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Commentary on: Fabio Paglieri's "Argumentation, decision, and rationality"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Paglieri's main claims in this paper are three: 1) that argumentation theorists have given insufficient attention to decision-theoretic considerations in their work, 2) that a decision-theoretic approach to argumentation promises to yield important results and 3) worries that decision-theoretic approaches to argumentation are not capable of generating normative recommendations are misplaced. All of these claims together, of course, are meant to suggest that argumentation theorists should embrace decision-theoretic approaches to their subject. In these brief comments I will offer a few words about each of Paglieri's main claims. The general point of my comments will be that while I disagree with Paglieri's defense of a decision-theoretic approach to argumentation in this paper, I agree with him that decision theory has much to offer to the study of argumentation.

2. DECISION THEORY AND INFORMAL LOGIC

In one sense the claim that informal logicians have not incorporated decision theory in a central way is obviously true. One finds scant discussion of the prisoner's dilemma, Arrow's theorem, and the like in the informal logic and argumentation corpus. And certainly they could have been there. The game-theory- and decision-theory-influenced works of John Rawls, Kurt Baier, David Gautier, and Gregory Kavka were all well known before or during the period of significant initial activity in philosophy around informal logic.

Nevertheless, inasmuch as this observation is meant as criticism, it must be weighed against the fact that the pioneers of informal logic were interested in moving *away* from formal, abstract approaches to describing and evaluating human reasoning. It would rather have taken the sting out of the "informal" in "informal logic" to eschew the deductive canons of reasoning so dominant in philosophy in favor of a no-less-formal set of mathematical canons from the social sciences.

The point of informal logic, it seems to me, has been to work at understanding precisely those dimensions of argumentation in specific and interpersonal reasoning in general that are not captured by formal approaches--those features from which formal approaches must abstract in order to do their

work. Early on this point was polemic as well as methodological, as one goal of informal logic in the early days was to unseat the notion that formal methods were the best or the only “real” way to study reasoning at all. Hence, if informal logicians have paid scant attention to decision theory, this is perhaps more charitably understood as predictable consequence of deeper theoretical, methodological, and political commitments than as a kind of oversight or blind spot in their thinking.

I suspect that the dialecticians and pragma-dialecticians may also take some exception to Paglieri’s characterization of their approaches here, but as I am less familiar with these approaches I will not do them the disservice of an incapable defense.

3. THE POTENTIAL OF THE DECISION-THEORETIC APPROACH

As a central exhibit of the potential of a decision-theoretic approach to argumentation, Paglieri presents a handy, process-based, six-category taxonomy of types of decisions that arguers make, ranging from decisions about whether to argue at all to decisions about how and when to offer particular arguments, to decisions about how to react to arguments one is offered by one’s interlocutors. This is, indeed, a handy device, but what one finds most striking about it is not its novelty but its familiarity. Despite his having taken great pains to separate his approach from informal logic and pragma-dialectics in the early portions of the paper, the six-category taxonomy, at nearly every level, seems to recall considerations that are familiar from either those two approaches or from more rhetorically oriented approaches.

This in itself is not a bad thing, though. Intentional or not, I think the familiarity serves Paglieri’s purpose here. The six categories can easily be taken as a sort of “proof of concept” demonstration that concerns familiar to argumentation theorists *can* be described with the tools of decision theory. Game-theory may give us another way of talking about familiar topics such as how persons choose whether or not to argue when confronted with a difference of opinion, or about how a rhetor might frame and time her arguments in such a way as to maximize their effect upon her audience. It may yield an additional stream of empirical evidence that helps us better understand some dimensions of these phenomena--and that’s not nothing. It’s quite significant, if in fact decision theory can give us such data. To the extent that this is what Paglieri means when he claims that game-theory has much to offer argumentation theory I am inclined to agree with him. If, however, Paglieri intends the stronger thesis that game-theory can offer *more* than perspicuous modeling of familiar dimensions of interpersonal argumentation then I think his case requires a different sort of example. Best would be if he could produce an example of a novel insight from decision theory that the other frameworks have not already arrived at, or better, could not have arrived at, using their own resources.

4. RATIONALITY, NORMATIVITY, AND ARGUMENTATION

The most interesting part of Paglieri’s arguments in this paper concern his claims that a game theoretic approach to argumentation is capable of standing shoulder-to-

shoulder with other approaches when it comes to the normative domain. The idea is not a new one. Well-developed, decision-theoretic approaches have been around in moral and political philosophy for some time. Gauthier (1986) is a prime example, as are the theories referenced in chapters 3 and 4 of Shapiro (2003). Still others, for example Tuck (1979), would say they have been around since the days of Thomas Hobbes. All of these represent attempts to ground normativity (either of ethical or political obligations) in theories of practical reason. Paglieri's proposal is very much in this spirit. As he says: "In sum, far from relinquishing normative concerns in the study of argumentation, a decision-theoretic perspective on argumentative processes offers for free many powerful tools for defining and assessing the rationality (or lack thereof) of arguers" (p. 5).

Clarity about the kind of rationality at issue is important here. As Paglieri makes clear in the paragraph immediately following the one just quoted it is strategic rationality, understood as "what is rational to do, given a certain set of preferences, beliefs, and current external conditions." Paglieri, to his credit, immediately recognizes this: "Admittedly, this is very different from the kind of rationality usually discussed in argumentation theories". Indeed, it certainly is.

In decision-theoretic terms the rationality of a particular choice is cashed out in terms of its leading to the most optimal outcome (among those possible in the context) for a self-interested agent who is driven, (typically) by nothing more than a desire to maximize the satisfaction of its preferences. To speak in a somewhat plainer if not entirely clearer way, the sort of rationality involved in decision-theoretic concerns is prudential or practical in nature. Those norms direct agents towards the most optimal choice-path for the achievement of their goals, given the context of the choice situation. As seekers of optimal outcomes under such conditions the agents of decision theory are, in essence, members of a type of utilitarian consequentialists. On this view a person acts rationally if she makes decisions that conduce to the maximization of her preferences. Applied to argumentation theory, this means that a person will act rationally if she argues (i.e. offers arguments, makes challenges, retractions or other kinds of argumentative moves) in a way that conduces to the maximization of her preferences. (In all of Paglieri's examples, securing adherence for her thesis is among these preferences.)

By contrast, the sort of rationality typically involved in argumentation theory ranges from the Popper-ian critical rationality of the heart of pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 16-17) to the notion of "the ability to engage in the practice of giving and receiving of reasons" in Johnson (2000, p. 14), to the not unrelated notion of rationality as the having of "reason-assessment abilities and reason-honoring dispositions" in Siegel (1999, p. 47), to name just a few. On views like these, a person is rational not if she exhibits skill at maximizing preference satisfaction but if her conduct comports with external norms of reasonable behavior. Satisfaction of the norms might result in the satisfaction of her individual preferences, but it might not. Applied to argumentation theory, these views have the consequence that a person will act rationally only if she makes argumentative moves that exhibit the appropriate sort of respect for the norms of reasonability (and other values) that apply specially to argumentation.

There is a wide gap between ‘rationality’ of the strategic, decision-theoretic sort and ‘rationality’ of the latter sort. The gap is so wide between decision-theoretic rationality and rationality construed otherwise that it once led Robert Nozick to remark that decision-theory was “not a theory of rational action at all, but of best action”, ‘best action’ being understood as that most conducive to the agent's goals, full stop (Nozick, 1993, p. 65). We need not go so far as Nozick to see problem before us: Paglieri defends the normativity of the decision theoretic approach by saying that it is sometimes rational to allow strategic considerations to outweigh moral and epistemic considerations in argumentative decision making. But for this claim to be plausible, one has to believe already that decision-theoretic rationality is the sort that governs argumentation in the sense of grounding all or most of its most important norms. Hence the defense of the normativity of decision-theoretic considerations here is somewhat question-begging. If argumentation doesn't work like this, as would be the case if, *pace* Johnson the purpose of argumentation were to manifest rationality, for instance, then it would seem less likely that one could defend as optimal strategies that involved lying to one's interlocutors by their wonderful outcomes.

None of this should be taken to suggest that strategic considerations are unimportant. Strategic considerations may well be rational *in a sense* and so normative *in a sense*, but the truth of this observation does not establish the sort of moral equivalence between strategic considerations and considerations of reasonableness and argumentative fair dealing that derive from the usual sense of rationality in play in argumentation theory. Thus, this part of Paglieri's argument is somewhat less than convincing. I do not, however, see this as necessarily damning to his larger project.

5. CONCLUSION

Decision theory may not be capable of explaining, in normative terms of the familiar sort, why we should not use a fallacious form of argument, or engage in deception in cases where doing such things clearly is the most optimal path to getting adherence for our thesis, but so what? To dismiss decision theory as “merely descriptive” is to miss the importance and value of having good descriptions. To dismiss it on grounds of insufficient normativity is to expect too much. Paglieri is quite right to point out that decision theory is excellent at identifying prudential or strategic incentives for making moves in argumentation, and as no one denies that skillful arguing does require a balancing of practical requirements—along with ethical, rhetorical, logical, epistemic, communicative and other requirements—it seems to me that this ought to be enough. If we are capable of recognizing the importance of selecting an appropriately effective argumentation strategy from other standpoints within argumentation theory, such as dialectics or rhetoric, then we should be capable of recognizing the relevance of decision theory to such investigations. If we get this far, then it seems to me that Paglieri's battle is very nearly won. We do not have to think that decision theory is normative in a way that extends beyond the domain of the prudential in order to see that its insights are worth taking seriously.

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