Scholarship at UWindsor

May 14th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Kalef

Daniel H. Cohen

Cohen, Daniel H., "Commentary on Kalef" (2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 56.
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA5/papersandcommentaries/56

Author: Daniel H. Cohen
Commentary on: J. Kalef's "Informal Logic and the Philosophy of Religion"

We know that from a purely logical standpoint, none of the proofs for the existence of God holds much water. Most involve readily identifiable invalid inferences. Of the remainder, those that do not Beg the Question obviously, do so surreptitiously. The history of commentary on the even the greatest contribution to philosophical theology, Anselm's Ontological Argument, is the history of a debate not on whether it actually works or goes wrong - it does go wrong! - but on exactly where it goes wrong. Indeed, it was precisely because so many of the criticisms were so completely on target, that the one-time Ontological Proof was down-graded to a mere Ontological Argument.[1] Hell, even Aquinas' Five Ways are still called his Five *Proofs* (e.g., by Frederick Copleston in his various histories of Medieval Philosophy).

On the other hand, maybe it deserves to be called an argument because it really is something worth arguing about! And perhaps now, after we have been arguing about it at great length for so long, it is time to up-grade it to the Ontological Controversy.

At any rate, I think we can all agree that putative demonstrations of God's existence are better thought of as arguments, so that turning the lenses provided by informal logic, critical thinking, and argumentation theory onto the various proofs, reasons, and arguments for the existence of God is completely called-for. I do not think that I should have to argue for that - certainly not to the argumentation theorists at IL@25 anyway! But it is also an ambitious project because the literature on the Blessed - but vexing - topic of theism is, as befits the Unmoved Mover, inexhaustibly exhausting. The darkest depths of its mysteries cannot be plumbed, so no end is in sight. And even though the literature on the vexing - but Blessed! - topic of argumentation may not be as daunting, neither can the highest summits of enlightenment be finally scaled, so its end too is nowhere in sight. Oh, but the vistas along the way!

Thus, even if there is not a whole lot of news value in the conclusion that Informal Logic is a better tool than Formal Logic for dealing with the likes of Augustine, Anselm, Avicenna, Maimonides, Aquinas, Scotus, Pascal, Descartes, and Spinoza, as well as their descendants Plantinga, van Inwagen, and Shalkowski, it is a point well worth saying because it points to a path well worth following.

Let me step back now from my irreverent metaphors, excessive hyperbole, and heavy-handed assumptions in order to ask a question about the rhetoric that I just used: Was it illogical? Was it inappropriate? Did it help further my argument? For that matter, did it help to make my words into an argument?

To answer these questions, we have to look beyond the words themselves. Words are just words until they are contextualized. They can be neither reasoning nor argument nor proof until they are put to some purpose - and arguments serve many purposes. Irreverent metaphors may serve the purposes of persuading, explaining, and perhaps entertaining quite well, even while at the very same time they might be counterproductive for convincing someone logically. How well they serve their identified purpose depends on, among other things, how they are

presented, where they are presented, and to whom they are presented. Hyperbole, if presented as blatant overstatement may make effective use of the mechanics of Gricean implicature. But those same overstatements, if taken as ill-informed mis-statements, can be the occasion for unnecessary quibbling. And as for gross assumptions, from a logical standpoint, they are inappropriate only when they cannot be supported by the proponent. Regardless, they would have to be counted as dialectical mis-steps if they invite an extended series of objections from the opponent and cicuitous detours in the dialectical tier. From a rhetorical perspective, presumptuous assumptions would be counterproductive if, say, they made the arguer look biased or dogmatic and so either distracted the audience from the argument at hand or alienated them altogether.

If we are going to use the tools of argumentation theory on theistic arguments, we need to keep in mind that there are many tools from which to choose designed for many different purposes. For example, the conceptual vocabulary of fallacy identification treats arguments as proofs, but a lot of what arguments do is not captured in proofs. Even the tools of classical rhetorical analysis, designed to assess the art of rational persuasion, are inapt when rational persuasion is not the target.

Consider, for example, Pascal's Wager argument. The conclusion can be taken to be that it is rational to have faith. When we examine it as a proof, the relevant questions concern its logic. What are the premises? What is the conclusion? And does that conclusion follow from those premises? The focus on the inferential structure renders the pragmatics all but invisible. The simple assertion that it is rational to have faith means very different things when presented to theists and to atheists. Is it an assertion that theists are rational too? Or is it an assertion that only theists are rational? An argument to the rationality of faith will mean very different things when coming from a sidewalk prophet confronted by a challenging crowd of skeptics than when it is coming from a preacher encouraging the assembled faithful from his pulpit. We need to take into account the arguer's goals in arguing - which prominently include winning - as well as the audience's reasons for listening. A class listens to its professor to learn (we hope); a jury listens to attorneys to render a judgment; and while congregations may listen to their clergy in order to shore up their beliefs, philosophers will enter into arguments precisely in order to challenge theirs.

We do need to think of arguments as proofs, but we also need to remember that they can also be thought of as disagreements and as presentations and as explorations and simply as spontaneous eruptions of our rational natures. There is a multiplicity of audiences and purposes, to go along with the multiplicity of kinds of arguments. This is the great lesson we should take from argumentation theory, broadly understood, if not also from informal logic, more narrowly construed. Apply those lessons here. Who is the target audience for Shalkowski, van Inwagen, et al.? And what are their goals? Do they really think they are going to convert the pagans?

It is almost impossible to imagine that they could sincerely believe that their arguments will in fact convert the masses. Philosophical argumentation rarely manages to have that kind of effect. I doubt that they are even trying for that. We should ask ourselves, then, what other goals might be in mind. And the answer to that question is something interesting, namely, that neither of the "theistic arguments" considered here is any such thing. Shalkowski's discussion of the burden of proof and van Inwagen's ratiocination about the relative probability of evil are much better thought of as counter-arguments to arguments against theism than initial and positive arguments for theism. They are parts of a much larger dialogue - which is not the natural habitat of proofs proper.

Kalef is quite right to note that there is something objectionable about weasel-y falsification evasion. And he is also quite right to note that it cannot be easily put under the rubric of any of the available logical fallacies. That is right, but it is not because there is a shortage of fallacy categories. Rather, it is because of the simple fact that falsification evasion per se, as objectionable as it may at times be, is not a logical fallacy at all. Changing one's mind is allowed. Modifying one's position in response to critical feedback is what we're supposed to do, so it should be thought of as admirable, not blameworthy, so it should not be on the fallacy lists. But there is indeed often something suspect about it. When it is problematic, however, it is a different sort of problem than a failure of inference, so looking for this problem among fallacies is looking in the wrong place. The same can be said of shifty shifting of the burden of proof. We need other tools from the argumentation theory kit when we are dealing with other sorts of argumentative errors. And we do have such tools at hand. In the two cases at hand, the problems are dialectical rather than logical, but there are other cases where rhetoric or the ethics of argument fill in the gaps.

Actually, it may be that we have too much at hand. Kalef's well-founded qualms about post facto falsification evasion as objectionable strategic retreats to "save the phenomena" can be chastised in several ways:

(1) as equivocations from the original position;
(2) as a form of ignoratio elenchi, viz., failing to recognize or recognize a refutation;
(3) as an excess of what Peirce called the method of tenacity;
(4) as a joint failure, in the pragma-dialectical vocabulary, of their second and ninth rules for critical discussions for proponents to defend their positions and abandon them when their defenses are unsuccessful;
(5) in perhaps the closest fit, provided by Walton and Woods, as a violation of their explicitly dialectical - rather than logical - No Retraction Rule governing refutations (Woods and Walton, 1989).

Similarly, there are vocabularies in place to accommodate Kalef's well-founded suspicions regarding shifty shifts in the burden of proof. The pragma-dialectical school may provide the most developed and detailed framework for transgressions concerning burdens of proof, but there are others. For the record, it would be violations of their second rule (Van Emmeren and Grootendorst, 1992).

Perhaps all I am saying is that Informal Logic and the Philosophy of Religion is a paper that needed to have been written. The dialogue about theism is not, as Kalef shows, a simple matter of Logic. There is more, so I await the sequels - Critical Thinking and the Philosophy of Religion and Argumentation Theory and the Philosophy of Religion. That is a Trinity even a good Jewish atheist like me could get behind.

Notes

[1] Kant, in Norman Kemp Smith's translation of The Critique of Pure Reason, referred to the impossibility of an "Ontological Proof" for the existence of God, but concludes that Descartes' "ontological argument" is futile. Now, even its adherents, like Plantinga, refer to it as the "Ontological Argument."   See, e.g., Plantinga, 1965.

References

Eemeren, Frans H. van and Rob Grootendorst, 1992. *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies: A Pragma-Dialectical perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Plantinga, Alvin, editor, 1965. *The Ontological Argument*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Woods, John and Douglas Walton, 1989. *Fallacies: Selected Papers* 1972-1982. Providence: Foris Publications.