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Commentary on: Christoph Lumer's "Practical arguments for prudential justifications of actions"

Menashe Schwed
Ashkelon Academic College, Department of Philosophy

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MENASHE SCHWED

Philosophy
Ashkelon Academic College
12 Ben Tzvi St., Ashkelon, 78211
Israel
m.schwed@outlook.com

Lumer extends the epistemological approach to argumentation to account also for practical arguments. Furthermore, the choice in practical arguments in this respect is to confront one of the more challenging cases for the epistemological approach. In doing so, he formulates a set of preconditions of adequacy for rationally good practical arguments. Lumer's system is rule-based one and he uses a particular logical language defined over sets of rules. The question is whether such system is suitable in the domain of practical arguments, where knowledge cannot be represented in a classical propositional language. The critical approach is one way to deal with this question, in which the rule-based system is tested against possible refuting test cases, or at least pointing at unintuitive and undesirable results for this argumentation formalism. Another question deals with the meta-level characteristics of consistency and completeness. The question is whether the proposed rule-based systems succeed to meet the objectives of an inference system, such that it will not lead to unintuitive results. Indeed, with this kind of systems it may be the case that an agent believes that "if *a* then it is always the case that *b*", and the system returns as output *a* but *not-b*. Worse yet, if the agent also believes that "if *c* then it is always the case that *not-b*", the system may return *a* and *c*, which means that the output of the system is indirectly inconsistent. However, in what follows I would rather address more general issues regarding the epistemological approach to practical arguments.

The first issue I want to address is the delicate relation between empirical theories that have a bearing on argumentation theories and the possibility to formulate on this basis hypothetical preconditions for every argument. It is the delicate move from argumentative considerations in concrete contexts of reasoning to universally adequate preconditions for this sort of arguments. Now, some of the preconditions, which Lumer classifies as the Empirical Hypotheses, are supposed to be based on empirical research in decision theories in psychology and economics. And, thus, Lumer dedicates part of his paper to a critical overview of current decision theories in the relevant fields of research. However, the requirement for objectivity from the epistemological approach forces the inevitable choice in one decision theory rather than another. For instance, Lumer in his paper argues against Kahneman & Tversky's Prospect theory. Kahneman & Tversky's model is a descriptive rather than normative decision model, which does not agree with Lumer's own intuitions regarding what are good or rational decisions. It does not

agree with Lumer understanding of what *should be* practical justifications of actions. Lumer's reasons for rejecting this or that decision model might be convincing, but they cannot disregard the fact that this scientific field, as any other scientific field of research, is in a constant state of disagreement and change. Given this state of affairs, an argumentation theory has to be sensitive to essential disagreements and changes in theories likewise. Thus, the prospects for being able to formulate one set of universally applicable preconditions are futile to begin with.

A complementary to this issue is the question of rationality. Any rule-based system, which has to do with belief revision, should fulfil some defined principles as rationality postulates. The purpose of these postulates is to govern the sound definition of an argumentation system. The critical question now is not whether these postulates are violated *in* the system, but rather whether these postulates are warranted from a philosophical standpoint. Another filed of philosophical investigation, which has many affinities with argumentation theories, is the philosophy of science. There one can find a variety of notions, which are offered as intuitive and desirable meaning for rationality. However, it is sufficient to examine three such suggestions, as Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend, to see that no such intuitive and desirable meaning for rationality is possible. The philosophical wars over the right meaning of rationality are only a symptom to diverse world views and as such, prevent any philosophical consensus, even in the sense of scientific consensus in a given field of research and in a given time.

The second issue I want to address is a consequent of the former. Lumer's reasoning in his paper might be classified as a hypothetical reasoning. Lumer's strategy in overcoming the difficulties of analysing practical arguments in terms of the epistemological approach to argumentation is by formulating a set of adequacy conditions for all practical arguments without any exception. These preconditions are supposed to satisfy the requirements for the justification of the epistemological approach, namely to provide true and acceptable beliefs. The overall hypothetical reasoning in this paper signifies a detailed epistemological stance, which supports the connection between the preconditions to good practical arguments on the one hand, and the paper's thesis on the other hand. The expected criticism to such approach is that hypothetical reasoning by its nature does not presuppose the complicate reality of their subject matter with its vast variety. So how do we know that the preconditions do or do not engage the purpose of Lumer's paper? There is nothing wrong with this noble argumentation strategy to begin with. However, this argumentation strategy concerns the fundamental controversy regarding the epistemological approach to argumentation.

Lumer criticizes the non-epistemic criteria for justifying practical arguments, such as Habermas' *rightness* and van Eemeren and Grootendorst's *acceptability*, on the ground that they are ambiguous and do not have a specific meaning. Furthermore, he claims that any attempt to define these criteria in more specific terms would eventually ends up in providing truth criteria. In doing so, Lumer argues indirectly for a more general philosophical assertion, stating that any relativist conception of argumentation must eventually culminate in terms of true or false.

I will not pretend to add to this controversy, but state that when Toulmin emphasised in the late 1950's the justificatory function of argumentation, he changed the focus from traditional epistemology to pragmatics or from Kant to Wittgenstein. Thus, the nature of justification had become a relativistic concept. Habermas' *rightness* and van Eemeren and Grootendorst's *acceptability* are deliberately ambiguous. The ideal of inference as determined by fixed bonds of logical rules as hypothetical and universal rules on the one hand, and truth as correspondence on the other, has collapsed. The theory of argumentation is more about establishing consensus and the norms of justification as constantly revised and relative to a given community. This understanding of argumentation, however, is not only compatible with actual uses of arguments, but also maintains a workable and useful epistemological demarcation between good and bad arguments. Toulmin's and Perelman's *argumentation turn* following the linguistic turn in philosophy leaves room for different kinds of analysis of the processes which lead to evaluating arguments in varied contexts.