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Does happiness increase the objectivity of arguers?

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ABSTRACT: At first glance, happiness and objectivity seem to have little in common. I claim, however, that subjective and eudaimonic happiness promotes arguer objectivity. To support my claim, I focus on connections between happiness, social intelligence, and intellectual virtue. After addressing objections concerning unhappy objective and happy unobjective arguers, I conclude that communities should value happiness in argumentative contexts and use happiness as an indicator of their capacity for objective argumentation.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, happiness, objectivity, virtue

1. INTRODUCTION

At first glance, happiness seems to have little to do with the objectivity of argumentation. In epistemology and philosophy of science, objectivity is historically associated with detachment, neutrality, impartiality, cold cognition, individualism, and seriousness of mind—features of reasoning seemingly at odds with the affective dimension of happiness. In psychology, this apparent disconnect between happiness and objectivity is supported by research suggesting that happy people are more prone to illusions about themselves and the world than unhappy people. (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Mischel, 1979; Yeh & Liu, 2007) And in the areas of critical thinking, rhetoric and argumentation, few (if any) connections are made between happiness and objectivity. While positive affect and humor have a role in persuasion and other functions of argumentation, they are not generally considered relevant to arguer and audience objectivity.

Broader questions concerning the relation of happiness and *wisdom* have, of course, occupied philosophers for thousands of years. The wise person is compassionate, virtuous, reflectively self-aware, and of sound judgment, and objectivity is relevant to each of these qualities. However, while the debate about whether the wise person is also happy continues, my intention in this paper is to focus on the narrower issue of happiness and objective argumentation.

Despite the lack of attention paid to this narrower question, there are good reasons to think that subjective and eudaimonic happiness promote the objectivity of arguers and audiences. To support this claim, I do what Chaïm Perelman and

Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric*, say they will not: that is, engage with experimental psychology. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 9) Though of interest, they did not think experimental psychology would determine the value of argumentation. But research in social and educational psychology can illuminate questions of happiness and objectivity in argumentation and so the empirical sound of my title 'Does happiness increase the objectivity of arguers?' is therefore quite intentional. Further integration of argumentation theory and psychology with regard to the question of objectivity is especially important given the intense polarization, negativity, and incivility in contemporary argumentation about politics, science, economics, and human rights.

To support my thesis, I first outline a social conception of objectivity based in intellectual virtue. Second, I point to psychological research on emotion regulation that shows how positive affect might enhance arguer and audience objectivity. Finally, I broaden the discussion about happiness and objectivity to examine the question of social intelligence and its relation to the creation of more positive intellectual communities. I conclude that subjective and eudaimonic well-being is an essential element of good social epistemic relations and that good social epistemic relations are important for objective argumentation. We should therefore find ways to elucidate, value and support subjective and eudaimonic happiness in argumentative contexts.

2. SOCIAL, VIRTUOUS OBJECTIVITY

The definition of objectivity I am working with is social and virtue epistemic in nature. With Anthony Simon Laden, my starting point is the view "that reasoning is always a social activity, it does not work outwards to our relationships with others, but begins there." (Laden, 2012, p. 47) In the context of argumentation, Christopher Tindale expresses a similar view. He says that it

seems a fundamental feature of our social beings that we are "in audience." What this means is that we always have the standpoint of an audience, of what the experience of audience feels like; this is our primary relationship to argumentation, our entry into it... Thus, audience as a way of being is fundamental to argumentation as a social phenomenon. (Tindale, 2011, p. 454)

Any account of objectivity, I argue, should begin with the social.

It must also be virtue epistemic. Some, like Jason Baehr (2011) identify objectivity as an individual epistemic virtue. I think, however, that 'objectivity' is more of an umbrella term for virtues that ground a commitment to uncovering unbiased views of reality (to the extent that this is possible). These virtues also communicate this commitment to others in the epistemic and argumentative community. Objectivity, then, involves a social *commitment* to acquiring an empirically adequate and unbiased understanding of reality. In the following, I consider two benefits arising from this social and virtue epistemic definition of objectivity: the first addresses epistemic dependence and trustworthiness; the second addresses epistemic diversity. I will also argue that this definition is similar

to one contained in the idea of the universal audience, with the notions of *commitment* and *responsibility* filled out in virtue epistemic terms.

With regard to epistemic dependence and trustworthiness, a social and virtue epistemic understanding of objectivity stands to improve our analysis of biases that originate in the belief that reasoning is a highly individualistic and independent process. Simple observation reveals a general tendency—amongst western-educated academics at least—to trust our own individual thought processes over those of others. But as Linda Zagzebski points out, such views are usually unwarranted: we do not actually have evidence that we are "more [epistemically] trustworthy than other people" (Zagzebski, 2007, pp. 253-54). We do, however, have evidence that we are sometimes *less* epistemically trustworthy than others.

Evidence from psychology supports this view. People who have a highly individualistic view of reasoning appear to be less able to evaluate epistemic trustworthiness and assimilate multiple sources of information; they also have a greater need for cognitive closure. (Bråten et al., 2011; Strømsø et al., 2011; Kruglanski, 2009) Also of interest is a study showing that children can delay gratification for longer periods of time in trustworthy social environments than in untrustworthy social environments. (Kidd et al., 2013) While the children participating in this study were delaying gratification for marshmallows rather than truth, the ability to delay gratification is important for objective inquiry and argumentation. Trustworthy social environments may be essential to the expression of epistemic virtues requiring delayed gratification, such as intellectual tenacity, intellectual honesty, and intellectual courage.

The social dimension of epistemic dependence and trustworthiness is therefore clearly important to understanding objectivity in argumentation. Naomi Scheman observes that

[c]entral to what we do when we call an argument, conclusion, or decision "objective" is to recommend it to others, and, importantly, to suggest that they ought to accept it, that they would be doxastically irresponsible to reject it without giving reasons that made similar claims to universal acceptability. (Scheman, 2001, p. 24)

Objectivity, then, emerges from social and virtuous relationships. Nancy Potter (2010) echoes this in her claim that achieving objectivity "is centrally a practice involving virtue, the virtue of trustworthiness..." (Potter, 2010, p. 58)

The second benefit of a social and virtue epistemic understanding of objectivity concerns epistemic diversity. Feminist epistemologists have long argued that sociality is essential for objectivity and importantly, their accounts stress the relevance of diversity of perspective, value, and embodied social location to objectivity. (Code, 1987, 1991; Harding, 1986, 1991; Longino, 1990; Solomon, 2001) This issue also concerns epistemic trust for as Potter argues, we must

recognize the ways that trust and trustworthiness are compromised by the fact that bodies of knowledge do not emerge from generic abstract "human beings" but from embodied knowers who have various interests and biases that may impede the development of objective knowledge. (Potter, 2010, p. 58)

Similar ideas about embodiment and objectivity can be found in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* in relation to diverse audiences. They argue that the concept of objectivity has to change if it is "to have meaning in a conception that does not allow the separation of an assertion from the person who makes it." (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 59) The assertions of epistemically located, embodied arguers are connected to objectivity (as I define it) through Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concept of the universal audience. They say:

Instead of believing in a universal audience, analogous to the divine mind which can only assent to the "truth," we might, with greater justification, characterize each speaker by the image he himself holds of the universal audience that he is trying to win over to his view. Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of. Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience. The study of these variations would be very instructive, as we would learn from it what men, at different times in history, have regarded as *real, true*, and *objectively valid*. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 33)

For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the universal audience arises from experience with particular audiences.(Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 461) In imagining the universal audience, we need to think about how other audiences might view our argument and about how they understand the universal audience. The empirical and diverse nature of the universal audience is also apparent in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's view that while elite audiences often see themselves as universal and set "the norm for everybody," they only embody the norm for those who believe them—for others, the elite audience is "no more than a particular audience." (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 34)

The universal audience, then, should be understood as empirically grounded in a multiplicity of perspectives and engagement between those perspectives. This is a challenging criterion, for as Jane Braeton observes,

to imagine another person's point of view is far more complex than the analogous but simpler ability to imaginatively represent, say, the appearance of an object from an angle other than the one from which the viewer is in fact viewing it...In degree of complexity, it is more like the ability to understand a debate on a specialized topic, which requires education, and the careful observation and distillation of experience. But the ability to understand persons requires some additional ability as well. A person who is good at responding to other people's academic arguments may not be good at understanding people. (Braeton, 1990, p. 6)

I would add that if they do not understand people very well, the quality of their responses—and their objectivity—will also suffer. Arguably, then, those who think of the universal audience in abstract, uniform, disembodied terms will have reduced access to the objectivity-enhancing activity of imagining diversity during argument construction.

A social and virtue epistemic understanding of objectivity makes better sense of our experience of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, epistemic diversity, and the value of constructing universal audiences alongside arguments. I now turn to consider what psychological studies about emotion regulation might indicate about the role of positive moods and emotions in objective argumentation.

3. EMOTION REGULATION, POSITIVE AFFECT, AND OBJECTIVITY

Many philosophers argue for greater integration of emotion into epistemological issues. (De Sousa, 1987, 2008; Jaggar, 1989; Nussbaum, 2001; Scheffler, 1991; Thagard, 2006; Zagzebski, 1996) Some argue that we can use emotions cognitively to counter bias, and thus challenge the idea that emotions undermine objectivity. (Frye, 1983; Lugones, 2003; Ortega, 2006) Others have developed accounts of emotion and its management in the context of critical thinking, rhetoric, and argumentation. (Auchlin, 1990; Bailin, 2006; Gilbert, 1997; Walton, 1992) To build on this work, it is useful to consider research on emotion regulation in the field of psychology, especially with regard to the issue of objective argumentation. I am particularly interested in emotion regulation studies that situate participants in a social context. (Campos et al., 2011; Kappas, 2011) It is my view that these studies support the happiness-objectivity connection principally by casting doubt on the depressive realism hypothesis. And these doubts may be especially relevant to argumentation.

The depressive realism hypothesis (Mischel, 1979) is the claim that people suffering from depression have more realistic perceptions of reality than the nondepressed. The depressed, it seems, evaluate themselves and other people more realistically. (See Birinci & Dirik, 2008) But this hypothesis is problematic for a number of reasons. Studies providing evidence for the depressive realism hypothesis have been criticized for not incorporating the kinds of emotional and social situations people encounter in everyday life into their experimental design. (Birinci & Dirik, 2008, p. 3) When you do incorporate these everyday life situations, evidence suggests that the depressed have less accurate evaluations of reality. (Pacini et. al., 1998)

One reason for this finding may concern the role of emotion regulation and intellectual virtue in helping us pay *attention* to the right things. Paying attention to the right things is one of the cornerstones of objective reasoning. Objectivity requires us to pay attention to relevant features of reality and ignore irrelevant features. Emotions can help with this: emotions affect what we pay attention to, and what we pay attention to affects our emotions (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2011). Intellectual virtues can also help us pay attention to the right things. Fairmindedness motivates us to attend respectfully to contrasting viewpoints. Tenacity sustains attention under conditions of adversity. You can also use virtue to regulate emotion and vice versa. This means that if your ability to regulate emotion is decreased, this will adversely affect your ability to exercise virtue and consequently direct your attention to the right things. Because depressed people tend to ruminate about negative life events (Nolem-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993), we might expect to find that they have narrowed their attention. This narrowing of attention might explain why the depressed evaluate reality more accurately in artificial experimental environments with reduced variables of interaction, but less

accurately when navigating the complexity of everyday life. Attention difficulties could easily lead to bias in argumentation given its inherent social complexity.

Social context studies of emotion regulation also challenge the depressive realism hypothesis because of their finding that emotion regulation involves the interpersonal negotiation of goals. According to Campos et al. (2011), emotion management in a social context

involves a regulatory triad of relinquishing, modifying, or persevering with one's goals in an attempt to move from conflict to negotiated outcome...On the former [nonsocial] account, emotion regulation centers on meeting one's goal. In the relational view, emotion regulation is just as often about negotiating outcomes, including relinquishing one's goals in the interests of the negotiated outcome. (Campos et. al., 2011, p. 28)

The kind of negotiation involved here is very similar to—and overlaps with—the kind of negotiation that takes place between arguers and audiences. As Tindale (2004, 2006) claims, audiences have an active and influential role in argumentation. They can influence the direction of an argument, what an arguer can achieve, what an arguer wants to achieve, as well as change their own objectives and views.

How successful arguer-audience negotiations are in relation to maintaining a commitment to acquiring knowledge will depend on how well arguers and audiences regulate emotion and manage cognitive goals. A study by Anderson et al. (2013) found that incivility in online comments about a neutral blog post on nanotechnology had the effect of polarizing perceptions of risk amongst the participants. This finding is not startling: most are familiar with situations wherein incivility has a negative effect on arguer and audience objectivity. But it underscores the effort required to negotiate emotions and cognitive goals and maintain emotional environments conducive to objectivity. Psychologists Heather Wadlinger and Derek Isaacowitz point out that to

reappraise a negative situation, attention must disengage from the negative information or interpretation and reorient toward finding or creating evidence for an alternative interpretation. (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2011, p. 77)

But shifting attention away from incivility or other negative relations may require greater effort for depressed individuals—or even those who are simply unhappy than it does for others. For this reason, emotion regulation may be even more important for objectivity in argumentative contexts—contexts wherein negative emotions can very easily arise. If the unhappy are hampered in their ability to regulate emotions, we might expect them to have difficulty negotiating goals in social contexts; and hence, their ability to argue objectively may be weakened.

Social context research might also explain why positive affect seems to enhance reasoning. Some evidence in psychology supports a modest positive correlation between wisdom and happiness (Bergsma & Ardelt, 2012). A positive correlation also exists between mindfulness—an ability strongly associated with wisdom—and recovery from depression. (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011) Kareem Johnson's (2010) research shows that smiling—even fake smiling—reduces

prejudicial perceptions of others and reduces the attention we pay to racial categories. Smiling and the positive feelings it creates regulates emotion and this seems to influence the objectivity of our perceptions of others.

Arguers and audiences able to create trusting and virtuous social contexts using emotion regulation may well have an easier time negotiating emotional and argumentative goals. As Michael Gilbert (1997) argues, we can better achieve our goals when we treat argumentation as arising from agreement rather than disagreement. Arguers and audiences may have an easier time supporting a commitment to acquiring knowledge of reality in such contexts. And as I argue next, trusting and virtuous argumentative contexts are also more likely to involve happiness.

4. SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, HAPPINESS, AND OBJECTIVITY

Braeton (1990) claims that many intellectual virtues involve a type of social ability and that there exists an important relationship between this virtue epistemic social ability and community building. She says that the

building of community, which involves real, particular others in unique and complex circumstances, is intellectual work which requires a special intellectual competence. (Braeton, 1990, p. 5)

She connects community building to eudaimonic happiness, pointing out that "the building of community is the creation of an environment in which all members of the community have the opportunity to live well." (Braeton, 1990, p. 5) Living well in a community requires that that community promote objectivity using diversity. Imagining a non-sexist society is, she claims, a much greater *intellectual* achievement than imagining our current society with slight changes to certain norms. There is, she says, a "close connection between the social ability to see a problem from another person's subjective perspective and the logical ability to analyze the problem." (Braeton, 1990, p. 10) For Braeton, then, eudaimonistic communities are more likely to be objective.

Nancy Snow (2010) also argues that virtues are a type of social intelligence and links them empirically with eudaimonistic communities. Virtues, in her account, involve "cognitive-motivational-affective wholes" and there is, she says, "a deep and enduring sense of happiness that is psychologically impossible" without them (Snow, 2008, p. 93 & p. 225) Virtue is necessary to the factors most strongly associated with happiness, such as "close personal relationships and meaningful community ties, and developing skills of autonomy, competency, and relatedness." (Snow, 2008, p. 227) It is hard, Snow points out,

to imagine how one might forge meaningful community ties without the aid of some degree of virtue, especially virtues such as conscientiousness, honesty, loyalty, trustworthiness, cooperation, benevolence, generosity, kindness, compassion, considerateness, justice, tolerance, friendliness, and temperance. (Snow, 2008, p. 234)

Snow focuses largely on ethical virtues, but it is also important to make explicit the role of intellectual virtues and virtues of will power in community building, particularly in relation to argumentative communities. Problems with epistemic trust that arise during argumentation could originate in a lack of social intelligence so defined. Snow says that "the lack of adequate knowledge of whom to trust and of how to detect signs of an untrustworthy character is a lack of social intelligence." (Snow, 2010, p. 96) Argumentative communities lacking social intelligence so defined will be less happy—and less able to sustain the kind of commitment to reality objectivity requires.

The foregoing suggests that to foster objectivity in communities of argumentation, we need to strengthen skills of virtue, emotion regulation, and social intelligence in Snow and Braeton's senses of the term. Argumentative communities that support subjective and eudaimonic happiness will have an easier time strengthening these factors. In such contexts, arguers and audiences are likely to find it easier to change their minds in the face of evidence and imagine diverse, multifaceted audiences. They are more likely to be resilient and assertive in the face of negative commentary and find it easier to disagree respectfully. Overall, we can expect such communities to support a deeper commitment to acquiring an empirically adequate understanding of reality.

Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1974) unusual question about whether the universal audience *laughs* was therefore quite prescient. Laughter focuses our attention on the audience and helps us come to know them. For David Frank and Michelle Bolduc, Olbrechts-Tyteca

offers a vision of argumentation that hinges on a deep sense of humanity ... She suggests that laughter itself comprises a wish for universalization and human communion that is also inherent to the concept of the universal audience. (Frank and Bolduc, 2011, p. 73)

This longing for positive social connections in the context of argumentation and reasoning is poorly recognized. Laden says:

The isolation that failure to reason together creates is not a matter of a failure of coordination. It is the sense that no one understands what you say or do, or who you are. Such isolation can be the result or the cause of madness, even a kind of death. (Laden, 2012, p. 22)

Thus, not only can the pursuit of happiness amongst arguers and audiences better support objectivity—it also stands to address the isolation and suffering that so commonly undermines argumentation.

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