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Commentary on Andrew Aberdein “Argumentation Schemes and Communities of Argumentational Practice”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Aberdein uses argumentation schemes to address two theoretically significant matters concerning *communities of argumentational practice* (hereafter “argument communities”): first how argument communities can be distinguished from one another, and second whether the plurality of argument communities, which Aberdein links to a rich notion of Toulminian *argument fields*, leads to epistemic relativism. After amending Aberdein’s conclusions with a suggestion pertaining to the first issue, I argue that the tools Aberdein provides are not sufficient to extricate us from the dangers of relativism.

2. ARGUMENT COMMUNITIES

For Aberdein, argument communities are defined and distinguished from one another along three indices: domain (subject matter); community (subjects or arguers) and practices (specifically including argumentative practices). Key amongst the last of these is the use (both varied and constant) of argumentation schemes by different argument communities. Aberdein (p. 9) holds that schemes are useful “in the individuation and classification of communities of argumentational practice,” arguing that “it is possible to distinguish communities of arguers by tracking the schemes they employ, subject to several points of clarification.”

At first blush, considering argumentation schemes seems to be a promising way of distinguishing argumentative practices. For example, surely the frequency with which a group relies upon appeal to witness testimony, and the confidence which it accords to conclusions based on testimony, indicates the degree to which that community holds testimony to be a reliable source of knowledge. And, communities can have different views on this point. Further, different branches of inquiry often study different domains or use different methodologies. Just as the data for these branches of inquiry might vary (facts about the weather are relevant to meteorology but not to mereology), so too might the useful inferential strategies. For example, one might expect disciplines concerned with necessary, *a priori* truths to rely more on *reductio* as a proof method than a discipline concerned with contingent, *a posteriori* truths. Since, for contingent claims,

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neither the claim nor its negation will imply a contradiction. Similarly, communities concerned with universal truths will rely more upon, and treat the results of, counter examples differently than those seeking general truths that are only true-for-the-most-part.

Aberdein gives four examples to illustrate the ways in which a community's use of argument schemes can distinguish that community from others. Generally, these examples go towards showing that a mere inventory of schemes alone – even a comparative one – is not sufficient to distinguish argument communities. In addition to itemizing the schemes employed within the practice, a satisfactory account of a community's argumentative practices should also (and here I quote directly):

1. track frequency of use for the schemes (including those omitted altogether), paying particular attention to schemes whose use is disproportionate to that in comparable practices
2. record information, explicit or tacit, about preferences amongst the community with regard to specific schemes;
3. relate each scheme to the context(s) of dialogue employed by the community;
4. where possible, observe how the practice changes with time. (Aberdein, p. 9).

Since none of Aberdein's examples are comparative, it is not entirely clear how the use of schemes will differentiate argument communities, even when the additional points are taken into consideration.

For example, consider a group of reasoners who routinely consult different experts, who are granted some kind of epistemic authority, in order to learn how their personal relationships are affecting their lives and what decisions they should make in these matters. In one sense, each member of the group uses the argumentation scheme of appeal to authority. Suppose further that those who consult the authorities have similar attitudes about those schemes in these respects: (1) the group members consult with the authorities with roughly equal frequency; (2) they equally prefer such appeals to authority over the use of other, perhaps more self-reflective or self-reliant, methods; (3) these expert consultations occur in roughly the same situational or dialogic contexts; and (4) their practices continue in roughly the same manner over time – that is, each group responds similarly with changes in the ostensive success of the advice given. But consider now that some members of this group consult their psychic, some their counselor, others consult their psychiatrist, others consult their guru, and others the leader of their cult, while still others consult their mothers. The question is, does this group constitute one argument community or several?

I suggest that these groups constitute different argument communities despite their using the same scheme in roughly similar ways. What differs between these groups is not their pattern of reasoning, or the general mode of reasoning (appealing to authority), or their use of it, but rather the warrant that they find acceptable. I suggest that their different attitudes concerning who counts as a proper authority – that is, on what counts as an acceptable warrant in an appeal to authority – distinguishes them into different argument communities. Thus, I suggest that it is not the use of a scheme but the acceptance of a warrant that will help to distinguish different communities of arguers.

3. ARGUMENT COMMUNITIES, SCHEMES AND EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

Moving on to the issue of epistemic relativism, Aberdein argues that the spectre of relativism should be exorcised from Toulminian fields and communities of argumentational practice for three reasons: (i) code-switching, (ii) extra-field judgements and (iii) argumentation schemes.

- i. *code-switching*: “membership in communities of practice is not exclusive: many individuals operate successfully in multiple, overlapping communities simultaneously. ‘Code switching’ between different communities is commonplace and seemingly unproblematic. This suggests the possibility of intersubjective comparison.” (p. 2)
- ii. *inter-field judgements*: “standards of evaluation are not exclusively field-dependent: there is no requirement that only the standards developed within a community should be applied to the products of that community.” (p. 2)
- iii. *argumentation schemes*: “the practices of different communities may be articulated using a common apparatus: that of argumentation schemes” (p. 2)

In response, I will try to show that these are neither severally nor jointly sufficient to alleviate the problem of relativism.

Let us start with (ii), *inter-field judgements*. That I can apply a standard external to the standards of some other community to judge the arguments of that other community does not show that there are field-independent standards. Rather, it shows only that one can, using the standards of his or her own field, make inter-field as well as intra-field judgements. Notice that this is a descriptive claim about the inferences arguers actually can, or do, make – not a claim about the objectivity of the inferential standards arguers use. Indeed, it does not even demonstrate that there is any commensurability or reconcilability amongst cross-field judgements. To show that there are genuinely objective (extra-field or perhaps trans-field) judgements, one also has to show that there are field-independent standards of judgement, and it is those standards that are applied when making judgements about the argumentative products of other argument communities. But this claim about the nature and foundation of the standards employed in some field or other is not demonstrated by observing how arguers employ some set of standards.

Moving on to (i), *code-switching*. That I can routinely move between argument communities, does not show that there are any objective, field-independent standards either. Rather it seems to show that at times I can employ the field-dependent standards of one field, field-A, in making judgements, and at other times I can employ the equally field-dependent standards of some other field, field-B. Even when combined with the practice of making *inter-field* judgements, this still only shows that I can make judgements about the claims of some given field using a variety of different, yet field-dependent standards. None of this provides a common standard by which the judgements made using the standards of some particular field may be compared or evaluated.

Surely it is true that, in code-switching, I can now communicate with, and even reason with, members of a different field in ways that non-code-switchers cannot. Yet

this type of intersubjectivity does not lead to any objectivity in any comparisons code-switchers might make. Rather it shows only that I can, using the field-dependent standards of some field (say, field-A), compare the judgements made in a variety of different fields, say B, C, and D. But, it would be quite a different thing to make the same comparison using the field-dependent standards of some different field (say, field-B). And, there is nothing in this practice to suggest that there is any common, objective or extra-field standard by which I might compare *those* comparative judgements. To avoid the problem of relativism, one must not merely show that there is a possibility of intersubjective comparison – after all, different subjects within the same field can easily compare their different yet field-dependent judgements. What is additionally required is some claim about the objectivity or field-independence of the standards being employed.

Finally, when considering (iii) *argumentation schemes*, it is not entirely clear what this can add to (i) and (ii). If the schemes, their usage, or (as I have suggested above) the acceptance of warrants, differs from one community to the next, then we seem no further ahead. If, on the other hand, there are some schemes, warrants or standards that are common to several or all communities, this only shows that there is some *small-“u”* universal standards or patterns of argument. Since there is no guarantee that further investigation could never find some community of hitherto unknown madmen who do not share these standards, this does not solve the problem of relativism at a theoretical or foundational level. Rather, it merely suggests that there might be some universal agreement on our relative judgements in cases where the standards are common or shared. Perhaps this is the best that can be hoped for.

If, though, it is to be demonstrated that relativism can be avoided, it seems to me that a very different type of argument must be provided. Further, given Toulmin’s thesis that the norms of argument evaluation are field-dependent, this might instead prompt a different response: the abandoning of fields altogether as evaluative categories of argument.

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