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# RESPONSE TO PATRICK CLAUSS' "*EUNOIA* ON THE INTERNET?: USENET NEWSGROUPS AND THE SUBVERSION OF RATIONALITY"

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Patrick Clauss offers an interesting and probably representative set of examples of conversations on the internet (suitably qualified by his disclaimer about his method of collecting the examples) which he categorizes as exemplars of (i) Walton's general types of dialogue and (ii) abuses of Damer's guiding principles for ethical argumentation. Most of the examples are versions of the general strategy known as *diversion off topic*, commonly called the *Red Herring Fallacy*, which is often particularized into specific instances of fallacious *Ad Hominem* attacks against the person or negative characteristics of the person. His conclusion is that with no central authority, Usenet groups degenerate into anarchy, violate standards of rational conduct and "subvert attempts at goal-directed argumentation" contra the flowery claims made to sell the use of internet as a freedom enhancing, positive communication medium where "nobody can tell anybody else what to do" (3). In what follows, I offer several comments on Clauss' paper and the thesis developed in it. I will attempt to clarify and question the intent and viability of the project itself.

1. First, in most of the examples provided, there is a deliberate and obvious attempt to (a) lead or divert the participants off topic (grammar example and racist example) onto extraneous or irrelevant considerations, and (b) these attempts *may* have the intention of subverting any rule-governed or goal-directed process. So, in an odd sense, the diversion in (a) may be intentionally used to satisfy the goal in (b), which is to subvert any normative goal directed process, including the project of rational argumentation. Thus, the "trollers" are successful in employing tactics to subvert one kind of activity and so they satisfy *their* "anti-social" goal-directed activity. They employ a process designed to achieve *their* goal which is in opposition to a prevailing normative goal or the process used to achieve it. So, the diversion may be a deliberate critical strategy to divert the participants away from prevailing normative argumentation strategies.

2. A successful "troller" (as Clauss describes this individual type) must remain anonymous while engaging in a more or less public debate. This individual must have free access to sites with specific site-defined goals and must succeed in diverting the participants in these internet site groups away from their site-defined goals. Their overall aim *could* be to preserve the internet for the pure and unrestrained voicing of any (albeit perhaps adolescent or youthful uninformed) opinion, however well-formed or ethically acceptable anyone takes these opinions to be according to whatever standard is employed. There is a long-established tradition of soap box orators whose aims may be similar to those of the "trollers". Minimally, both may be playing a game which has some rules and has a desired outcome or goal. It is just that they are not playing the normative, argumentation game with the established rules described by Damer. Some sociological investigation of the internet players might unearth a significant set of individuals who frequent the internet with highly opinionated responses only because they *feel* disenfranchised from voicing their opinions anywhere else, something like the soap boxers. Both participants may use the medium for cathartic reasons. As well, it is difficult to determine whether the devious trollers are being ironic, sarcastic or simply playful in their responses to the questions posed by the straight usenet players. The context in which the examples occur does not give us a clear indication of the participant's tone of speech. This can further complicate the simple response that what the deviant participants have done is obviously wrong. So, have the "trollers" done anything wrong? The simple answer is: it depends on the rules and the aim of the process they are following. Elaborating a further response to this question, we need to consider the issues of

a transfer of context for standards and rules and how rules may be independently formed, when transfer from one context to another fails to maintain accepted standards and when no accepted rules exist.

3. Second, the internet is a relatively new means of communication. We need to be careful in assessing what happens on the internet not to assume that standards in other communication *contexts* are (i) universal and (ii) obviously transfer to the internet. For example, the constraints on slander, libel and harmful comments which apply to the public news media, including unsolicited letters to the editor, are at least put into some doubt when opinions are voiced on the internet. After all many of those who play on the internet know and accept that "anything goes". That seems to be part of the allure and attraction of the medium. So, in actual practice, such standards of ethical argumentation are *not* believed by some participants to be universal. Even if we could say that such standards *are* universal in all other media contexts, it does not necessarily follow that they apply univocally to this new internet context. Why suppose that the participants are knowledgeable enough to understand the normative standards already in place, especially when many participants *may be* uninformed adolescents and youths? Why suppose that the traditional standards *must* transfer from one context to another? To assume that traditional normative standards from other contexts must apply to internet discussions is *potentially* to commit a question-begging use of the fallacious *appeal to tradition*. This is a *potential problem* that not all philosophers of ethics recognize, as R.M Hare argues: "The 'wisdom of the ages' has some authority simply because it is the result of the thought of a great many people in diverse situations." (p. 461-462, "Universal Prescriptivism" in *A Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer, Blackwell, 1995) Finally, what standards are we assuming are transferred: standards of etiquette or standards of ethics? At the very least, some kind of argument is needed to show that prevailing normative standards of argumentation (etiquette or ethical) must apply to this new context. As David Hume notes in an earlier context:

There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons; especially, if you employ a little art or eloquence, in aggravating some circumstances, and extenuating others, as best suits the purpose of your discourse. (p.333, "Dialogue" in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 2nd ed, Oxford University Press, 1902.)

I am not suggesting that there is a minefield of problems which cannot be defused. There is a way out, but it needs to be approached before we get to the minefield—not afterwards.

4. Third, if we suppose that Internet users are not necessarily subject to the same public normative standards accepted in other contexts, then we have the task of rationally persuading these users to construct and use some such standards. If there are no rules of ethical argumentation invented or accepted by the internet users, then there may be no context-specific means for determining right and wrong conduct on the system. As Clauss indicates: this is anarchy. Anarchy is not automatically a state that one ethically must or should attempt to avoid, but for present purposes we can assume that we all have an interest in avoiding this state. As with most attempts to extricate us from the state of anarchy, the participants need to understand and accept that it is in their interests to invent rules to establish standards. Such standards would, of course, apply reciprocally to them while protecting individual autonomy: Some version of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. Otherwise, those with no formal script to follow will prevail since it may be in their interests to promote and enhance anarchy or a kind of licensed freedom without responsibility.

5. Finally, to consider applying standards to a context (like usenet) we need to consider (i) both the utilitarian gains and the losses of applying the standards (and whether we value freedom as license over freedom as

reasonable constraint), (ii) if, and/or, how well ethical argumentation domain-invariant or so-called universal standards from one domain transfer univocally to another context or domain, and (iii) the nature of the internet/usenet participants, the goals, aims and processes valued and used by these internet users.

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