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Commentary on Daniel H. Cohen: “Virtue Epistemology and Argumentation Theory”

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Dan is right that Virtue Epistemology VE is “flourishing,” and it recommends itself to argumentation because

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.

VE will broaden epistemology

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?...Can we simply assume that these get the same kind of justification that justifies our justified beliefs?

Dan wants to answer negatively. He proposes to transfer these views to argumentation theory.

I will first address Dan’s proposals specifically for argumentation theory; then I will turn to VE itself. In either case, Dan’s paper is hard to comment on because he offers almost no specifics or illustrations. I’ll come to the one exception.

“In addition to persuading and convincing,” as well as entitlement to one’s position, Dan credits argumentation with a number of cognitive achievements,

Only some of [which] can be explained in terms of the addition and subtraction of discreet beliefs; but all of them can result from argument.

I’m unsure of the critical force of this denial, since I do not know what kind of explanation he is looking for. Does the explanation include changes in arguer’s emotional response, since emotions have cognitive components in their judgments? I am also unsure why basic cognitive changes that matter to epistemology are not explained by alterations in beliefs. If you used to believe that the sun revolves around the earth, and you have come to believe the opposite by argument, isn’t the improvement explained in good part as a loss of false beliefs, replaced by many true ones?

Dan distinguishes various way that arguments “bring about cognitive changes” including that arguments can be causes, evidence, and catalysts for cognitive transformations. The connection to the virtues is this:

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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.

However, isn't it possible to identify virtues like open-mindedness to some degree independent of their contingent success ratio? Of open-mindedness Dan complains:

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!

But does not this same objection apply to his claim that virtuous arguments are "more likely to bringabout" cognitive achievements? Open-mindedness would then be identified by how often it actually does succeed, in which case it would be an empirical and highly contingent matter.

But it is not an empirical question, or not only one, whether open-mindedness is expected to be conducive to knowledge in normal environments. The non-empirical answer is 'yes' given that we are fallible. Dan is right that if you are justified or do know, you are better off with a closed-mind. But since it does not follow that you are then in a position to regard yourself as justified or to know, you can still expect yourself to be better off epistemically with an open-mind.

One problem that I have with VE applied to argumentation begins with Dan's first way arguments bring about cognitive changes:

First, in what many take as the archetypical case, arguments provide *reasons*... 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.

Is this so? Euthyphro's family criticizes him, a criticism gently pressed by Socrates, that he should not prosecute his own father. Euthyphro responds dismissively by noting that justice requires consistent treatment of all, indifferent to personal connections. From his point of view that is a successful defense. But surely anyone less rigid and shallow than Euthyphro would take the failed criticism to still survive as a reason to rethink whether, specifically, he well understands the principle to treat all the same in matters of justice.

What more interests me in Dan's opening observation is a sharp difference indicated, as I see it, between the domains of VE and argumentation, which to me warrants caution in the proposed extension of VE. VE needs to handle the traditional subject of epistemology, which is the justification of beliefs, via an examination of the virtues of the believers. Virtues become then a way to require reasons or reliable connections which is the link between belief and the world that yields knowledge or justification. But in arguments, the reasons are already present. So minimally the target problem is different. More speculatively, the pursuit will be different, since what needs evaluating will be the argument, containing the reasons, not the arguer.

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But at this juncture we come to the one very specific claim that Dan makes as I read him:

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.

Now, first, "a good argument" does not mean "one that has been conducted virtuously." A good argument is, roughly, one that establishes a worthwhile conclusion. Second, and more pertinent, arguments conducted out of epistemic vice e.g. to embarrass your interlocuter can be excellent; and conversely, out of the best of epistemic virtues, one can commit fallacies. Quine once argued that because it is discovery that Hesperus is Phosphorus, it is contingent. I assume that he argued virtuously. But the argument we now regard, and rightly thanks to Kripke, as fallacious. Conversely, is Kripke's criticism any less insightful and convincing were he motivated to embarrass Quine?

This criticism goes to the root of the connection that Dan must assume, if VE is to accord with virtue ethics, between motives and quality of argument. The criticism develops into my final worries about VE generally. My scepticism is directed at one particular form of VE theory, which is the one Dan adopts, though his specific commitment is not evident given that he cites Sosa, Zagzebski and Greco together. But Sosa and Greco, like Plantinga, are doing traditional reliability theory applied to the virtues or cognitive faculties. Zagzebski is the one who wants to model VE on the virtue ethics of Aristotle, as Dan explicitly applauds. Of course the approaches overlap, as Zagzebski is also externalist and reliabilist oriented.

My criticisms draw on, initially just quote, two other papers of mine. (Adler 2005, 2004) I claim a wide gap between the domains of ethics and epistemology:

.....the epistemic virtues are primarily directed to guiding one's intellectual activities (reasonings, thoughts, inferences, or beliefs), while the moral virtues are largely directed to how we treat others. The moral virtues characteristically operate as restraints on actions to regulate and harmonize our (social) behavior toward others. We act honestly; we examine our position with intellectual honesty.

There is then much more latitude for deviation from norms in the epistemic than in the moral realm.... When we act immorally we typically hurt others. But in the epistemic realm the harm (to others) is usually weak and indirect. We can and we should be and we are more carefree ("Popperian") in the range of our epistemic acts than in our ethical acts, and that is essential to advancing inquiry.

The ethical virtues serve to curb or thwart self-interest, while the epistemic virtues serve mainly to guide it. To act justly and honestly, when these virtues are called upon (e.g. the cashier returns too much change to you and you think that no one else notices it) is to forgo clear [immediate], benefits or rewards for oneself.

However,....our self-interest lies in correct beliefs, rather than incorrect ones or ignorance, since these provide the best assurance that our actions succeed....So we generally have a built-in, clear motive toward acting in accord with the epistemic virtues that we do not have for the moral virtues.

What follows from these differences is that epistemic activities can be strategically directed. We need to think strategically because the goal of the epistemic virtues and inquiry is to discern new truths and to expose false beliefs, which are, from our point of view as inquirers, a mystery. So we want to guard against eliminating viable

contenders, which involves guarding against our own potential misjudgments. We also want to reduce our burden by exploiting the potential contribution of others in shared inquiries, even when ideological foes.

VE, by way of their parallel with the moral virtues, are committed to a uniformity of epistemic virtues across an inquiry as best, while our argument concludes that non-uniformity, above a high threshold of epistemic virtues, is best. In brief, it is epistemically better in an inquiry for most to be epistemically virtuous rather than all. To go out on a predictive limb: a community where a substantial, but still very few, members are dogmatically committed to their disfavored positions will, under similar circumstances, not be moved to fall in line with the dominant view. If they can remain actively involved in the discourse, rather than dismissed as cranks or contrarians, they will help keep their deviant ideas in play.

Much of the obvious losses or dangers of deviation from the epistemic virtues and of their impurification are promised to be effortlessly compensated for through the ongoing operation of the division of epistemic labor. The division enormously lightens the informational burdens of inquiry, which is essential, given our limited time and resources. (Kitcher 1993 Ch.8)

My criticisms of VE on this count is even more forceful in light of the most important objection to virtue ethics, which is that social psychology research shows that people do not act consistently across situations. The results are taken as evidence against either any of us as virtuous or that there even could realistically be virtues of character. (Doris 2002) In the domain of VE, the point is even more forceful, since we wouldn't want such consistency. For reasons already noted or hinted at, the consistency demand would be too demanding.

Besides the objections raised above that good arguments can be due to bad motives and conversely, that the demand for purity of motive would retard argumentation or inquiry, allowing freer reign for non-virtuous motives like competitiveness will spur inquiry and excellence. The free reign works well in science, given that standards of good work, such as those of refereed journals, and reward for criticism and replicational tests, are in place. Think of the Nobel Prize: competition, and mixed (partly ignoble) motives, But given the high standards, a purity demand would be harmful. (Only 'partly' because I do not think that a scientist who is competing for the Nobel Prize could only be motivated by external reward, lacking internal passion.)

The best way to nail your opponent—to succeed at the base motivation of winning or embarrassing or destroying him – within legal bounds – is to genuinely refute him, and because the refutation is likely to be a surprise to the ill-motivated and to have to meet high standards, the base motives will likely lead to no different a result than if the motives were pure. If an Aristotelian VE is to work, it will do so only for domains with intellectually weak standards and either where the inquirer works in isolation or he is a member of an inquiring community that is already varied.

[link to response](#)

[link to paper](#)

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