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Arguments that Backfire

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ABSTRACT: One result of successful argumentation – able arguers presenting cogent arguments to competent audiences – is a transfer of credibility from premises to conclusions. From a purely logical perspective, neither dubious premises nor fallacious inference should lower the credibility of the target conclusion. Nevertheless, some arguments do backfire this way. Dialectical and rhetorical considerations come into play. Three inter-related conclusions emerge from a catalogue of hapless arguers and backfiring arguments. First, there are advantages to paying attention to arguers and their contexts, rather than focusing narrowly on their arguments, in order to understand what can go wrong in argumentation. Traditional fallacy identification, with its exclusive attention to faulty inferences, is inadequate to explain the full range of argumentative failures. Second, the notion of an Ideal Arguer can be defined by contrast with her less than ideal peers to serve as a useful tool in argument evaluation. And third, not all of the ways that arguers raise doubts about their conclusions are pathological. On the contrary, some ways that doubts are raised concerning our intended conclusions are an integral part of ideal argumentative practice.

KEY WORDS: fallacies, argument, credibility transfer, good reasoning, bad reasoning

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the things we hope to achieve when we argue is to raise the credibility of the target conclusion, ideally to the point of making it acceptable to our intended audiences. This might not be the only goal of argumentation, nor need it be taken as an essential or defining goal that is necessarily common to all arguments. But it is, at least, a prominently shared feature. A lot of what argumentation is about is the process whereby reasons are offered to bring that end about. Good reasons successfully raise the credibility of the conclusion – or otherwise 'enhance the acceptability of the speech act which is the conclusion' (Haft van Rees, 1989). Bad reasoning fails in that regard. Typically, the failures are sorted into two categories. First, there are premises that fail to impart their credibility to the conclusion because the inferential connections leading to that conclusion are faulty. Second, some premises are unable to impart any credibility to the conclusion because they lack sufficient credibility of their own.

This, in a slightly different vocabulary, is just the traditional point made in introductory logic and critical thinking classes about the options for criticizing arguments: challenge the premises or challenge the inferences. What the revised formulation highlights is that there is a sense in which all reasons – and by extension, all arguments – are always *for* their conclusions. Arguments *against* a conclusion, C, are generally better understood as arguments *for* its contradictory, ~C.[1] As before, bad arguments are bad either because their premises have no credibility to impart or because they fail to transfer what credibility they do have.

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[1] Arguments against an argument for C are a significantly different case. Even supporters of C can argue against some of the arguments that others may offer on its behalf.

Adrian Heathcote, in an unpublished paper, has codified the concept of 'credal flow' from premises to conclusions, and deftly deployed it as part of the explanation of what is wrong with *petitio* arguments.[2] Credal flow goes from the premises to the conclusions, not the reverse. At the end of an argument, the credibility of the conclusion must be at least as much as that of the premises. If not, there will be what he calls a 'back-propagation' of doubt. As an immediate corollary to all this, he says, 'the propounding of an argument *for* a claim should never cause the credence measure on that claim to drop'.

I think Heathcote is right to isolate and identify the idea that reasons can only *increase* the credibility of a conclusion as an implicit part of our thinking about arguments, but is that principle itself right? When presented with the claim that *no* argument will ever decrease the credence measure of its conclusion, my immediate reaction – being the good contrarian that seems to be the product of philosophical training – is to look for possible counterexamples. As it turns out, they are not that hard to find. The phenomenon of an argument 'backfiring' by making its conclusion *less* credible is widespread. Indeed, in some form, it is well nigh ubiquitous. To be fair, the principle is intended to apply just to the illative, or inferential, core of arguments – and only in deductive arguments at that. The introduction of new information can certainly be of negative relevance in inductive arguments and the principle of weakening is notoriously invalid when it comes to counterfactual conditionals and the associated forms of speculative reasoning, but the reasons why this principle fails to apply to ordinary arguments are worth considering.

What follows is, first, a series of possible counterexamples to the claim that arguments never diminish the credibility of their conclusions. It is a bestiary, of sorts, of arguers and their arguments that are actually counter-productive insofar as the effect they have is to *inspire resistance* to or *raise doubts* about or in some other way *lower the credal status* of their conclusions. Three conclusions emerge. First, the analysis that is offered along the way to explain the identified phenomena – and there are indeed several importantly distinct kinds of phenomena present – defines by contrast the negative space around an Ideal Arguer. Second, focusing on arguers provides a healthy complement to traditional argument evaluation with its narrow focus on inferences and fallacy-identification. And third, raising doubts about the conclusions of their own arguments is one of the things that Ideal Arguers routinely do. As for the rest of us, we Less-Than-Ideal Arguers, if we do not raise doubts, our Closer-to-Ideal Audiences will probably pick up the slack for us. Even the most cogent arguments *for* an attractive and already-accepted conclusion may still raise new doubts because that is an important product and by-product of argumentation processes.

2. A BESTIARY OF LESS THAN IDEAL ARGUERS

The two putative principles on the table are:
      (1) Arguments are always arguments *for* their conclusions,
and   **(2)** Arguments should never *decrease* the credibility of their conclusions.
An argument of the form 'P, therefore C', should raise the credibility of the conclusion to the level of the premises. If the inferences are good, but the conclusion remains doubtful, then that doubt will lower the credibility of the premises until they are no higher than the conclusion. If the premises are securely credible, but the conclusion remains doubtful, it is the inferences that must be questionable. Doubtful premises and even manifestly false premises do not impugn the

[2] Adrian Heathcote, 'Measures on Arguments', forthcoming.

conclusion. In principle, even outrageously fallacious inferences tell us nothing about the conclusion – but only in principle!

The first putative counterexample – the first specimen for our zoo – is the disputant we can call the **Reductio Absurdist**, a well-intentioned but ultimately unfortunate arguer. The Reductio Absurdist tries to argue for a conclusion, C, by drawing absurd consequences from its negation, ~C, but manages instead only to demonstrate the feasibility of ~C. I mention this first because there have been a number of historically important examples of Reductio Absurdists. Perhaps none is as striking as the case of Girolamo Saccheri, who, in the 18th century, tried to demonstrate Euclid's fifth postulate by *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. The consequences he drew from its negation were indeed fantastic, and even absurd by some measures, but, in the end, he was unable to deduce the manifest contradiction he was after. The conceptual terrain he explored in search of absurdity became, in the next century, a playground for all manner of non-Euclidean geometers.

A similar tale is unfolding now regarding the work of Thomas Taylor, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Beasts* to parody Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.* Taylor hoped to reveal the absurdity of Wollstonecraft's position by suggesting the absurd thought that beasts as well as women might have 'intrinsic and real dignity and worth'. In one of history's myriad ironies, some of Taylor's arguments are now being resurrected and reclaimed by the contemporary animal rights movement.[3]

The same thing can happen in the short term. One of the real but unintended beneficiaries of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 was working women. Legend has it that the word *sex* was inserted alongside the words *race, creed,* and *national origin* as a forbidden basis for discrimination by a Southern Congressman who hoped that it would doom the legislation by its absurdity. Just imagine, he thought, what the world would be like if police and fire departments, trucking companies, law firms, and all the other employers with good men's jobs had to hire women![4]

Reductio Absurdists have close cousins in **Poor Devil's Advocates** and **Failed Satirists**. My favorite Devil's Advocate is Ivan Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's literary advocate for the Devil, whose profound, moral arguments against God are so greatly at odds with Dostoyevsky's own position. Devil's Advocates have only themselves to blame. Their arguments undermine their intended conclusions, C, but that is because they have produced arguments for its negation, ~C. The claim that all arguments are *for* their conclusions is untouched. Failed Satirists, however, present a slightly different story. Like Reductio Absurdists, they offer arguments that *on the surface* are for the opposite of what they really want, but that is not how their arguments are supposed to be taken. Unlike the Absurdists, they might not deserve any blame: the failure might be the audience's. An obtuse audience can miss the irony. They just don't get it. I suppose if we insist on putting the blame on the proponent of the argument, we can easily do so: she can be said to have failed insofar as she has not successfully persuaded the audience. But what is important to note is that that is not a **logical** failure. It is a **rhetorical** failure. Arguments are more than sequences of premises and inferences. They involve arguers as well as propositions, antagonists as well as protagonists, audiences as well as inferences, and those disputants and audiences are not one-dimensional epistemic agents. They are fully realized

[3] See Cass Sunstein, 'Slaughterhouse Jive', for further discussion of this example.
[4] Ellen Goodman, *Central Maine Morning Sentinel*, June 29, 2004.

and individual human beings. When these features are taken into account, the door opens for much more interesting and instructive counterexamples.

Consider the case of the **Anti-Authority**, someone who is regarded as reliably wrong about almost everything. Imagine, for example, you read of a proposed bill before Congress or Parliament. It seems like a reasonable proposal, so you tentatively support it. Suppose you then hear that someone on the extreme opposite end of the political spectrum also supports it. Do you re-think your support? If a proposed Law X, Act Y or Amendment Z is endorsed by, say, Politician W, maybe it is not so good after all!

In itself, the case of the Anti-Authority is also not a very telling counterexample because it is easily reconstructed as involving an implicit argument for the negation: do *not* support X, Y or Z because W does. A positive reason is being offered for a different conclusion. What this reconstruction makes clear is that it is the Anti-Authority's *act* of arguing rather than the logical inferences or the content of the premises that matters. What raises doubts about C is the **dialectical** context rather than the illative core. For all that has been presented here, the Anti-Authority could actually have a logical argument, but arguments have to be assessed by more complex criteria than the simply logical.

Different kinds of counterexamples are provided by **Embarrassing Allies**. Embarrassing Allies will stand up during town councils, parliamentary debates, faculty meetings or other such occasions to speak on *behalf* of the position you support – but you wish that they wouldn't. (We all know people like this!) Perhaps he is a **Loopy Logician** whose arguments are so slipshod that you cringe in fear that he will be taken as a representative spokesperson for your position. His logic is not yours, but there is guilt by association to worry about. Or maybe she is a **Naïve Enthusiast** or an **Eager Believer** who combines a healthy earnestness with an uncritical gullibility. She adopts and argues for whatever position she has most recently heard. For all her enthusiasm, or perhaps because of it, she will have failed to ask the necessary questions, she will not have raised the obvious objections, and she will not, therefore, have grasped the subtleties. Or perhaps our ally is a **Deaf Dogmatist** who simply ignores questions and brushes aside objections without giving them their due. What makes these allies embarrassing is that the supporting reasons and arguments for your position need not be as weak, nor the conclusion as stark, as they make it out to be. As with the Anti-Authority, their flawed arguments for the conclusion raise doubts about it. In these examples, an explanation for the negative effect of the argument has to include reference to the rhetorical performance in addition to both internal logical problems and external dialogical ones.

There are other Embarrassing Allies besides Loopy Logicians and Naïve Enthusiasts. Arguers who lack credibility or have ulterior motives for arguing – **Suspect Sources**, **Discredited Arguers**, and **Agenda Pushers** – can also elicit resistance to a conclusion that otherwise might have been more acceptable. Arguers who have previously been found to falsify data or make errors in their inferences start with two strikes against them. So do the excessively partisan. More to the point, when they enter into an argument, the two strikes against *them*, as proponents, can transfer over to, and be counted against, their *conclusions*. Perhaps this explains why *ad hominem* argumentation, whether circumstantial or abusive, is not always inappropriate. As I have argued elsewhere (Cohen, 2004, chapter 6), when *ad hominem* criticisms are mis-steps in argumentation, it is usually *not* because they involve faulty inferences, but because they transgress against rhetorical, rather than logical, rules of argumentation.

The failures of the sundry Embarrassing Allies, *Reductio* Absurdists, Anti-Authorities, and Hapless Satirists and Devil's Advocates are instructive cautionary tales. What they tell us, clearly and distinctly, is:

> *Do Not Argue Like That!*
> *Do Not Be Like Them!*

More specific and more helpful injunctions can also be drawn, such as:

> *Do not misjudge the audience.*
> *Do not ignore their questions and objections.*
> *Do not miss the point of your own arguments.*
> *Do not lose sight of your conclusion.*
> *Abandon or alter your conclusion if your own logic leads you elsewhere.*
> *Do not compromise your credibility as an arguer.*

The pedagogical and heuristic value of these examples is considerable. An entire course in argumentation could be framed around them to good effect. If we narrowly restrict argument analysis to the inferential failures canonized in traditional lists of fallacies, we will miss every one of the lessons that can be learned from these incompetent arguers.

3. TRAGIC HEROES OF ARGUMENTATION

The arguers we have considered so far have been presented as almost comic stick figures to make a point, but my own tastes run more to the heroes – the *flawed* heroes – of tragedy than to the anti-heroes of cautionary morality tales. And there are indeed tragic heroes whose tragic flaws lead to the ignominious failure of arguments that backfire. Despite their flaws, they are also heroic. There is something admirable in each of them. We would do well to emulate them in those respects.

To begin, there is the **Concessionaire**. He is the arguer who concedes too much and too readily. He tries to see all sides of a question, he listens to his opponents, and, what is relevant, he acknowledges their good arguments. His own positive arguments are laced with recognition of counter-considerations – the *granted*'s, *admittedly*'s, *even though*'s, and *to be sure's* that serve to strengthen an argument **dialectically** by forestalling objections. His arguments include concessions to his opponents manifested as qualifications and limitations on his nuanced conclusions – *Well, it holds, but not under all conditions*. It doesn't make for good sound-bites, and too much of it gives away the store. The Theist turned Deist may be guilty of this: Yes, God exists, but not as an old bearded man in the sky, and probably not as a corporeal being, and maybe not even really as a conscious being at all, and perhaps not immanently caring in a moral sense, and so on. It is that pattern of strategic retreats that leads from Abraham's personal God to Spinoza's Nature itself – a thorough-going pantheism that is, in the end, rather hard to distinguish from complete atheism.

The Concessionaire is at the far end of the spectrum that includes the Deaf Dogmatist. If Aristotle is right and the golden mean is found by aiming for the opposite extreme from our natural inclinations, then we could do worse than trying to emulate the Concessionaire. The Concessionaire does, after all, listen well and has the honesty and self-confidence to acknowledge good points. If we hope for as much in our fellow interlocutors, we should cultivate it in ourselves.

A close cousin of the Concessionaire is the **Un-assuring Assurer**, or She Who Doth Protest Too Much. This is the arguer who feels compelled to defend positions that no one else

thinks need to be defended. Even when the position is not one that has been challenged or questioned at all, she feels the need to offer arguments, clarifications, and qualifications anyway. Because we typically argue only about what is arguable, the realm of 'pros and cons' (Govier, 1999, p. 47 and chap. 10), the mere act of arguing for a thesis may raise doubts where there had been none because it puts the proposition in question into the 'arguable' basket. If a young child walks into a room and is about to be unnoticed, but chimes up with, '*Don't worry, everything's OK. There's nothing going on in the next room, no mess or anything like that to see. So just relax, stay here doing whatever you were doing*', we have a most Un-assuring Assurer on our hands. Something is going on! A minute ago, we had no reason to wonder whether everything is OK, but now, thanks to the argument, we do. When no argument is needed, it may be best not to give one.

Vigorous arguments in defense of the accepted, the obvious, the innocuous, and the unconsidered will generally be violations of Gricean maxims, particularly relevance and quantity. Even if they are not intentional floutings for the purposes of implicature, there will still be pragmatic implications from the act of arguing distinct from the logical entailments from the premises. If they are flagrant violations, as in the example above, they will raise red flags with the listeners that there's some funny business going on.

The virtue that is over-exemplified by Un-assuring Assurers is one that is often found in the best philosophers: the ability to regard even seemingly innocuous assumptions as fair game for argumentation. They take nothing for granted. The problem, of course, is that some things have to be taken for granted for there to be even the possibility of a critical, dialectical engagement. It is true that we can argue about anything, but it is not true that we can argue about everything at once. And even if we could, I'm not sure we should.

This leads to the final, most dangerous, most intriguing and, I think, most valuable, specimen for the bestiary: the ***Argument Provocateur***. The Argument Provocateur is someone with whom you invariably end up arguing. He or she is someone who has an uncanny knack for drawing you into an argument. Even when you agree with an argument provocateur, you end up arguing. A typical conversational starter from an AP, an opening gambit, really, might be something like, 'How can you condone the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib?' or 'Isn't metaphysical realism untenable?' or 'Why are there too many good Thai restaurants and too few good Chinese ones?' It does not matter whether you buy into the assumptions, you can still be pressed. Your objection that you do <u>not</u> condone the prisoners' treatment is brushed aside with, 'But how *could* you, or *anyone*, condone it?' And suddenly it is too late. Your argumentative buttons have been pushed. You have been drawn in, and find yourself in the uncomfortable position of offering arguments against your own positions. The AP's arguments are occasions for his fellow interlocutors, *even those who agree*, to raise doubts about his positions by being cast in the role of opponents.

Arguments are not simply linear structures of inferences among propositions in neatly arrayed proofs. Nor are they even lattice structures among positions, objections and replies in complicated pragma-dialectical exchanges. They are, among other things, often messy dialogues between persons whose emotions and beliefs, values and attitudes, and interests and goals are all involved. There are all sorts of personal buttons that can be pushed to initiate an argument. The Argument Provocateur knows them all.

The Argument Provocateur succeeds by the annoying habit of projecting beliefs that he wants to argue with onto the nearest available opponent. The projected position is invariably one for which the AP has a ready arsenal at hand, so it might seem that it is all a grandstand play:

creating an argument in order to trot out already prepared arguments. Show-boating aside, it is actually an enviable talent, because what it does, in effect, is draft someone to be a real-life stand-in for the other voice in arguments that an AP has with himself. Aren't there times when you would like to subject your political or theological or other important – and deeply sensitive – beliefs to critical argumentative scrutiny but cannot find a suitable debate-mate? There are, after all, good reasons why religion, politics and other hot-button topics are often off-limits for debate or discussion. In some circumstances, arguing is bad form. If we are too sensitive to that, we can become (to resort to the notorious, but occasionally apt, war metaphor for arguments) *gun shy* about arguing. Argument Provocateurs are not gun shy about arguing. Nor are they deferential about including sacred cows in their gun-sights.

The genuine willingness to engage in serious argumentation is an admirable feature of APs, at least as arguers, if not always as persons. Along with the Concessionaire's willingness to listen to others and to modify her own position, and the Unassuring Assurer's willingness to question the obvious, these attributes should be prominently included in our descriptions of ***Ideal Arguers***.

What we are ultimately after, of course, is greater rationality. Becoming better arguers is a means to that end. Because of that, we tend to focus on the idea of an Ideal Protagonist. I am suggesting that we need to widen our focus to include the correlative concepts of Ideal Audiences and Ideal Interlocutors. They, too, are fully equal participants in argumentation.

Conventional wisdom has it that we live in an Argument Culture.[5] The epidemic of snarly talk-show hosts and the plethora of nuisance lawsuits are evidence for that claim, but in many ways, we are not a culture that engages in serious critical argumentation very often or very well. Earnest argumentation about political disagreements is not the norm. Instead, we have loud voices on talk-radio, and the crossfire of talking heads on television's news shows. Something similar holds true for religious and economic disagreements: we argue in the adversarial and pejorative sense of 'argue' rather than critically engage. There are, to be sure, some appreciable benefits to be had from our reluctance to argue. The collective decision to tolerate sectarian differences rather than to fight over them, for example, has enabled Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Moslems, and Moslems and Hindus to live side by side civilly in North America, which is almost unthinkable in some parts of the world. But the cost should not go unnoted: it may be that we do not take theological questions seriously enough;[6] and it may be that as a result we are out of practice in arguing in these areas.[7] As annoying as he may be, the Argument Provocateur is a gadfly we need.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A brief re-cap of the three inter-related conclusions that emerged from the catalogue of hapless arguers and backfiring arguments is in order. First, there are distinct advantages to be gained from paying attention to arguers and the broader argumentation contexts in which they find themselves, rather than focusing narrowly on their arguments. The broadened perspective is a better one for trying to understand all that can go wrong in argumentation. Traditional fallacy identification, with its exclusive attention to faulty inferences, is inadequate to explain the full range of argumentative failures. Second, the notion of an Ideal Arguer can be defined by contrast

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[5] Tannen (1998) is perhaps the most visible proponent of that idea.
[6] This line of reasoning can be extracted from Bloom (1987).
[7] Woods (2001) raises the possibility of this phenomenon in another context.

with her less than ideal peers, and this can serve as a useful tool in argument evaluation. It provides a model of what can go right in argumentation instead of what can go wrong – and a better model than is provided by soundness and validity in a formal, first-order deductive system. This is especially the case when the Ideal Arguer is understood to be someone who might be called on to play any of the principal roles in an argument: protagonist, antagonist, or audience. And third, not all of the ways that arguers raise doubts about their conclusions are pathological. On the contrary, some ways that doubts are raised concerning our intended conclusions are an integral part of ideal argumentative practice.

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