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Foundations for nothing and facts for free?

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ABSTRACT: According to Michael Rescorla’s recent defense of dialectical egalitarianism (The Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 59, No. 234: 2009) reasoned discourse lacks a foundational structure, but saves the foundational intuition that some propositions are basic. On this view, I may select the reasons forwarded in support of a claim according to their being accepted by particular communities/audiences. I discuss the epistemic risk of doing so, and clarify if Rescorla’s is an epistemic approach in disguise.

KEYWORDS: epistemic foundationalism, epistemic coherentism, dialectical egalitarianism, disagreement, epistemic merits, rapprochement

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Michael Rescorla’s (2009) recent defense of dialectical egalitarianism reasoned discourse lacks a foundational structure, but saves the foundational intuition that some propositions are basic. On this view, I may select the reasons forwarded in support of a claim according to their being accepted by particular communities. I discuss the epistemic risk of doing so, and clarify if Rescorla’s is an epistemic approach in disguise. My thesis is: Instructive as Rescorla’s separation of dialectical from epistemic considerations is, if he can be granted to assume “uncontroversial facts about the epistemic context,” then because these facts are epistemically justified.

In the following, I give a brief (and severely incomplete) overview of two standard epistemological positions (Section 2), point to a problem in separating dialectics from questions of knowledge (Section 3), present Rescorla’s proposal (Section 4) and, finally, argue that it implicitly recurs to aspects of justification (Section 5). My paper is a “first stab” at this issue, rather than reflecting a worked out position.

2. JUSTIFICATION VS. REASONED DISCOURSE

Assume some array of sentences which you know to express true propositions. Assume further that these propositions are epistemically basic. This means, they cannot receive justification from further propositions which—as it were—are “more basic.” Neglecting important details, the above characterizes epistemological foundationalism, a position in the theory of knowledge. Examples of such basic propositions include observational re-

ports (aka. protocol sentences), statements about one’s self (“I am happy/sad;” “My name is Frank”) or so-called hinge propositions (“I have a physical body”).

Plausibly, epistemological foundationalists demand that basic propositions are assigned a non-marginal status in reasoned discourse. After all, these propositions can serve as the “bed rock” on which to erect good arguments. For this reason, epistemological foundationalists may reject conclusions that are incompatible (logically inconsistent) with epistemically basic propositions. Moreover, should an interlocutor challenge a basic proposition, epistemological foundationalists may refuse the challenge. They may not accept an obligation to defend it and, thus, reject a burden of proof. Such behaviour comes down to endorsing dialectical foundationalism (as a position in the theory of rational linguistic interaction).

In contrast, assume that you reject the idea of epistemically basic proposition. This means, each proposition can receive justification from at least one other proposition which—as it were—is also non-basic. Neglecting important details, this characterizes a non-foundational or a coherentist position in epistemology.

Plausibly, epistemological coherentists demand that no proposition is assigned an ultimate role in reasoned discourse. For this reason, coherentists may accept a conclusion as long as it is supported by one or more accepted propositions. Moreover, should an interlocutor challenge a supporting proposition, epistemological coherentists cannot reject the challenge but incur an obligation to defend it. Taking all propositions to be on (roughly) equal footing, then, comes down to endorsing dialectical egalitarianism.

The above should have made clear that epistemological foundationalism and epistemological coherentism (as positions that concern justification) are easily assumed to be related to—and may motivate, and indeed have motivated—dialectical foundationalism and dialectical egalitarianism, respectively (as positions that concern reasoned discourse).

This assumption is rather common. Rescorla (2009) calls it the justification thesis: “[E]pistemic justification intimately involves the ability, at least in principle, to defend one’s beliefs against legitimate challenges” (2009: 93). We return to this in Section 4, below.

3. AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM FOR THE DIALECTICAL EGALITARIAN

Consider the pragma-dialectical theory (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), whose authors explicitly endorse dialectical egalitarianism. According to one of the theory’s norms for critical discussions: If a speaker forwards a standpoint that is subsequently challenged by her opponent, then the proponent must accept the challenge. He must forward argumentation in support of this standpoint, or else retract it.

The pragma-dialectical theory leaves it to discussants to determine the conditions under which a standpoint has been conclusively defended (or not). However, discussants are obliged to make clear which propositions they accept. In fact, unless commitments to some proposition are incurred, there is no point in arguing (2004: 60).

Should a proposition be mutually accepted by discussants, then it can serve as a basic premise in a discussion, in the sense of being dialectically basic (see above): “[W]hen there is an intersubjective agreement on the acceptability of a premise (starting point), discussants can use this starting point as a premise in the argumentation without further justification” (Garssen & van Laar 2010: 126).
Rather than seek recourse to one or the other epistemological position, pragma-dialecticians have stayed clear of tying reasonable resolutions of differences of opinion to issues concerning the structure and genesis of human knowledge. This means, the justification thesis (see Section 2) is not endorsed. Rather than normatively constrain argumentation with respect to its substance (“what”), the focus has always been on the procedural aspect (“how”).

This theoretical choice as not remained unchallenged. For instance, since 1992, Biro and Siegel (see their 2010 for further references) have regularly argued that the pragma-dialectical notion of reasonableness ignores (i) the epistemological standing of proposition (e.g., being justifiable by other propositions, or not), and (ii) the quality of the inference rules participants lend themselves of (e.g., being a logically valid inference). So have others, e.g., Lumer (2005).

After all, without violating any dialectical norm—i.e., norms which stay clear of regulating discourse with respect to its epistemic aspect—, discussants x and y can in principle come to agree on what is known to be false by z. Thus, arguers who reach a consensus while exclusively obeying dialectical norms risk reaching agreement on known falsehoods. This “caveat” is recognized by pragma-dialectical authors; criticism concerns the fact that the theory avoids reducing this risk through recourse to epistemological notions, widely understood (e.g., truth, truthfulness, validity of inference, reliability).

Put differently, the notion of dialectical reasonableness developed in Pragma-dialectics—or so is the charge—is insufficient to generate substantially reasonable discussion results. Here, ‘substantially reasonable’ means that the process (the series of discussion moves) and the product (the consensus position) stay sensitive to epistemic aspects. So, ‘substantially reasonable’ contrasts with ‘procedurally or dialectically reasonable’ (see Biro and Siegel 2010: 461-464). Further, ‘insufficient’ means that, when quantified, the above risk is (non-zero and) greater than it would be were the theory sensitive to epistemic aspects.

Most recently, Biro and Siegel—who admit that even with epistemic sensitivity this risk will remain non-zero—put it as follows:

Our criticism is that the beliefs and standpoint-evaluations that result from such discussions [conducted according to the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion] can be rational or reasonable in this pragma-dialectical sense, while being irrational or unreasonable, epistemically speaking, ... The discussants may share, and rely on, unjustified beliefs, and they may accept, and use, problematic rules of inference or reasoning. In both cases the resulting resolution may be rational in the pragma-dialectical sense—henceforth ‘PD-rational’—but patently irrational from the epistemic point of view. (Biro and Siegel 2010: 458)

In the following, we disregard the problem allegedly arising from mere participant agreement on (the use of otherwise) epistemically non-qualified argument-schemes, some of which may project onto valid inference rules, or not. Instead, we focus on the first alleged problem, above, to do with the epistemic standing of proposition.

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1 See Garssen and van Laar (2010). They reject the criticism on the grounds that, in addition to being intersubjectively accepted, argumentation schemes must be problem-valid. This they spell out as ‘furthering criticism/critical testing’—a defense Biro and Siegel (2010) reject as inadequate.
3. RESCORLA’S PROPOSAL

Michael Rescorla (2009) distinguishes defensible from indefensible propositions. A proposition “is defensible if [and only if] some argument could provide it with justification which adds to force to whatever justification is already present from understanding it … [and] indefensible iff no such argument is possible” (2009: 91). Hence, he grants that indefensible propositions are dialectically basic in the sense endorsed by dialectical foundationalists. His examples are analytic (“A ball is round”) and elementary logical and mathematical truths (“\( p \text{ ergo } p \)”; “\( 1 + 1 = 2 \)”) (see 2009: 89).

However, Rescorla denies a principled relation between the epistemic standing of a proposition and its normative status in reasoned discourse. On his view, “[e]pidemological consequences follow from egalitarianism only if we assume one or another dubious doctrine, such as the justification thesis [see Section 2, above], linking epistemic status and status within reasoned discourse” (2009: 94).

Clearly, my inability “to engage in a certain way in reasoned discourse” (ibid.) does not entail being unjustified in some proposition. To see as much, it suffices to imagine that your dentist administered an overdose of anaesthetic. You are now unable to engage in reasoned discourse. Yet, you do not therefore lose justification possessed prior to this incident (see ibid. for further examples and references).

Once the alleged link between engaging in a certain way in reasoned discourse and being justified is severed, some interesting options arise. With a view to the theme of this conference, the perhaps most interesting question is whether it is permissible to engage in a certain way in reasoned discourse (e.g., in a way that will persuade my audience) without being justified in the proposition I persuade my audience of. A similar question can be formulated with respect to using argumentation schemes/figures the quality of which I know to be questionable (e.g., post hoc ergo propter hoc).

This is an instance of the more general description of \( x \) and \( y \) agreeing on what is known to be false by \( z \) (Section 2). Put differently, \( z \) knows that neither \( x \) nor \( y \) can justify what they agree on (and perhaps also believe). After all, what they agree on is false and, by stipulation, a falsity cannot be justified.\(^2\) We return to this below.

First, we outline the rest of Rescorla’s proposal. He maintains that our reasoned discourse gives the impression of being foundational, and seeks to explain this appearance (away) from a position of dialectical egalitarianism. To this end, he invokes:

(1) “[R]approchement as a common goal of participants in reasoned discourse” (2009: 100).
(2) Defense norm: “When challenged to defend an asserted defensible proposition, one must either defend it or else retract it” (2009: 91).
(3) Epistemic context (e.g., a sceptical vs. a non-sceptical scenario)

Importantly, (1) is understood such that “[t]he challenger must elucidate his position, thereby helping the original speaker isolate the relevant mutually acceptable premises which rapprochement requires” (2009: 100). Further, his defense norm principally re-

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\(^2\) However, note that false propositions may justify in the sense of leading to true propositions by means of a deductively valid scheme. For instance, (i) ‘All Indians are conquerors’ and (ii) ‘Napoleon is Indian’ deductively entail (iii) ‘Napoleon is a conqueror’. Under standard assumptions, (i) and (ii) are false, but (iii) is true.
stricts obligations to *defensible* propositions, excluding, e.g., analytic or mathematical truth, but does not exclude “I have a physical body” (2009: 89). Finally, the epistemic context can be *normal*. This means, we are not brains-in-vats and, hence—this is the desired outcome—, “I have a physical body” need not be defended, without being foundationally justified. The context is non-normal, whenever opponents offer reasons to believe so.

Rescorla’s basic claim, then, is:

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\text{If the basic explanatory strategy is sound, then one need not build a privileged role for these [defensible] propositions [such as I have a physical body] into the rules of rational dialectic. Their privileged conversational role already emerges from three elements: the … defense norm; the constitutive goal of rapprochement; and uncontroversial facts about our epistemic circumstances. The first two elements are constitutive of reasoned discourse, but do not privilege any premises over others. The third element privileges’ certain premises over others, but it is not constitutive of reasoned discourse. Operating together, these three elements generate an illusion that dialectical interaction has a foundational structure. (2009: 102)}
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This means, to account for the special status of propositions such as “I have a physical body,” it is not necessary to assume that they are *epistemically* basic. Rather, assuming a normal epistemic context suffices. Should that context shift—say, to a sceptical scenario—the proposition will no longer count as dialectically basic (see 2009: 99).

Before venturing on an assessment of Rescorla’s proposal, let us look at one of the implications of severing reasoned discourse from epistemic justification.

4. JUSTIFICATION FOR NOTHING?

We saw above how the structure and genesis of justification can provide the basis for reasoned discourse. Certainly, Biro and Siegel would not disagree. Rescorla argued not only that one may suspend this basis, but that one never needed it to begin with. Why? “On my [Rescorla’s] view the main point about defending assertions is not to exhibit one’s own reasons for belief, but to adduce putative reasons why others should believe. The two goals often overlap, but they need not” (2009: 105). Hence, the norms of reasoned discourse (dialectics) become independent of justification (epistemology).

This position suggests that nothing is wrong if proponents offer to their audience reasons (aka. premises) and argument schemes that proponents do not endorse. In like vein, nothing is wrong if, rather than offer the premises and schemes which come closest to capturing their own justificatory and doxastic structure, proponents forward those coming closest to their audience’s. In brief, endorsing as much comes down to rejecting that reasoned discourse requires speakers to be sincere and trustworthy (see 2009: 107 ff.).

As pointed out above, rather than treating it, this position also incurs the risk of agreeing on known falsehoods. What to make of this? If we agree with Rescorla that it is *not necessary* to be a dialectical foundationalist (in order to explain how reasoned discourse operates), we would also agree on the role of epistemic context in determining dialectical basicness (see (3) above).

In the following, we ask whether aspects of epistemic justification nevertheless enter “through the back door”. That is, for his proposal to come out right, does not Rescorla rely on what he sought to remain independent of?

Rescorla relies on what he calls “uncontroversial facts about the epistemic context” (2009: 102). In a normal context, or so is the idea, dialectically basic propositions
will be accepted by participants because challenging/rejecting them violates rapprochement. Else, if these same propositions are not dialectically basic, then the relevant epistemic context explains as much. In a normal epistemic context, or so we can presume when following Rescorla, we mutually trust our sense perceptions, our memory, perhaps also the testimony of others. In a non-normal epistemic context, we do not.

How do we determine which kind of context obtains? Presumably, by finding ourselves in agreement with our interlocutor on basic propositions such as “I have a physical body,” we find out that the context is normal. Otherwise, it is not. But just why are we in agreement with our interlocutor, to begin with? Presumably, because both of us are justified qua proprioception in believing that we have physical bodies. Similar examples can be construed for visual perception (“This rose is red”) and memory (“We had fish for dinner yesterday”).

In brief, Rescorla’s “uncontroversial facts about the epistemic context” seem to be uncontroversial because (perceptions and proprioception giving rise to) these facts normally are justified by reliably operating senses and memory. It can then remain true that changing the epistemic context—say, to a sceptical scenario—changes the status of hitherto dialectically basic propositions. But this is the plain reason that, in the sceptical scenario, senses and memory are assumed to operate unreliably, and so cannot shoulder the justificatory work they otherwise do. Clearly, once we ask why some facts are uncontroversial, we cannot help but fall back upon that which justifies these facts.

Finally, if you agree that sense perception and memory are, in some sense, ultimate justifiers—i.e., there is no point in asking what justifies perception, and so on ad infinitum—then you “re-discover” the position of the epistemological foundationalist. So, one may very well seek to sever the link between reasoned discourse and epistemic justification. And, hence, one can very well be a dialectical egalitarian, provided one keeps matters of dialectics distinct from those of justification. Rescorla’s shows this nicely. Yet, even the dialectical egalitarian—or so it seems reasonable (to me)—will recognize that foundational elements of epistemic justification provide the reasons for some epistemic context being what it is.

5. UPHSHOT

We pointed to a tension between a dialectical and an epistemic approach to argumentative discourse. We used Rescorla’s proposal to discuss how the link between epistemic norms and dialectical ones may be severed, while recovering intuitions which motivate dialectical foundationalism. Crucially, this recovery relies on what were called “uncontroversial facts about the epistemic context.” Insofar as these facts are uncontroversial, or so we argued, they are (foundationally) justified by reliably operating sense perceptions and memory. And because they are so justified, sentences expressing these facts will normally not be questioned/challenged in reasoned discourse (modulo philosophy classes, where sceptical scenarios are introduced as assumptions). Conversely, what will be questioned in reasoned discourse normally has nothing to do with the kinds of facts that are foundationally justified. To sum up, and in gross variation of the title: “Foundations for something, and facts qua reliable sense perception.”
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Commentary on “FOUNDATIONS FOR NOTHING AND FACTS FOR FREE?” by Frank Zenker

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1. INTRODUCTION

My response to Frank Zenker’s essay comes from a specific rhetorical perspective on the study of argumentation. As there are other rhetorically oriented positions which would find Frank’s essay of interest and as my dialectically oriented colleagues persistently narrowly identify rhetorical orientations with a singular interest in the effectiveness of argumentation as a means of persuading and convincing, I should at the outset briefly identify the central rhetorical orientation of my remarks. My comments are guided by a traditional rhetorical aspiration to identify the qualities which arguments and arguers must manifest so that, in circumstances involving doubt and disagreement, the arguments and related considerations can acquire persuasive force commensurate with their epistemic merit. Hence, I find Frank’s exploration of the place of epistemic concepts in reasoned discourse very interesting.

Frank’s essay responds to Michael Rescorla’s (2009) recent claim that reasoned discourse lacks a foundational structure and to Rescorla’s attempt to square this claim with the foundational intuition that some propositions are basic. Rescorla denies that propositions on the order of “I have a physical body” are epistemically basic and claims that they merely appear to have that status as a consequence of the norms and goals which constitute reasoned discourse and the assumption of a normal epistemic context. Zenker objects to this proposal, first, on the grounds that it incurs the risk of agreeing on known falsehoods and, second, that it sneaks epistemic considerations into the picture as determinates of the “normal epistemic context.”

I find Zenker’s claim that Rescorla’s position brings epistemic considerations into play via the back door to be clearly and persuasively defended. So I will concentrate on the risks Zenker sees as inhering in Rescorla’s position. I will conclude with some sceptical remarks about Rescorla’s claim that the pursuit of rapprochement is constitutive of reasoned discourse.

2. THE RISKS INHERENT IN RESCORLA’S POSITION

Zenker sets the stage for his assessment of the epistemic risks inhereing in Rescorla’s position by reviewing a challenge Biro and Siegel have directed to pragma-dialectical theory. The latter occupies a position of dialectical egalitarianism, which holds that should a proposition be mutually accepted by discussants, then it can serve as a basic premise in a discussion, in the sense of being dialectically basic. Biro and Siegel object that the beliefs
and standpoint-evaluations legitimated by this position leave open the possibility that the discussants may share and rely on unjustified beliefs and may use problematic rules of inference resulting in resolutions which may appear rational from a pragma-dialectical perspective but which are patently irrational from an epistemic point of view. Zenker holds that an analogous objection applies to Rescorla’s views.

Zenker’s concern regarding the risks which appear to inhere in Rescorla’s proposal trace largely to Rescorla’s claim that the pursuit of rapprochement is constitutive of reasoned discourse. The possibility of reasoned discourse, Rescorla argues, depends upon identifying propositions which are mutually agreeable to contending parties and which can serve as starting points for their argumentation. Consequently, he holds, parties to reasoned discourse are committed, by its very constitution, to the goal of identifying and basing arguments on mutually agreed upon propositions.

The danger which Zenker sees in this proposed commitment to rapprochement is that it licenses, even encourages, the arguer to advance her case on premises she believes will be acceptable to her addressee, whether or not she accepts those premises. This prospect, Zenker argues, opens the door to the possibility of agreeing on known falsehoods, as dialectical partners substitute mutual acceptance for the requirements of veracity and rational adequacy.

From a rhetorical perspective, I have an ambivalent reaction to Zenker’s worries. On the one hand, time honoured principles of rhetorical argumentation admonish the arguer to rely on enthymemes, premises of which are acceptable to her addressees and, further, to recognize that the case she presents for her position need not duplicate the inferential route by which she arrived at the conclusion for which she is arguing (Bitzer, 1954; 1992; Madden, 1952; McBurney, 1930). From this perspective, it may seem that Zenker’s alarms need to be tempered. The fact that an arguer makes her case on grounds acceptable to her addressee, but different from those which led her to the conclusion she advances does not entail that the case she makes to her addressee is evidentially and/or rationally defective. The same conclusion can often be reached by different, yet epistemically satisfying routes.

On the other hand, Rescorla’s claim that parties to reasoned discourse are committed by its very constitution to the goal of identifying and basing arguments on mutually agreed upon propositions does seem to invite, even require, that the need for (indeed, the mere prospect of) mutual acceptance by itself serve as reason for accepting centrally important propositions and may even override epistemically significant reasons for rejecting those propositions. This possibility seems clearly to inhere in Rescorla proposals. If it does, Zenker’s alarms are more than justified. Students of rhetoric and communication are familiar with a phenomena called “groupthink” in which decision-making is driven by premises the primary merit of which rests on and is maintained by a dynamic of sheer mutual acceptance. Groupthink can result in remarkably bad and unreasoned decisions (McCroskey & Richmond, 2008). Rescorla’s principle of rapprochement seems to be an invitation to groupthink. If that is so, it may be that Zenker is not sufficiently alarmed. If the principle of rapprochement invites groupthink, it does more than open the door to the possibility of agreeing on known falsehoods; it provides a positive incentive to epistemically irresponsible decision-making.
3. A RHETORICAL RESPONSE TO RESCORLA’S PRINCIPLE OF RAPPROACHEMENT

Regarded from a rhetorical perspective Rescorla’s principle of rapprochement rightly emphasizes the importance of arguing from premises acceptable to one’s addressees, but conceived as a goal constitutive of reasoned discourse, this principle seems to unduly narrow the range of discourses which qualify as “reasoned discourse” and, consequently, to narrow our appreciation of the work which reason-giving discourse can do.

A basic purpose of reasoned discourse is to isolate mutually acceptable premises relevant to the truth of disputed propositions. Mutually acceptable premises provide a neutral evidence base for adjudicating disputes. A neutral evidence base may not resolve a dispute decisively, but it serves as common ground. By isolating it, speakers achieve what I shall call rapprochement. Only by achieving rapprochement do participants in reasoned discourse engage one another rationally. One might say that if two speakers cannot agree upon any relevant premises, then they succeed only in talking at one another, rather than reasoning with one another. In this sense, the pursuit of rapprochement is constitutive of reasoned discourse. (Rescorla, 2009)

Setting aside the difficult question of whether “reasoned discourse” is constituted by a general set of goals, the goal of achieving rapprochement would be recognizable in only a relatively narrow range of the discourses in which reasons can be productively brought to bear. Rescorla presents it as a constitutive goal of dialectical interaction which serves “the basic purpose of convergence on truth” (2009). Much powerfully argued, exemplary public discourse is produced in the context of conflicts within which contending advocates could hardly be supposed to share the “basic purpose of convergence on truth.” In those situations, advocates commonly argue from premises which they demand that their addressees ought to accept, but it is generally understood that their addressees would not find those premises to be acceptable as basis for the argumentation advanced. Nevertheless, reason-giving discourse of can and often does lead to social, economic, political, and moral reform in many such conflicted situations.

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