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Argument Quality and Cultural Difference

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Title: Argument Quality and Cultural Difference¹

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I. Argument Quality as Impersonally and Transculturally Conceived

Central to argumentation theory is the matter of the normative evaluation of argument quality: that is, of argument *normativity*. Argumentation theorists are concerned, among other things, with explaining why some arguments are *good*, or at least better than others, in the sense that they provide reasons for embracing their conclusions which are such that a fair-minded appraisal of the arguments yields the judgment that those conclusions ought to be accepted -- are *worthy of acceptance* -- by all who so appraise them.

Such goodness is an *epistemic* matter. Argument normativity is a variety of epistemic normativity, in that what makes an argument good is that its premises provide reasons for accepting its conclusion. That is, the conclusion ought to be accepted, on the basis of the support provided that conclusion by those premises: the premises *justify* the conclusion, rendering it worthy of belief.²

The feature of this view of argument normativity which is of concern in what follows is its impersonal and transcultural character. The quality of a given argument is *impersonal*, on this view, in the sense that its normative status is *independent* of the person(s) evaluating that status.³ This is not to say that the argument could be evaluated without a person to conduct the evaluation (although some arguments can be successfully evaluated by machine). It is to say, rather, that the quality of the argument is a feature of the argument itself, rather than of the person(s) assessing its quality. Moreover, the quality of an argument is *transcultural* in the sense that its normative status is independent of the cultural locations and perspectives of its evaluators. It is the character of such impersonal and transcultural evaluation, such that the quality of an argument is as it would appear to a hypothetical 'fair-minded' evaluator -- rather than as it actually appears to actual, flesh and blood evaluators, with their own cultural locations and perspectives -- that will occupy us in what follows.

II. Argument Quality as Culturally Contextualized: Preliminary Considerations

This impersonal, transcultural conception of argument normativity makes no reference either to the attributes of the persons appraising the argument and judging its normative force, or to the characteristics of the culture(s) to which such persons belong or the cultural context in which the appraisal occurs. The premises of the argument provide whatever support for its conclusion that they do -- from no support whatsoever in the case of a really bad argument, to

extremely strong support in the case of a really good argument, with every degree of support in between for arguments of every degree of quality -- *whoever* is conducting the evaluation, in *whatever* cultural context.

But recent work by a wide range of philosophers, argumentation theorists, and social theorists rejects such an abstract, de-contextualized notion of argument goodness. Instead, these theorists insist upon taking seriously, in the evaluation of arguments, the features and perspectives -- and in particular, the cultural locations -- of the evaluators. That is, such theorists emphasize the importance of *cultural differences* in argument appraisal. Often locating themselves under the banner of *multiculturalism*, they argue that the quality of an argument depends upon culturally-specific beliefs, values, and presuppositions. Consequently, they contend, no a-contextual⁴, culture-independent characterization of argumentative goodness can succeed.

A considerable range of writers advocate the view that judgments concerning the goodness or normative force of reasons and arguments (and cultural ideals and values more generally) are inevitably, and perhaps necessarily, culture-specific. Alasdair MacIntyre's celebrated *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) announces in its very title the doctrine that rationality -- and so the probative force of reasons, and so argument quality -- is in some sense relative to cultural/historical tradition, and is in that sense neither impersonal nor transcultural. MacIntyre writes that all rational activity is "inescapably historically and socially context-bound" (1988, p. 4); elsewhere he suggests that one "cannot find...any genuinely neutral and independent standard of rational justification" (1989, p. 198) -- and so, presumably, any context- or tradition-independent standard of argument quality.⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard is said to champion "the irreducibly local character of all discourse, argumentation, and legitimation" (Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy 1987, p. 70); he holds, clearly enough, that what counts as knowledge and as justification is itself relative to local, cultural context, and he rejects any sort of transcultural 'metanarrative' that sets out standards of argument quality as 'terroristic.' (Lyotard 1987) More generally, those thinkers generally classified as 'postmodernists' are typically regarded as holding that "rationality is always relative to time and place," implying that argument quality is similarly relative.⁶

Perhaps the most visible writer in that somewhat vague classification is Richard Rorty, who also rejects the possibility of personally- or culturally-transcendent evaluation of arguments, and of cultures more generally.⁷ His favored version of pragmatism famously rejects the search for "an Archimedean point from which to survey culture" (1982, p. 150), in favor of a frank embrace of ethnocentricity or 'solidarity,' according to which there is no non-circular or non-question-begging way to justify our own ideals, values and commitments to those who reject them in favor of their own, equally ethnocentric alternatives: "We pragmatists...should say that we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so" (Rorty (1989), p. 44) -- including, presumably, our own group's judgments and standards of argument goodness. David Theo

Goldberg helpfully summarizes and develops Rorty's view as follows:

The traditional historical commitment of philosophical liberalism to universal principles of reason and (moral) value presupposes universal ideas like intrinsic humanity, human dignity, and human rights -- values, that is, that are thought to mark individuals in virtue of their very humanity. As Rorty insists, there is no transhistorical or supersocial Godly view on which such universal (moral) principles can be grounded or from which they can be derived. Axiological concepts and values are necessarily those of some historically specific community....Thus, any insistence on the universalism of values must be no more than the projected imposition of local values -- those especially of some ethnoracial and gendered particularity -- universalized. (1994, pp. 17-18)

As Goldberg here suggests, Rorty's ethnocentrism rejects the possibility of 'universal principles of reason' in accordance with which arguments can be impersonally evaluated. While Rorty's denial of the possibility of impersonal, transcultural beliefs, values and ideals is in the first instance directed to moral values and principles rather than to principles of 'reason' or of argument evaluation, it is readily extended there, as Goldberg suggests:

Axiological relativism is bound to deny neither some basic formal principles of thinking -- call them universal, if necessary -- nor generalizable value judgments concerning especially pernicious social conditions and practices. So, owning up to formal principles of logical relation implies nothing about the assertive content of thought....Logical formalism enables only that inconsistent and incoherent claims for the most part can be ruled out; it is thoroughly incapable of assertively promoting some coherent or consistent standard over another. (16-17)

So, on the Rorty/Goldberg view, there may be universal 'formal principles' both of 'thinking' and of 'logical relation,' but these will be insufficient to determine the quality of 'the assertive content of thought.' With respect to the quality of thought -- and, in particular, the quality of particular arguments -- such determinations of argumentative quality cannot be other than the judgments of 'some historically specific community,' which may well differ from the judgments of argumentative quality of other specific communities. How good is a given argument, then? It appears that the Rorty/Goldberg answer to this question can only be: it depends on the cultural identities and commitments of its evaluators, and the cultural circumstances in which the evaluation takes place. But appearances here *may* be deceiving.

As Rorty and Goldberg both acknowledge, their view suggests a problematic form of epistemological relativism. Rorty explicitly rejects relativism, although it remains unclear whether he is nonetheless committed to it⁸. Goldberg defends 'a more robustly nuanced,' 'multicultural' relativism, as the following two passages indicate:

If the truth is relative simplistically to the group proclaiming it, then all claims to truth, no matter how much they lack substantiation, are on an equal footing. Pat Lauderdale has noted recently that the critique of "objectivity" as veiling the imputation of Eurocentric value has buried justifiable concerns about accuracy. A more robust and more robustly nuanced conception of relativism underpinning the multicultural project will enable distinctions to be drawn between more or less accurate truth claims and more or less justifiable values (in contrast to claims to the truth or the good). (1994, p. 15, emphases in original)

Here Goldberg seems clearly to reject epistemological relativism -- at least the 'simplistic' form of it according to which 'the truth is relative simplistically to the group proclaiming it' -- in favor of an epistemology that explicitly and legitimately distinguishes 'between more or less accurate truth claims and more or less justifiable values.' There is nothing here that the epistemological 'absolutist' need reject. His version of relativism is spelled out further as follows:

...the relativism upon which a sophisticated form of critical multiculturalism rests is not restricted to value particularism. Multicultural relativism is ready and able to fashion general judgments, that is, revisable inductive generalizations as the specificity of (particular) circumstances and relations warrant. These circumstances and relations will include often, though not necessarily always, racial, class, and gendered articulation. Thus multiculturalists are able to condemn a specific form of racism, say, apartheid, in terms of a general judgment that racist exclusions are unacceptable because they are unwarranted in a specifiable scheme of social value to which we do or should adhere for specifiable (and, perhaps, generalizable) reasons. But there is no transcendental proof or grounds, no universal foundation, for this scheme or any other. (1994, p. 19)

Here again what Goldberg calls 'multicultural relativism' seems not particularly relativistic: it accepts that general judgments, e.g. that 'racist exclusions are unacceptable,' can be warranted within 'a specifiable scheme of social value to which we do *or should* adhere for specifiable (and, perhaps, generalizable) reasons.' (emphasis added) The 'scheme of social value' is one to which we should adhere for specifiable reasons, even if we (or some of us) do not in fact so adhere: we would be *wrong* not to adhere to it, given the reasons which can be offered for it. This seems not only not relativistic, but the very definition of 'absolutism.' (Siegel 1987, 1999)

Why, then, given his willingness to distinguish between more or less 'accurate' (15) or warranted claims, does Goldberg consider his view to be a 'relativistic' one? I can only speculate here, but there is considerable textual support for the

hypothesis that Goldberg regards his view as relativist because he rejects all claims to "*the truth*" and "*the good*" (15), and to "transcendental proof or grounds," and to "universal foundation[s]," for any particular scheme. (19) That is, it appears that Goldberg is concerned mainly to reject foundationalism, certainty, necessity, and transhistorical and supersocial Godly perspectives from which claims to the truth or the good might be made, and to embrace a thoroughgoing epistemological fallibilism. With all this the non-relativist can happily concur. Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, the important point for present purposes is that Goldberg's 'robustly nuanced multicultural relativism' appears not in the end to hold that argument quality is relative to culture; it holds, rather, that some cultural beliefs, values and practices can be legitimately criticized on the basis of reasons which, while neither necessary nor certain, are nevertheless good ones which we *should* acknowledge as probatively telling even if we in fact do not. (Only thus are we (on Goldberg's view) within our epistemic rights to condemn racist exclusions as 'unacceptable' -- i.e. as *wrong* -- not just for us, who are already convinced of the wrongness of racism, but for everyone, including the racist who does not, but *should*, accept our scheme of social value on the basis of the reasons which can be offered for it and which itself provides us with reasons adequate to establish the unacceptability of such exclusions.)

If this analysis of Goldberg's view is correct, that view in the end does not, despite initial appearances, support a culturally relative view of argument quality. But I hasten to acknowledge that other passages in Goldberg's discussion do seem to recommend such a view. I consider some of those passages further below.

As is already clear, the thesis that argument goodness depends upon cultural commitments and differences raises problems which also arise in the context of discussions of epistemological relativism; in contemplating the former it will prove necessary to consider the latter as well. In what follows, then, I will discuss difficulties with the view that argument quality depends upon culture which accrue to that view in virtue of its apparent embrace of a problematic epistemological relativism; but I will consider other difficulties as well, which befall it even if it avoids relativistic ones. While I hope in what follows to acknowledge the genuine insights of a multiculturalist approach to argument quality, I will argue that that quality is not rightly understood as dependent upon cultural difference.

III. Four Difficulties with a Culturally Contextual View of Argument Quality

A. *Transcendence*. Central to the view that argument quality depends upon culture is the claim, embraced by the view's defenders -- and, as we will see, by its critics as well -- that there is no possibility of 'transcending,' no escape from, whatever specific historical/cultural⁹ location argument evaluators happen to occupy. I consider next a version of the argument that defends that view by appeal to this premise.¹⁰

One case for a personal, culturally sensitive -- rather than an impersonal, a-cultural -- conception of argument quality depends upon a rejection of culturally 'transcendent' principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality. According to it, all such principles and criteria, however much they are made to look universal or transcendent, are local; their status varies from locale to locale. As Goldberg puts the point: "As Rorty insists, there is no transhistorical or supersocial Godly view on which such universal (moral) principles can be grounded or from which they can be derived....any insistence on the universalism of values must be no more than the projected imposition of local values...universalized." (18) If the values in question are those relating to argument quality, this claim seems to lead directly to the culturally relative conception of argument quality we are considering.

The point, it must be admitted, is widely acknowledged in contemporary discussion: one can never completely escape one's historical/cultural location, with its associated perspective, framework, or conceptual scheme, and achieve a 'God's eye view' or a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986); all cognitive activity -- including, of course, the evaluation of arguments -- is inevitably conducted from some ongoing perspective or point of view. A typical expression of the thesis is Quine's:

The philosopher's task differs from the others', then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work. (1960, pp. 275-6)

Philosophers generally grant Quine's point: there is no 'cosmic exile' from all conceptual schemes; one cannot cognize except from within the confines of some scheme or other. As Goldberg puts it, there is no 'transhistorical or supersocial Godly view' from which human judgments -- and in particular, judgments concerning argument quality -- can be made. But from the relatively uncontroversial claim that we cannot escape all perspectives and achieve a 'view from nowhere,' it seems a short step to the conclusion that principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are themselves relative to the cultural frameworks which inevitably limit our judgment; that, since there is no 'perspectiveless' judgment, there is no possibility of achieving a perspective which would allow us to judge the quality of arguments in a culturally transcendent way. That is, the uncontroversial claim that all judgments of argument quality inevitably occur in the context of some cultural location or other might be thought to entail that all such judgments are therefore *bound* or *determined* by such *inescapable* locations -- and so that what counts as a good argument is problematically *limited* by cultural context in such a way, or to such an extent, that a culturally relativistic view of argument quality inevitably results.

However, it does not -- or so I will argue. The alleged entailment just mentioned fails; even though we cannot attain a culturally transcendent perspective, in the relevant sense we *can* nevertheless 'transcend' such perspectives in judging argument quality. The key is to distinguish between transcending or escaping *any particular* perspective from transcending *all* such perspectives. Once this distinction is drawn, the 'no transcendence, therefore argument quality is relative to culture' argument collapses.

Consider the question first in general terms, i.e. without regard to the specific case of judgments concerning argument quality, and without restricting ourselves to *cultural* frameworks or perspectives. Are we limited by our perspectives, such that we cannot achieve any critical perspective on them? Are we really 'trapped' within our perspectives in this way? Common sense and every day experience indicate the contrary. Perhaps the most obvious range of counter-examples involve the cognitive activities of children. Children of a certain age, for example, can count and have a reasonable grasp of whole numbers, but have no understanding of fractions or decimals, i.e., parts of whole numbers. If asked 'is there a number between 1 and 2?', they will answer in the negative, and will be unable to comprehend any suggestion to the contrary. But, given normal psychological/cognitive development, within a few years such children will answer affirmatively; they will have no problem recognizing that, e.g., 1.5 is a number between 1 and 2, and more generally, that there are non-whole numbers. This seems a perfectly straightforward case of the modification of a framework (or of the abandonment of one framework for another) which belies the claim that we are trapped in, bound by, or limited to our frameworks.¹¹ (Scientific examples can equally easily be given, e.g., of the recognition of the existence of things too small to see with the naked eye, or of the interanimation of space and time and of the large scale non-Euclidean geometry of the universe.)

Very different sorts of examples can also be given. Consider, for example, the 'male sexist pig' who has no awareness or understanding of women other than as (sex) objects, but who in the course of his experience comes to realize (if only dimly) that he does treat women as objects, that many women want not to be so treated, and that there might well be something objectionable about treating women in that way. Suppose that this benighted male comes eventually to a full(er) awareness of the injustice of his earlier treatment of women; he comes to believe that it is wrong to treat women as objects and, over a considerable period of time and with the help of many women (and perhaps some courses in the Women's Studies Department), he develops a radically different and more respectful view of women and (hallelujah!) treats them accordingly. (Surely many men have had their consciousnesses raised to some extent in this way in recent decades.) Here again it seems that our subject has had his perspective altered and, indeed, improved; that is, he has 'transcended' his old sexist perspective for another.

In these examples not only have perspectives altered; the cognizers considered all regard their later perspectives as *improvements*, i.e., as better

than, superior to, their earlier ones. If asked, these cognizers will be able to offer reasons which purport to justify those judgments of superiority. Those reasons, and the judgment that they are good ones which offer justification for the superiority of those later perspectives, are of course made from the perspective of those later perspectives or frameworks; they are not outside of all frameworks or issued from a perspectiveless perspective. Thus is acknowledged the uncontroversial premise of the argument under consideration. But the conclusion is undermined by the several counter-examples offered: epistemic agents always judge from some perspective or other, but there is no reason to think that they are trapped in or bound by their perspectives such that they cannot subject them to critical scrutiny. In this sense, we *can* 'transcend' our perspectives; and this sense is sufficient to defeat the general argument for the relativity of judgment to perspectives which we have been considering. As Popper puts the point:

I do admit that at any moment we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language. But we are prisoners in a Pickwickian sense: if we try, we can break out of our frameworks at any time. Admittedly, we shall find ourselves again in a framework, but it will be a better and roomier one; and we can at any moment break out of it again. The central point is that a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible. (1970, p. 56)

Here Popper clearly draws the crucial distinction which undermines this path to relativism. While the Quinean point that there is no 'cosmic exile' from all perspectives -- that we inevitably judge from some framework or other, and that we cannot judge from a perspectiveless perspective -- must be granted, it does not follow that our judgments are necessarily tainted by the fact that they are made from some framework or other, or are 'good' only relative to that framework. On the contrary, we can and regularly do 'transcend' our frameworks from the perspective of other, 'roomier' ones, in which can fit both our earlier one and relevant rivals to it -- and in this way fair, non-relative evaluations of both our judgments and the frameworks/perspectives from which they are made are possible.¹²

I have to this point been treating the general question of the degree to which our judgments are determined by, and therefore relative to, our conceptual schemes/frameworks/perspectives. The conclusion to which these musings have led is that, while it is clearly correct that we cannot attain or judge from a 'perspectiveless perspective,' we nevertheless not only can but regularly do attain sufficient critical leverage on our perspectives that we can criticize, evaluate, and improve them -- and, consequently, that judgment is not inevitably determined by or trapped within those perspectives. This general point is directly applicable to the special case involving judgments of argument quality.¹³ When we evaluate arguments, we inevitably do so from some perspective or other. In particular, we do so from the particular historical/cultural perspective in which we are embedded, with its own

particular principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality. Nevertheless, we are not 'trapped' within that perspective; our judgments of argument quality are not wholly determined by it. Indeed, during the long history of the development of principles of argument evaluation within Western/European culture, many such principles have been altered as theorists gained critical perspective on them. Particularly salient examples involve the impact of the development of probability theory on principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality which touch upon probabilistic matters, e.g. principles and criteria relevant to what are now taken to be the gambler's fallacy, the fallacy of hasty generalization, and arguments whose cogency depends upon representative sampling.¹⁴ The moral of the story is clear: while there is a clear sense in which judgments of argument quality are embedded in particular historical/cultural locations, that sense is not such as to challenge the impersonal and transcultural conception of argument normativity with which we began. The argument in question -- we cannot transcend our historical/cultural locations, therefore argument quality depends upon the features of and is relative to those locations -- founders on the failure to distinguish between 'transcending' all perspectives at once, and in doing so judging from a perspectiveless perspective, and transcending any particular perspective. The former is not possible, but the latter is not only possible but quite common. In particular, judgments of argument quality admit of this latter sort of transcendence. Consequently, this route to a culturally relative conception of argument quality does not succeed.

The argument we have been considering rests upon a failure to distinguish between transcending all perspectives, and transcending any particular one. A related argument suffers from the opposite failing: it draws a sharp, but ultimately untenable, distinction between the *locatedness* or particularity of principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality, on the one hand, and the possibility of any 'universal' status for such principles and criteria, on the other. It moreover regards these as contraries, and consequently holds that principles and criteria relevant to argumentation, being particular, cannot also be thought to be universal. I turn to this argument next.

B. Universality and Particularity Here, as we have already seen, Goldberg clearly articulates the problematic dichotomy in question: "Axiological concepts and values are necessarily those of some historically specific community....Thus, any insistence on the universalism of values must be no more than the projected imposition of local values...universalized." On this view, all principles and values are local and particular; any claim to universality is nothing more than "the imposition of [the] local values...of some ethnoracial and gendered particularity." (18) The application of this view to principles and criteria concerning argumentation is straightforward: they too are particular, not universal; argument quality is dependent upon the particular location in which evaluation takes place. So a given argument may (for example) beg the question, and be judged to be of poor quality in a locale that takes a dim view of that particular argument form, but be judged to be of high quality in a locale in which that form is regarded with equanimity. To take a real example: any

argument of the form which we now call 'the gambler's fallacy' was thought to be a good argument in the environs of the Harvard logicians of the 1870's, but is thought to be a bad argument in the rarefied atmosphere of the Emerson Hall (where the Harvard Philosophy Department is housed) of today.¹⁵

Let us grant that all principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are local and particular¹⁶, in the sense that they are inevitably articulated and endorsed in particular historical/cultural circumstances -- just (as granted above) as they are inevitably endorsed from some perspective or other. Does it follow that they are therefore not universal? Two contemporary denizens of Emerson Hall suggest not. Israel Scheffler writes: "I have always supposed that the universal and the particular are compatible, that grounding in a particular historical and cultural matrix is inevitable and could not conceivably be in conflict with universal principles." (Scheffler 1995, p. 14) Hilary Putnam, in commenting on this passage, agrees:

When we argue about the universal applicability of principles...we are not claiming to stand outside of our own tradition, let alone outside of space and time, as some fear; we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions and to see what in that tradition may be inferior -- inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to the best we may be capable of....

...[W]e are not forced to choose between scientism and skepticism [or between 'universalism' and 'particularism']....The third possibility is to accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world -- and, for that matter, some interests and values -- as better than others. This may mean giving up a certain metaphysical picture of objectivity, but it does not mean giving up the idea that there are what Dewey called "objective resolutions of problematical situations" -- objective resolutions to problems which are situated in a place, at a time, as opposed to an "absolute" answer to "perspective-independent" questions. And that is objectivity enough. (Putnam 1990, p. 178, emphases in original)

Putnam is here discussing principles of ethics rather than of argument evaluation, and matters metaphysical as well as epistemological, but the relevance of his remarks to our topic is clear. In regarding argument quality as 'impersonal,' 'transcultural,' or 'universal,' we are not denying that our principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are local and particular, in the sense that they are *ours*: articulated and endorsed by us, in our particular historical/cultural context. But acknowledging their particularity does not preclude us from proclaiming their universality: that is, their legitimate applicability to arguments, considered independently of their location.

In holding these principles and criteria to be 'universal' or transcultural, we need not deny their locality/particularity. Goldberg and Rorty are correct in holding that all proclamations of universal principle emanate from particular locales. It does not follow from this, though, that such values have no legitimacy or force beyond the bounds from within which they are proclaimed or embraced. The problematic move is to regard 'particularity' and 'universality' as contraries, such that a principle or criterion's being one precludes it from being the other. Elsewhere (Siegel 1997, pp. 174-8; Siegel (under review)) I have offered both general arguments against regarding these as contraries, and a range of examples, from mathematics, science, and morality, of claims, theses, principles and criteria which are both particular and universal. I will not repeat these arguments and examples here. I will instead content myself with suggesting that, for the reasons given both here and there, this argumentative path -- principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are particular and local; therefore they cannot be 'universal' or 'transcend' their locales; therefore argument quality is relative to historical/cultural location or context -- does not succeed.

C. 'Transcultural Normative Reach' I believe that the two problems facing culturally relative conceptions of argument quality just rehearsed are formidable. The main difficulty with conceiving of argument quality in culturally relative terms, however, is that any argument for that conception must presuppose the impersonal, transcultural conception of such quality with which it contrasts. As I will call it, any such argument must presuppose 'transcultural normative reach.'¹⁷ For any such argument will proceed from premises to a conclusion which is said by its proponents to follow from those premises. That it does so, if it does, will not be dependent on the cultural characteristics or commitments of those either advancing or contemplating the argument. The argument is taken by its proponents to provide good reasons for embracing its conclusion, reasons which should be found compelling by any person who fair-mindedly considers it. In this sense the argument's quality -- the ability of its premises to justify its conclusion -- is what it is, independently of the culture of either the arguer or her audience.

Such transcultural normative reach must be accepted by any advocate of a culturally relative conception of argument quality who thinks that her advocacy is not only non-arbitrary, but *rational* -- warranted by the reasons offered in its support. For an advocate who rejects such reach cannot regard herself as advancing reasons which ought to persuade a fair-minded opponent, i.e., an imagined rational and open-minded person interested in determining for herself which conception of argument quality is more worthy of embrace. Neither can she regard her embrace of the culturally relative view as more rational than her opponent's embrace of its rival. But this leaves her in a troubling position: if she can't offer such reasons, why should her opponent, or anyone else, agree with her? If she regards her favored view of argument quality as in any way rationally preferable to its alternatives, she must hold that that view is supported by reasons which have force beyond the bounds of those who happen to share her own presuppositions and commitments. In

short, the *rational* advocacy of and commitment to the culturally relative view of argument quality presupposes the transcultural character of the normative standing of arguments (and reasons) as such.¹⁸

It is important to recognize that this 'transcultural normative reach,' which I am claiming must be acknowledged by all parties to the debate concerning argument quality, does not depend upon the presumption that judgments enjoying such reach must be issued from some impossibly neutral perspective. Earlier we saw that Goldberg and Rorty reject the possibility of universal principles or values -- including those concerned with argument quality -- on the grounds that any such principles must stem from a 'transhistorical or supersocial Godly' perspective, and there simply is no such perspective available, at least to the likes of us. Goldberg and Rorty are right about the unavailability of such a perspective, and, if such a perspective were to prove necessary for arguments to enjoy transcultural normative reach, they would be right to reject such reach. But it is not. Let us grant that there are no universal or transcultural values in the sense that they are grounded in, or derived from, a perspective outside of history and culture, for there simply is no such 'Godly' perspective available. This is not the sense of 'transcultural' relevant here. All that is required for argumentative principles and criteria to be, in the relevant sense, transcultural, is that it is possible that reasons offered for particular conclusions be such that a fair-minded contemplation of those reasons will result in such conclusions being deemed worthy of acceptance on the basis of that contemplation, independently of the cultural heritage and commitments of those doing the contemplating. And this possibility, we have seen, is presupposed by any argumentative advocate of any conclusion whatsoever -- and *a fortiori* by the advocate of the culturally relative view of argument quality. Consequently, that advocate, like every other, must accept the viability of what I have been calling 'transcultural normative reach' -- and must therefore reject the culturally relative view of argument quality, which is incompatible with it.

A parallel point is powerfully made by Robert Fullinwider:

Consider the case of Christopher Columbus: did he discover America or invade it? From the perspective of fifteenth century Europe, he discovered it. From the perspective of the Arawak and other indigenous American populations, he invaded it. As descendants of the European immigrants of America most of us take (or took) the perspective of Europe. Why should we give it up or modify it? Because it is inadequate in some way? Saying it is amounts to measuring it against something outside itself, some more comprehensive and better point of view.

However, the strong separatist denies there are any overarching perspectives, just other perspectives. Now, no other perspective can claim to supercede our own merely by being other. If an Arawak-centered perspective is no better than a Eurocentric perspective or no part of a more comprehensive synthesis, why

bother to re-write the books on poor Columbus? The ironic implication of strong perspectivism is that the label "Eurocentric" ceases to be a charge, complaint or criticism; it becomes a mere description. (Fullinwider 1991, p. 14, emphases in original)

Fullinwider's 'strong perspectivist' may for present purposes be identified with the advocate of a culturally relative view of argument quality; the lesson of the example is the same for both. Since the strong perspectivist denies the possibility of overarching perspectives in terms of which particular, local perspectives can be evaluated, she denies herself the ability to criticize any such particular perspectives. More tellingly for present purposes, in doing so she likewise denies herself the ability to criticize alternatives to her favored 'strong perspectivist' view, and to defend as rationally superior to its alternatives that view itself.

Similarly, by denying the possibility of overarching, transcultural principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality, the advocate of a culturally relative view of argument quality denies herself the ability to criticize particular, culture-bound argument-related principles and criteria; and, in doing so, likewise denies herself the ability to criticize alternatives to her favored culturally relative view, and to defend as rationally superior to its alternatives that view itself. But her whole purpose, *qua* advocate of that view, is to establish its superiority. Consequently she must, in order to advocate it, *accept* rather than deny the possibility -- and indeed the actuality -- of overarching, transcultural principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality. That is, she must accept 'transcultural normative reach,' and, as above, must therefore reject the culturally relative view of argument quality which is incompatible with it.¹⁹

D. Argumentation, Rhetoric, and Power A final worry, which I can treat only briefly here, concerns a kind of skepticism toward the very idea of argumentative or epistemic normativity. The claim that a given argument is a good one, in that its premises provide justification for its conclusion, is (it may be said) not really a claim about normative status at all, since there is 'in the world' no such thing. Such claims, rather, are simply rhetorical devices, which serve to mask the exercise of power. My persuading you that you ought to believe a conclusion C because it is well supported by its premises P, or that certain standards of probative support (which I endorse) are the standards by which you should judge such support, is simply an exercise of my power over you. That certain principles and criteria of argument quality are seen as legitimate is itself no more than a reflection of the power enjoyed by those able to establish them as such. That some items are thought to be 'good reasons' while others are not is -- as van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans et. al. put it in their helpful review²⁰ of recent work on argumentation, communication and rhetoric -- "systematically to privilege certain kinds of claims over others." (1996, p. 209). As they point out, this claim:

points to the nexus between argumentation and power. It is power,

whether political, social, or intellectual, that permits one to stipulate what sorts of claims "count" in any argumentative situation. Power enables those who hold it to impose a partial perspective as if it were holistic -- the definition usually given for the term hegemony. The most recent wave of argumentation studies seeks to explore and expose the tendency of power to foreclose discourse, and it seeks emancipation by opening up alternatives. This project focuses on marginalized arguers and arguments, and is given impetus by the widespread concern for matters of race, gender and class.

The intellectual underpinning of argument-as-critique is "postmodernism"....There are many varieties of postmodernism, but the central core seems to be the denial that there are any verities or standards of judgment, and the claim that what passes for such standards really is socially constructed. In its...location of argument in communities, this perspective is in some measure consistent with the others we have discussed. But it goes on to argue that only a part of the relevant community has defined the standards, then hegemonically imposed them on the whole. The goal of critique is thus to shed light on this practice and to promote emancipatory potential by posing alternatives. (1996, p. 209, emphases in original)

As these authors point out, one "implication...of the postmodern project...is the denial that there can be any such thing as communal norms or standards for argument." (209)²¹ The claim, and the argument for it, can perhaps be summarized as follows: 'Rational argument' is really just a form of rhetoric. The use of rhetoric is the exercise of power. Judgments of argument quality are likewise rhetorical exercises of power. Thus the impersonal, transcultural view of argument quality defended above can be seen only as an equally rhetorical, power-laden construct; it can be no more than a tool of power wielded to further marginalize those not involved in its construction but expected to judge in accordance with its dictates.

This is a fundamental charge; as such adequate treatment of it requires more attention than I can give it here.²² But three points in reply seem in order. First, this skepticism concerning the very idea of argument quality (other than as an exercise in power) plagues culture-relative as well as transcultural views of argument quality, since according to it the former as well as the latter are mere rhetorical exercises of power. Consequently, it does not offer a reason for preferring the former to the latter (or vice-versa). Second, it is unclear why this view of argumentation should be itself embraced. If the application of standards of argument quality is *just* a rhetorical exercise, with no genuinely normative epistemic force (which renders the conclusions of some arguments *worthy* of belief), there seems to be no reason to embrace this rhetorical view of argumentation and judgments of argument quality either. The rational *defense* of the view requires that some rhetorical efforts are more probatively

forceful, and some exercises of rhetorical power more legitimate, than others -- and so, that argument quality is not *merely* a matter of rhetoric and power.

Of course, the 'advocate' of the view might simply shrug off the debate concerning the relative merits of her view versus opposing views, regarding all such 'rational' debate as merely rhetorical exercise; she may, in denying any sense of 'rational superiority' other than the rhetorical/power one here being considered, be flatly uninterested in establishing the rational superiority of her view. This stance embodies an admirable consistency, but it comes at a high price: in adopting it, and so rejecting the very possibility of rational advocacy of her view, this 'advocate' seems clearly enough not to be engaging the issue with which this paper is concerned. Indeed, taking this stance would render its defense logically impossible; it would make it impossible either to advocate the view in question as rationally preferable to its alternatives, or to engage the general issue of the relative merits of the rival views of argument quality we have been considering. Consequently, while the stance in question appears at first blush to constitute a possible position to take with respect to that issue, taking it not only renders that position indefensible, it renders the issue itself incapable of being coherently posed -- in which case it cannot be seen as an adequate stance to take with respect to that issue.[23](#)

There is, obviously enough, much more to be said here. Nevertheless, I hope to have said enough to make it clear that the view of argumentation as rhetorical, and as fundamentally the exercise of power, has no tendency either to upend a transcultural view of argument quality or to support a culturally-relative view of it.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that while there is much merit in the general multiculturalist perspective on argumentation -- it rightly warns us against impossible 'perspectiveless' perspectives and 'Godly' perspectives outside of time, space, and culture; and rightly reminds us that argument evaluation is conducted by flesh-and-blood people in specific historical/cultural locations, that it takes place in a context -- the multiculturalist argument against impersonal, transcultural conceptions of argumentative quality fails. It fails, first, because its criticism of the possibility of 'transcendence' depends upon a conception of transcendence which, although rightly rejected, is far stronger than that required by a transcultural view of argument quality. It fails, second, because it depends upon a sharp 'universal/particular' dichotomy which is in the end untenable. Most fundamentally, it fails because it itself presupposes just the impersonal sort of argumentative quality it seeks to reject: that of *transcultural normative reach*. Finally, it gains no support from regarding argumentation as the rhetorical exercise of power.

I conclude that the transcultural conception of argument quality survives at least the multiculturalist challenges to it discussed here.

NOTES

1I am grateful to the Spencer Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Miami for their support. The views expressed are of course solely my own responsibility. This paper was presented at a session sponsored by the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (AILACT) at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston, August 1998; I am grateful to Jonathon Adler for the invitation to participate in the session and to those in attendance for their stimulating reactions.

2For further articulation and defense of this epistemic conception of argumentation, see Feldman 1994, Lumer 1991, Wreen 1997, Biro and Siegel 1992, and Siegel and Biro 1997; for criticism see Adler 1997a and 1997b. For more general consideration of epistemic normativity (in the context of consideration of 'naturalized' epistemology), see Siegel 1996 and 1996a and references therein.

3Feldman 1994 appears to disagree, as his treatment relativizes argument goodness to persons: the same argument on Feldman's view can be a good one for you but a bad one for me. But I believe that this apparent relativization to persons is in fact relativization to the *evidence* that a given argument evaluator has at the time of evaluation. The latter sort of relativization, according to which the quality of an argument depends upon the probative strength of the relevant, available evidence utilized in its premises, is the very hallmark of the epistemic view. Thanks to Richard Feldman for helpful conversation and correspondence on this point.

4Such theorists can thus also be categorized as 'contextualists', who hold that standards of argument quality differ from context to context, culture being one such context-type. For references and critical discussion, see Combs 1995. For insightful discussion of possible cultural bias inherent in critical thinking itself, see Ennis 1998.

5Although I must immediately concede that on MacIntyre's view relativism *can* be 'transcended.' For discussion of MacIntyre's view of rationality and relativism, see Siegel 1999.

6The quoted passage is taken from Carr (1995, p.80), which offers a general and plausible characterization of the central themes of postmodernism. For critical discussion see Siegel (1990a).

7This paragraph borrows from Siegel (under review).

8For discussion of Rorty and relativism, see Siegel (1999).

9There is, presumably, equally no ready escape from our gendered, class, and other locations. For ease of exposition I will treat these further dimensions of our locations and identities as understood. I also acknowledge the vexed problem of the constitution and individuation of 'cultures,' which I make no effort to address here.

10What follows is adapted from Siegel (1999), to which the reader is referred for further discussion.

11Children typically attain a 'a reasonable grasp of whole numbers' by age three or four. Grasp of fractions and decimals usually involves a process which extends over several years and is presumably in part a function of what is taught, when. The classic work in this area is Gelman and Gallistel 1978; it (including their account of what counts as a 'reasonable grasp' of numbers) is summarized briefly and lucidly in Moshman, Glover and Bruning 1987, pp. 420-423. Thanks to David Moshman for helpful advice on matters concerning psychological development.

12For critical discussion of Popper's view, and of 'framework relativism' more generally, see Siegel 1987, ch. 2; for consideration of this issue in the context of arguments for/against naturalized epistemology, see Siegel 1995, esp. pp. 50-1; for more general discussion of the possibility of 'transcendence,' see Siegel 1997.

13It is equally applicable to the special case involving specifically *cultural* context. The example involving a sexist perspective I trust makes this clear.

14For discussion of epistemic status of these and other examples, including a sharp change of judgment concerning the legitimacy of the gambler's fallacy, see Siegel (1992).

15For discussion and references, see Siegel 1992, p. 33.

16Of course persons are also particular; all people are, in Seyla Benhabib's words, "embodied and embedded" (1992, P.6), and have to be understood such by philosophers if they are to avoid "the metaphysical illusions of the Enlightenment." (4) Benhabib strives to reformulate "the universalist tradition in ethics" (9) in such a way that it respects the "concrete other" as well as the "generalized other" (158ff.); she too rejects the universal/particular dichotomy I am challenging in this section.

17This section is adapted from and builds upon the discussion of 'transcultural normative reach' in Siegel (under review).

18This parallels the analysis of (and argument against) epistemological relativism offered in Siegel 1987, ch. 1 and rehearsed in Siegel 1999.

19She must, moreover, argue that from the perspective of those transcultural principles and criteria her favored of argument quality proves to be superior to its rivals. Here she runs into the well-rehearsed incoherence arguments against the relativism implicit in her view, since that view centrally denies the possibility of 'transcultural superiority' which it must nevertheless claim for itself. I will not rehearse again those arguments here. They are laid out in some detail in Siegel 1987 and 1999.

20The review in question appears as chapter 7 of their 1996. They are here reviewing the literature concerning this point, not endorsing it.

21For detailed discussions pro and con, see the several essays collected in Simons and Billig 1995 and Cherwitz and Hikins 1995.

22I have addressed various aspects of it, though not in the context of argumentation theory, in Siegel 1997.

23This point is developed further in Siegel 1987 and 1999, and in Siegel 1997, ch.5.

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