, for it assumes the advisability of strengthening, or of making more explicit, agreement on a given opinion.

[5] Quine and Ullian 1978 explicitly connect being rationality with coordinating the strength of one's beliefs with the strength of the available evidence (although one might have supposed that a Pragmatist would have preferred to use "reasons" rather than "evidence" in that formula). See also Goldman 1988, pp 88-93, on "evidence proportionalism" and Pinto 2005 (and, better, the longer version, Pinto forthcoming) for a more nuanced qualitative version.

[6] The difference understanding and knowledge is often treated as a commonplace –Lipton 2004, for example, refers to the "gap between knowledge and understanding" as the first, uncontroversial feature of explanation – but identifying this with the possibility of knowing-p (i.e., knowing *that* p is the case) without understanding-p (i.e., understanding *why* p is the case) misses the issue here because this could be explained as differences in what is known. There are different senses of "understanding." Kvanvig 2003 carefully identifies the difference *in kind* between some uses of "understands" and knowledge.

all significant cognitive abilities, and acquiring any of them is a significant cognitive achievement. (See Kvanvig 2003, ch. 8, Cohen 2006, and Lusk 2006). And yet, traditional epistemologies have nothing to say about any of these unless the cognitive states can be cashed out in terms of the canonical, propositional attitude *knowing-that-p*. We need to broaden the range of epistemological concern to include not only such cognitive achievements as understanding-that-p but also such non-propositional, "objectual" attitudes as knowing-p, recognizing-p, and understanding-p. Non-epistemic cognitive abilities and achievements like know-how should not be ignored.

There is more of interest for epistemologists in the realm of cognitive science than just the AI section. I am suggesting we broaden the focus of epistemology from *what to think* to *what kind of thinker to be*. This is where virtue epistemologies trump traditional versions because their entire orientation starts with virtues, i.e., the conditions that are conducive to the desired ends. When put that way, nothing in its framework restricts the desired ends to knowledge and justified belief.

Let me illustrate this. Open-mindedness, or something like it, is a common entry in lists of the features that critical thinkers should have.[7] Is it a cognitive virtue? I would expect most of us would like to think so, but we come up short when pressed to justify that claim. Traditional epistemologies can count it as a virtue only if it contributes to justifying our beliefs and is thus knowledge-conducive because that is the only value on record. Well, *is* it generally conducive to knowledge? That is an empirical question. Sometimes, of course, it does help to keep an open mind, so that the truth is not closed out. But for someone already in possession of true justified beliefs, it would be *counter*-productive. It would serve only to re-open questions that are better off closed, putting perfectly good beliefs unnecessarily at risk. In that case, close-mindedness would serve better because what it would close out is error! (Cohen 2007) The same argument applies to the nearby virtue of being critically reflective. Someone with a knack for getting things right on first pass – the kind of intuitive person Malcolm Gladwell has in mind in *Blink*, and thinks we all are (Gladwell 2005) – would actually be better served by *not* reflecting on her beliefs. There are two problems here. First, there is the daunting *empirical* questions as to how often open-mindedness and being reflective are helpful in the production of knowledge, Second, after that, there is a messy *conceptual* question: How much of the time do they have to be helpful in order to count as a virtue? Some? All? Most?

Don't get me wrong. I do think open-mindedness is a virtue of the mind. In fact, *I would still count it as a virtue even if it turned out to be generally detrimental to the production of knowledge*! Isn't that a contradiction? How can something that, perhaps more often than not, is an obstacle to knowledge still be counted as an important virtue? The paradox dissolves with the recognition that the category of cognitive virtues includes more than just the epistemic virtues. There is more to our cognitive lives than knowing. William James was on the right track: our concern is with more than just avoiding false propositions; we also need to be concern ourselves with believing true ones. But James still had his own blinders on: there are more cognitive achievements than justification and

[7] Actually, the status of open-mindedness as a virtue is usually implicit: texts on critical thinking traditionally focus on what could be called "sins" and "vices" – fallacies of reasoning and factors that make our thinking *uncritical* – rather than the positive virtues. Close-mindedness (or dogmatism or prejudice) is offered as an uncritical distorter, needing something like a principle of interpretive charity as a counterbalance.

knowledge, and there are more cognitive failings than ignorance and error. We do want knowledge of the world, of course, but we also want to understand it. That includes, prominently, understanding the other people who share the world with us. We want well-informed attitudes and well-grounded values. We want to be able to recognize and appreciate both Raphael's compelling perspectives as well as Pollock's challenging vision, Schumann's harmonies as well as Schönberg's dissonance. We want to get Ted Cohen's jokes, even (especially!) his really bad ones. For these projects, open-mindedness is indeed a virtue.

3. COGNITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS AND COGNITIVE TRANSFORMATIONS.

Cognitive achievements don't just happen, of course. They are the end result of all sorts of events and processes. Some of those transforming events and processes are cognitive; some are non-cognitive. The habits of mind that qualify as virtues are valuable because of the contributions they make to the cognitive processes that culminate in our cognitive achievements. This is where virtue epistemology becomes especially relevant for argumentation theory because arguments and argumentation occupy privileged positions among the events and processes that lead to important cognitive achievements. Arguers' virtues are cognitive virtues.

Some cognitive changes are best explained by causes that are irrelevant to the central subjects of argumentation theory. Becoming aware of one's environment through perception – and becoming unaware of it by falling asleep – are pretty dramatic short-term cognitive changes, but neither one typically counts as much of an *accomplishment*. Characteristically, neither results from argumentation. Our concern is with cognitive transformations, especially long-term ones, both positive and negative, that *do* result from argumentation, and of the positive ones, those that do represent significant accomplishments. This is at the heart of what argumentation at its best is all about.

Here is an example of a positive cognitive achievement that does *not* come about by argument: developing the ability to distinguish teal blue from cerulean blue. That skill is better achieved through painstaking practice and training than deliberation or rational discussion. To varying degrees, the same could be said about being able to distinguish between a merlot and a pinot noir by smell alone, a piece by Sonny Rollins and one by John Coltrane at first hearing, a painting by Rembrandt from a painting by one of his pupils at first sight, or a poem by Adrienne Rich from one by Maya Angelou at first reading. These are all things that we could learn. Sometimes discursive instruction helps; sometimes other procedures are more effective. The more that critical skills are involved, the greater the role for critical discussion.

Epistemological approaches to argumentation generally focus on *belief*, and that is proper since the cognitive transformations most relevant to argumentation do concern belief, but an important caveat is in order: for the purposes at hand, it is less important whether an argument effectively brings about a belief than whether it *licenses* that belief. (As Biro & Siegal 2006, p. 93 note, the sentences, "He succeeded in persuading by using a bad argument" and "He argued well, but unsuccessfully," are not meaningless or self-contradictory. There must be an objective component to argument evaluation.)

More explanation is in order: One thing that an argument can do is persuade us that its thesis is acceptable or even convince us that its conclusion is true. Arguments can bring about the dramatic transformation from disbelief to belief. Lots of other things that

can do that, too, like direct experience, indirect socialization, mystic insights, and Evil Geniuses manipulating electrodes attached to our brains. What distinguishes beliefs brought about by good arguments is that they are *justified* and we are *licensed* to believe by those arguments. We are *entitled* to them. (See Pinto, forthcoming, especially part VI.) The key change is not whether I now believe *p*, whereas before I did not. I may have believed it all along, arguing about it precisely in order to test it. The difference is that after the argument I am *entitled* to that belief. In theory, it could be possible that this momentous epistemological change could occur while leaving my entire belief-set unchanged. Even so, this is no mere "Cambridge change."

Argumentation is not the only way that we can come to belief and it is not the only way to become entitled to a belief. There may surer, quicker, and more effective way to bring about belief but for many beliefs argumentation is the most *rational* way because entitlement comes with the belief. Argumentation is both a rational project and a joint endeavor. We show that we know this every time we insist that rhetoric is not about persuasion simpliciter and dialectics is not about winning at any cost – no more than proofs in logic are all about just reaching the conclusion any old way. Conclusions must be inferred *validly*. Made-up rules don't count. Rhetorical success is persuasion that is brought about by rational means and dialectical success is consensus that is achieved by rational means. Accordingly, adequate theories of argumentation must be able to accommodate unequivocal normative principles and robust evaluations. Epistemological approaches have that much right. (See Lumer 2005a and 2005b for the roles of objectivity and normativity in epistemological approaches to argumentation.) But arguments are phenomena with broadly cognitive as well as narrowly epistemological import. Their roles in bringing about other cognitive transformations also need to be taken into account because they too count as argumentation's successes.

In addition to persuading and convincing, I think we can credit argumentation with the following cognitive achievements:

- a deepened *understanding* of one's own position;
- the *improvement* of one's position;
- the *abandonment* of a standpoint for a better one – *other than the opponent's*;
- a deepened understanding of the *opponent*'s position;
- a deepened *appreciation* of the opponent's position;
- *acknowledgement* of (the reasonableness of) another's position;
- greater *attention* to previously over-looked or under-valued details;
- better *grasp* of connections and how things might be fit together in a big picture.

And, notably,

- *entitlement* to one's own position. (This list is taken from Cohen 2007.)

Each of these represents a cognitive advance. Only some of them can be explained in terms of the addition and subtraction of discreet beliefs; but all of them can result from argument.

We need to be careful here when we say these accomplishments "result from argument" because arguments effect changes in several different ways. Cognitive changes, including the narrowly epistemic, can be brought about by non-cognitive means. Only some of them are germane. Let me distinguish four ways that arguments bring about cognitive changes:

First, in what many take as the archetypical case, arguments provide *reasons*. This is the domain of traditional epistemology and logic in the broad sense. It is the primary focus of much informal logic and critical thinking. Warrants, backing, and data become premises. The constituent assertions have logical consequences enabling them to serve as the reasons behind reasoned belief. Reference to reasons may suffice to explain the change of belief that occurs when we are convinced by an argument to accept its conclusion, but not when we decide to re-think and revise our own position *after* we have successfully defending it from criticism.

Second, arguments can be *causes*. They are events in the lives of their participants, in their social, emotional, and psychological lives as well as their cognitive lives. For example, (as Gilbert 1997 makes clear) an argument might upset someone, thereby altering that person's mood and outlook on the world. Some people have little tolerance for conflict and confrontation or simply just don't like to argue (Gilbert 2005, p. 28), so the mere occurrence of an argument can have a pronounced negative impact, with effects extending into the cognitive realm. "The world of the happy man," Wittgenstein wrote, "is a different one from that of the unhappy man." (*Tractatus* 6.43.) Conversely, since there are people who like to argue, an argument might be energizing and provocative. For some of us, arguing is stimulating. It motivates us to pay closer attention to what others say and to focus better on our own beliefs. These effects are positive and cognitive.

Third, arguments can themselves *be evidence*. They are parts of our world. As a non-participating witness, I might be able to infer just from the fact that Alberta is arguing with Brandon that she opposes the proposal or that she dislikes him. Or, given other information, I might to infer that she is passionate about the subject matter and confident about her knowledge. I suppose I could even make these inferences about myself when I find myself arguing! After all, arguments largely consist of speech acts. They have pragmatic implications. One of the implications of an argument is that the thesis in question has been given some critical attention by the arguments' participants. That is, the mere fact that someone has argued about something provides *prima facie* grounds for thinking she has some entitlement to that belief. *Prima facie*, but defeasible.

Fourth (the most important, and a mixture of all of the above), arguments can be initiating *catalysts*, *occasions*, or *conditions* for other processes that eventuate in cognitive transformations. Many of the most important and specifically cognitive long-term effects of arguments occur only after some time has elapsed. As I reflect later tonight on the arguments I will have had today, I will revisit my own standpoints, re-examine my assumptions, rethink my conclusions, and perhaps come to revised or even completely new positions. I may also become more sensitive to and understanding of alternative standpoints. This delay might have no more significance than indicating how slowly I process new information. Or it could be a way of yielding to stronger arguments without losing face. Either way, the cognitive transformations that result may be deep and long lasting. They come about neither wholly as *effects* from causally efficacious events occurring in the argument, nor wholly as logical *entailments* from inferentially sufficient

grounds offered during the argument, nor wholly as pragmatic *implications* drawn from the argumentative acts. Arguments plant the seeds for ideas that come to fruition in the course of time. The most valuable cognitive transformations that grow out of argumentation do just that: they grow in an almost organic process.

4. VIRTUOUS ARGUERS

We are now in a better position to understand what it means to say that a good argument is one that has been conducted virtuously. We argue virtuously when we exhibit those acquired habits of mind that are conducive to one of argumentation's characteristic cognitive achievements.

It is important to notice both what this elegant little formula mentions and what it does not mention. It includes two variables, arguers and their achievements. It omits any mention of winning and losing, persuasion and resistance, or settlement, resolution and consensus.

There are different roles for arguers to play in arguments. Defending a thesis is a different activity than criticizing a thesis, and both differ from weighing competing arguments. Each has its own skill-set. The art of rational persuasion is different from the art or resisting irrational persuasion. Adeptness at one does not guarantee adeptness at the other. Even an argument's observers may have roles to play: it is one thing to listen to an argument as a member of a jury in order to render a judgment; it is quite another to observe a critical discussion with the hopes of learning something. Different virtues are required by the different roles, with different achievements likely. Learning something new, for example, is a more likely accomplishment of open-minded proponents than tenacious opponents; attentive observers are more likely to end up with a more refined understanding from a well-conducted argument between a passionate, engaged proponent and a clever opponent. And yet, tenacity, cleverness, and passionate engagement are all argumentative virtues right alongside open-mindedness and attentiveness. Perhaps what is really needed is a sense of proportion, as something of a meta-virtue, to keep them all in balance.

As for the missing reference to outcomes: don't winning and losing, persuasion and resistance, and consensus count for *anything* in evaluating an argument? It would appear not. There is no cognitive gain in winning *per se*. On the contrary, there is usually more cognitive gain in losing! We learn from losing, not winning. We can, however, recognize the cognitive achievements that do result from arguing as argumentative successes. An argument that successfully persuades an incompetent audience is successful only by that one measure. By itself, that does not tell us nearly enough for a useful judgment of the argument. That kind of success does not represent any kind of intellectual achievement. Nevertheless, it is relevant and cannot be put aside completely. When we ask whether the argument was conducted virtuously, instead of asking about persuasion or consensus, we are indirectly implicating both *rational* persuasion and *rational* consensus as possible cognitive achievements. Virtues do not always lead to cognitive achievements, but since virtues are identified as such by being conducive to those achievements, virtuous arguments will be more likely to bring them about. They serve in much the same way that rules work in rule utilitarianism: they do not invariably bring about the best result, but, once again, the final product is not the only factor to take into account.

link to commentary

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