Jun 6th, 9:00 AM - Jun 9th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Kraus

Jeffrey Carr

Commentary on Manfred Kraus: “Early Greek Probability Arguments and Common Ground in Dissensus”

JEFFREY CARR

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Christopher Newport University
1 University Place,
Newport News, VA
USA 23606
jvcarr@cnu.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Probability arguments as used in the early Greek sources are (by definition) those which appeal to commonly held beliefs. This “popular” source makes for an important contrast to some recent versions of probability. Kraus attends to the role of such arguments in early rhetoric and philosophy in a detailed way. A few issues are explored, particularly when dissent yields consent.

2. THE TEXTS

Probability arguments as used in the early Greek sources are those which appeal to commonly held beliefs. One appropriately distinguishes between shared beliefs and opposed beliefs, given their different degrees of acceptability. The rhetoricians' advice about how to work with either of these to make a case for something one wants to convince others of is certainly well taken. Making the case for something on the basis of things one’s audience already believes is a mark of reliability: the hearers won't question whether the premises are true. This occurs when the premises are commonly known. The speaker then has to help the audience to either discover the unrealized implications of what they already believe, or that what they saw their view as proving wasn't actually justified by the other things which they believed. These differ with respect to their place in the justification intended

Following upon Plato's account of Tisias's definition of probability (or that of Corax, (Kraus p. 2)) in the *Phaedrus*, "that which the many think" (273b), to say that there is a strong tie between what is (presumably at best) probable, and that it is the object of opinion, emphasises that the many are taken to not know (assuredly, without doubt) why whatever they believe is true, is true. But nevertheless, they have beliefs. (Recall that to Tisias, "probability is superior to truth", at least if you can establish something in accord with the audience's beliefs – truth apart from or opposed to that would be more difficult to establish.) Thus, the familiar case follows in which a smaller man charged with assaulting a larger but cowardly man should lie in court, as should the victim.

Carr, J. (2007). Commentary on Manfred Kraus: “Early Greek probability arguments and common ground in dissensus.” In H.V. Hansen, *et. al.* (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-4). Windsor, ON: OSSA.

> the coward should say that he was assaulted by more men than one; the other should prove that they were alone, and should argue thus: "How could a weak man like me have assaulted a strong man like him?" The complainant will not like to confess his own cowardice, and will therefore invent some other lie which his adversary will thus gain an opportunity of refuting. (ibid.)

Relying on the probabilities, the effort is to sway the jurors of the unlikelihood of the cases made by their opposite. Because the smaller adversary seems to common understanding less able to subdue the larger, the jurors might be vulnerable to accepting his testimony. (Hobbes would have interesting comments on this.)

Similarly, the Pseudo-Aristotelian author of the *Rhetoric to Alexander* – which Kraus plausibly attributes to Anaximenes of Lampsacus (p. 5) - appeals to probabilities as believed positions for key foundations in making the case for other things; his view follows (1428a25-34):

> Such, then, is the nature of a probability [as the sympathy of the audience].
>
> [BECAUSE] We must, therefore, always carefully notice, when we are speaking, whether we are likely to find our audience in sympathy with us on the subject on which we are speaking;
>
> FOR in that case they are most likely to believe what we say.
>
> [ALSO BECAUSE] It is a probability when one's hearers have examples in their own minds of what is being said.
>
> For instance, if any one were to say that he desires the glorification of his country, the prosperity of his friends, and the misfortunes of his foes, and the like, his statements taken together will seem to be probabilities;
>
> FOR each one of his hearers is himself conscious that he entertains such wishes on these and similar subjects.

(By indenting a passage, above, the suggestion is that it justifies what is above it and to the left). This begets the question whether the appeal to examples introduces a justification of probabilities, i.e. that it is *because* they have the examples in their minds that the members of the audience will grant the propositions, or instead is this just another reason why we should attend to the audience's response to our words? The argument is stronger if offering an independent justification because the role of examples does not exhaust the kinds of positions one might take based on consensus, but it does buttress the position that the audience's previous experience can be appealed to as an enhancement to the argument's reliability: it promotes shared belief. There is ambiguity on the 'subject' because is could be the topic (generally) or the data appealed to in the proof. (See Kraus p. 5)

Both the view of Tisias and that of Alexander's author are intriguingly consistent with the "common-sense" view of Toulmin, according to whom "to say 'S is probably P' is to commit oneself guardedly, tentatively, or with reservations to the view that S is P and likewise guardedly to lend one's authority to that view" (pp. 53). The notion of "commitment" here appealed to suggests something that a reasonable person ought to accept. This is worth noting because many recent accounts of probability emphasise a quantitative, rather than qualitative, account. Thus, Whately: "One should mathematically compute possibilities because each diminishes the strength of the other premisses with which they are combined."(b iii, § 14, p. 138-9). Hoaglund emphasises attention to probability, noting that between possibilities and premisses which are "general or common knowledge" as features of their reliability (p. 160), some might suffer reductions

in credibility if other premisses converging to the same conclusion call into question their probability (p. 181-2). Kraus has it right that probability is here conceived differently (p. 4), appealing to the qualitative sense. An issue does arise concerning whether the term ‘probability’ should be surrendered in favor of ‘plausibility’ (p. 5), but the reference to Hacking (p. 4) is well taken: the “frequency-based statistical analysis” is a seventeenth century and later phenomenon.

Aristotle says “probability” is a "generally approved proposition" (*An. Pr.* II.27 70a2), key in the formation of enthymemes (each of which is a "syllogism starting from probabilities" (a10)). This is so, Aristotle says, because they are important for establishing the middle term. The middle term is the link between the major and minor terms occurring in the conclusion, so having such a role will be important to ensure that the premises appealing to them are sound, or at least not likely to be questioned by the audience. (Aristotle goes on to point out how the enthymemes are thus challengeable, because even if appeals to probabilities as what is true "for the most part" may be appropriate, the fact of their probability rather than necessity introduces the basis upon which they might be challenged.)

For Aristotle this style of reasoning will be crucial, as fans of the *Nicomachean Ethics* realize. Deliberation is crucial in relation to the use of practical wisdom to answer practical moral questions, particularly about the things which cannot be known of necessity: the person of Practical Wisdom bases their assessment of the mean (between excess and defect) on probabilities grounded by experience of a society, and in relation to capabilities of the individual moral agent. (These are the "continuous and discrete" qualities appealed to to distinguish the moral and intellectual virtues.)

> There are few facts of the 'necessary' type that can form the basis of rhetorical syllogisms. Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities.
>
> For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character;
>
> BECAUSE hardly any of them are determined by necessity. (*Rhet.* 1357a22)

In Aristotle's analyses of probabilities in the *Rhetoric*, for instance, his principles for the kinds of things one can rely upon for the audience's approval cover many of the circumstances in which deliberation might yield a new belief, and therefore the things one might appeal to to show the alternative possibilities. Kraus’s taxonomical list (section 4.2) is here appropriate. (The caveat to this is its exhaustiveness: some archaeologist friends once said that all non-flesh or food artefacts at a dig are either tools, vessels, or ornaments – that’s it.) It would also be worthwhile to know when else probability arguments are not appropriate.

2. A CHALLENGE ABOUT DISSENT

There are cases, however, in which there is a curious (both) sharing of a stance and disagreement upon it, which are further worthy of exploration. Notably here is Aristotle’s defence of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) in *Metaphysics* 4.4 (1006a14 ff.), a *peirastic (elenctic)* argument in which there is serious controversy between the

disputants, but Aristotle's appeal here is precisely to a kind of shared territory that even the denier must visit in order to make her case.

This is not a probability argument, although in the sense that there is a dispute, the denier of PNC at least is defending the view that doing so is possible: to her, it is neither an *arche* nor a necessary truth, and false, so her view is (to her at least) probably true: there is warrant for it. Bolton records that this is properly a case of the *peirastic* style of argument: one tentatively accepts one's opponent's point of view, to see what follows. Ideally, it is to reduce it to absurdity (p. 329). So, the proponent of PNC asks their adversary (disputant) to make her case. The snag is that in asserting the denial of the PNC, the speaker means what she means and intends the words which she has uttered to express the meaning that they have, and not their contradictories. In asserting the denial of the PNC, she has agreed to a shared set of argumentative standards with the proponent of PNC, but by doing so, has refuted herself in trying to establish her view.

However, this is still an appeal to the coherence of the account one might make of anything, on the basis of a consensus of standards to deal with the dissent in the details. In denying the PNC, the disputant must still consent, for the credibility of her case, to the meaningfulness of language, among other things. So, here at least, dissent on one front yields consent at the next.

3. CONCLUSION

Kraus's account of how probability arguments appeal to "general common sense warrant" (p. 3) is entirely appropriate. Reference to the sources provides ample evidence of this, particularly in contrast to quantitative approaches to probability by means of the *amount* of evidence. Some questions are noted.

link to response link to paper

REFERENCES

Aristotle. (1924) *The Complete Works*, ed. W. D. Ross. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Bolton, Robert. (1994) "Aristotle's Conception of Metaphysics as a Science". In T. Scaltsas, D. Charles, and M. L. Gill, eds. *Unity, Identity and Explanation in Aristotle's Metaphysics.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hoaglund, John. (2004) *Critical Thinking*, 4th ed. Newport News: Vale Press.

Kraus, Manfred. "Early Greek probability arguments and common ground in dissensus". OSSA 2007.

Plato. (1953) *Phaedrus(The Dialogues of Plato, 4th ed.).* Trans. B. Jowett. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

(Pseudo-)Aristotle.(1984) *The Rhetoric to Alexander*. in J. Barnes, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle.* Princeton: University Press.

Toulmin, S.E. (1958). *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whately, Richard. (1850) *The Elements of Logic.* London: Parker.