Sincerity, Santa Claus Arguments and Dissensus in Coalitions

Daniel H. Cohen

*Colby College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive](https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive)

Part of the Philosophy Commons


[https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA8/papersandcommentaries/34](https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA8/papersandcommentaries/34)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).
ABSTRACT: It is a virtue of virtue theory approaches to argumentation that they integrate many of the different factors that make arguments good arguments. The insights of virtue argumentation are brought to bear on a variety of versions of the requirement that good arguments must have good premises, concluding that a sincerity condition serves better than truth or assertability conditions, despite apparently counterintuitive consequences for arguments involving heterogeneous coalitions.

KEYWORDS: sincerity, truth, virtue argumentation,

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtue argumentation theory (VAT) is an approach that begins from the insight that a good argument is one in which the arguers argue well. It shifts the focus from the products of argumentation to the arguers and their conduct. Of course, this simple formula is of little help when discussions about what counts as arguing well remain unsettled.

Even so, the value of VAT to contribute to debates about existing problems in argumentation theory is already evident, having shed light on the traditional question of how arguments go wrong, but also on such important but often-overlooked questions as when and when not to argue, how argumentation contributes to cognitive achievements beyond the narrowly epistemic, and what the different responsibilities of proponents, opponents, and audiences are in argumentation.1

In this paper, VAT is applied to the requirement that good arguments have good premises. There are many versions of this requirement, ranging from the extremely strong claim that the premises be both true and known to be true, to weaker versions asking for accepted or even just acceptable premises.2

Consistent with its focus on arguers, what matters for VAT is that arguers be sincere. The apparently obvious counter-examples of good arguments offered insincerely all equivocate on “argument” for their evaluations.3 I defend a sincerity requirement for

---

1 Virtue Argumentation Theory is developed in Aberdeen 2006 and Cohen 2007.
3 Sincerity cannot, of course, be a sufficient condition for good argumentation, only a necessary one. Adler 2007 argues against a sincerity condition.

arguers. It supplies the tie that binds the epistemological and the logical aspects of argument evaluation. And because it situates argumentation in linguistic communities, it explains our reluctance to use the often-effective arguments of our coalition partners with whom we have other disagreements. However, it also leads to the unsettling conclusion that there are no really good public, political arguments at all! What there can be is a lot of arguing in public and a great deal of political manoeuvring, but they are very different moments in discourse.

2. GOOD ARGUMENTS

There are many senses of the word “argument” and many more ways to evaluate them, but I would think that any account with aspirations of completeness would have to include at a minimum some reference to logical validity, dialectical closure, and rhetorical competence. It is a relatively straightforward exercise to find examples of rhetorically successful and dialectically satisfying arguments that do not pass logical muster, or arguments that are logically unimpeachable and reach dialectical closure, but fail on rhetorical grounds, or any of the other combinations, simply by varying the epistemological standpoint or logical prowess of the proponents, opponents, and audiences. In each case, there is something relevant and negative to be said against the argument qua argument, so each of these is a necessary condition for good argumentation.

While those three axes of measurement jointly provide a very rich conceptual vocabulary for evaluating arguments, it is still not enough. There is also a fuller, more robust sense of goodness to incorporate into our accounts. Consider, for comparison, the ways we talk about good work. A carpenter who is technically competent will be commended for doing good work; a job that is personally engaging and rewarding is said to be a good one—good work if you can get it; and efforts to moral ends are good works indeed.

An argument ought to be good on all those counts, too: technically competent, rewarding to all its participants, and conducted in accord with moral principles to moral ends. At the end of an argument that wove all three strands together, all the participants could truly say, “Now, that was a good argument!”

As a group, we have done a lot of good work, in the first sense, on the first strand of this more robust concept of good work, viz., on what counts as technical competence and excellence. There has been some attention, perhaps less, to the ethics of argument, and some of that has been good work, too, at least in the technical sense, and, I’m sure, in the ethical sense. I want to engage with the second sense here: the role of the participants’ intellectual engagement in evaluating argumentation.

Intellectual engagement is a necessary condition; it is the necessary investment one must make in order to reap the epistemological returns that are at the heart of the robust sense of goodness for arguments. And, incidentally, it is what makes the war...
metaphor so spectacularly inappropriate because in the best arguments, the winners teach and the losers learn—which is to say that the losers are the real winners.

3. SANTA CLAUS ARGUMENTS

Consider the following argument as one of our data points: an exhausted and exasperated parent is trying to get a young child to go to bed for the night. However, being mindful of what it is to be a good parent and committed to the canons of rationality, the parent does not want to resort to heavy-handed tactics. Reasoning and argumentation, rather than bribes or threats, ought to be able to carry the day. After pointing out, to no effect, some obvious signs that the child is getting tired, and after a series of unsuccessful appeals to the importance of a good night’s rest for growing bodies, the parent finally says, “Well, you know, it’s only a few days until Christmas, and Santa Claus is watching young children especially closely right now to see who is naughty and who is nice, so that he can bring the right presents to the right children. And you do want to impress Santa Claus, don’t you? So, isn’t that a pretty good reason to go to bed without any more fuss.” The child objects, “But staying up late isn’t naughty. You do it all the time!” And the parent responds, “Oh, it’s not staying up late that’s the problem; it’s not listening to your parents that’s the issue.” Hearing this, and thinking it over, the child is, in the end, persuaded. More than that, she is convinced, and maybe even a bit abashed that she hadn’t thought of it herself!

Let me note at the outset, and I hope we can all agree, that this is not what we would want to hold up as a good example of argumentation. However, in our haste to criticize it, we should not lose sight of the fact that it really does have some very significant positive features. In the first place, from the parent’s point of view, it was successful because it did indeed succeed in getting the child into bed without recourse to physical, emotional, or intellectual abuse—and that is certainly not negligible. Beyond that, it can easily be reconstructed into a valid chain of inferences from the premises to the conclusion that would pass muster with even the most enthusiastic deductivist. Moreover, that reconstruction would employ only premises that were acceptable to the target audience. Finally, the child was given the chance to object and question and be heard, and she was satisfied by the answers. In sum, we ought to recognize and admit that this argument is logically valid, dialectically closed, rhetorically appropriate, and even agonistically successful! What’s not to like?

Actually, there are plenty of things not to like, starting with the fact that there is no Santa Claus who rewards children on the basis of whether they are taken in by the sophistries of their parents. The parent knows better, even if the child does not. But even if, in a second scenario, unbeknownst to the parent, there were such an old man, a kindly-looking stranger with a suspicious penchant for giving presents to children, it would still not count as a paradigm of good argumentation because the parent, the proponent in the argument, does not believe it and regards the child’s belief—which would be fortuitously true in this case—as unjustified. And that would still be the case if, in a third scenario, unbeknownst to the parent, the child’s belief were not just true, but justified, e.g., by the reliable authority of older siblings and direct sightings of her own. Finally, let us complete the analytic isolation of the problem by imagining a fourth scenario, a world with an existing Santa Claus, an unbelieving parent with a believing child in which both
the parent and child have access to sufficient justification, but only the child takes heed. It would still be an objectionable piece of argumentation.

4. JU-JITSU ARGUMENTS

Before getting into exactly what the source of the problems are, let me offer another example for contrast. Two people disagree about whether same-sex couples should have the same civic and legal options with respect to marriage as heterosexual couples. The opponent bases her opposition on two distinct but convergent lines of thought: what is natural and what is traditional. First, she appeals to a Thomistic concept of the natural telos of marriage, which she identifies as procreation—and procreation is just not in the cards for most same-sex couples. Second, as a classic political conservative who shares Edmund Burke’s suspicion of innovation based on utopian or speculative reason, she appeals instead to time-tested tradition—and same-sex marriages just aren’t traditional. Her opponent, who shares none of her theologico-metaphysical assumptions or traditionalist political principles, offers two arguments in response. He replies to the appeal to procreation as the justifying telos for marriage by asking, in a bit of an ad hominem, whether that is why she has objected to her own 70-year-old widowed mother’s recent re-marriage. Wouldn’t it also have to be disallowed as illegitimate since procreation is surely not part of it? Any rebuttal that would justify senior marriages by reference to the other things that marriages provide—love, commitment, companionship, stability, security, or family—are forestalled because they would also be applicable to same-sex marriages. To the other argument, he points out that it is precisely because the institution of marriage has stood the test of time that its benefits should be available to same sex-couples, rather than some new and untested social innovation. It is precisely because of the importance of such “family values” as love, commitment, companionship, stability, security, and family that one should want to promote and extend their presence in society. In short, he deploys Thomistic metaphysics as premises for one argument—although as a secularist, he would say that he knows better than to take them seriously—and he then offers a traditionalist-conservative argument for same-sex marriage—even though his own political ideals are more radical, including a preference to do away with the institution of marriage completely.

Now I personally happen to think that the proponent’s reasons have some merit, but I also have a nagging worry: if he is using premises he does not really believe, aren’t his arguments just grown-up versions of the Santa Claus argument? Why don’t they elicit the same disapproval? What’s the difference?

Not all arguments that employ opponents’ own principles against them—let’s call them “jujitsu arguments”—are Santa Claus arguments. Reductio ad absurdum arguments make provisional use of opponents’ principles only to reject them in the end. Similarly, arguments leading to conditional or assertoric conclusions are unobjectionable examples of speculative and hypothetical reasoning. Much of what is objectionable would disappear if the conclusion were, “If you believe in Santa Claus, then you should think that you go to bed,” or “Since you believe in Santa Claus, you should think that you should go to bed.” In the Santa Claus case as given, though, the conclusion was not qualified in either way. It exploited the opponent’s own questionable beliefs without question, in order to support other conclusions, leaving those premises unchallenged.
(unlike *reductios*) and purporting to reach categorical conclusions (unlike hypothetical reasoning).

The part of the argument referring to the opponent’s widowed mother’s late-in-life re-marriage is best read as a *reductio* argument with the enthymematic premise that that marriage should *not* be stigmatized as illegitimate (at least not for that reason). But the other line of thought, invoking family values in a conservative argument for same-sex marriages, does appear to fit the mold of a Santa Claus argument to a tee. The proponent regards the sacred-cow status of so-called “family values” among the evangelical right roughly the way the parent regards the very special belief in Santa Claus among children: a comforting fairy tale for those who don’t know any better. Isn’t he *patronizing* his interlocutor in much the same way the parent patronized the child? And yet, we hesitate to condemn that argument.

Perhaps we are (or at least, *I am*) ambivalent about this case because there is so much that is praiseworthy. Santa Claus arguments, as noted, can be logically valid, dialectically closed, rhetorically excellent, and agonistically successful. Still, there is that worrisome Santa Claus aspect to it.

5. INSINCERITY

What the four scenarios for the Santa Claus argument show is that the flaw in the argumentation is not that the premises are *false, unknown by, or unjustified* to the different parties to the argument. And what the two halves of the same-sex marriage debate show is that the problem cannot be simply that the proponent *doubts or disbelieves* his own premises.

We can sum up the problem in a single word, *insincerity*. The arguer has not argued virtuously. We need to be clear, however, that the problem is more than just an epistemological question about how arguers relate to their premises. Nor is it entirely an ethical matter regarding how arguers relate to imperatives about honesty and to their fellow arguers. Rather it is an entire series of questions about how arguers relate to their own *argumentation*. The common element is that there is a *lack of respect*: the arguers in question lack respect for truth, they lack respect for their interlocutors, and they lack respect for argumentation. It is a question of being *authentic* arguers.7

I will focus on indifference to the truth because it is in many ways the most important and the most revealing, and fairly representative of the others. There is a difference between simple dishonesty and a disregard for the truth.8 Dishonesty is largely an ethical matter. Disregard for the truth is, too, of course, but it is also an epistemological matter. It is a compromise of one’s *epistemological integrity* because it disengages and distances one from the pursuit of knowledge—and indeed, from any of the possible cognitive gains that can come about through argumentation. There are, of course, many reasons to argue ranging from the personal to the social, for practical ends and for pure theoretical ones, but the ones that involve us epistemologically and cognitively must be accorded a privileged position in theorizing about argumentation. That is the source of the payoffs that really matter. Insincerity—lack of respect for the

---

7 The line of reasoning developed in Williams 2004, ch.1, in which he makes the case that the concept of truth includes ethical imperatives towards truthfulness, would seem to apply here.

8 Frankfurt 2005 forcefully presses this distinction and isolates the added negative value of insincerity.
truth—is an insurmountable obstacle to the kind of engagement that is necessary if we are ever going to gain anything—to learn anything—from an argument.

Are there no good arguments insincerely presented?

If all we are concerned with is the product of arguing, then obviously sincerity is irrelevant. A sound proof considered as a sequence of premises and a conclusion is sound regardless of the mental state of the person who presents it; indeed, it is sound even if no one ever presents and it remains a disembodied structure of abstract propositions. There is indeed a sense of the word “argument” that is consonant with that use. It is harder to maintain that extreme Platonism, however, when we think of arguments as phenomena that include arguers. The robust sense of good argument that is being used here—the one that could end with its arguers saying, “Now that was a good argument”—must, perforce, be fully embodied.

The problem with insincerity, as noted, is the lack of engagement. Consider an extreme case: suppose a non-mathematically inclined friend memorized the steps in a proof and also stock answers to the standard questions. He presents what he has rehearsed, but without any real understanding, you raise objections, he answers, and in the end you are convinced. There is no genuine communicative, epistemic, or argumentative engagement. While you could learn something that way, it would be a poor metaphor to say that your innumerate friend taught you or argued with you. For that matter, a parrot could do what your friend did—and parrots do not argue. Or, to bring matters into a higher, and absurd, relief, suppose two parrots memorized and repeated the different parts in the dialogue. Would we really want to say that that even was an argument—let alone a good argument?

Insincerity disengages us from our argument, and it becomes irrelevant whether we even comprehend what we are saying. We are not really listening to what we are saying. It effectively turns us into parrots.

When an arguer lacks respect for his opponents and their arguments, it ensures that they will not teach him anything. When an arguer lacks respect for her own arguments, it further ensures that she will not learn anything. Thus, when arguers lacks respect for argumentation, it guarantees that their arguments will never be robustly good ones.

6. CONCLUSION: POLITICAL COALITIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Let me conclude by offering some curious, and perhaps a bit unsettling, corollaries to this way of thinking about arguments when it is applied to public, political argumentation.

The salient feature of political controversies is that they take place in the public sphere. Because the questions are of general interest, anyone might qualify as an interested party. Often, the issue is settled by a ballot, but there can also be something closer to real resolution when the tide of public opinion turns. The questions of slavery, contraception, prohibition, and women’s suffrage and equal rights can all be said to have been resolved, with only negligible pockets of those refusing to join the general consensus. Still, there are those hold-outs, despite the fact that the mainstream of the opposition in each case has acquiesced.

In contrast, the limited legal access to abortions and the almost unlimited access to pornography in the United States are examples of matters that are, at best, only more or
less settled because even though the access in each case is an established fact of political life, there is continuing and, in the former case, very active resistance to that status quo. Feminists favouring legal abortion are joined by libertarians and opposed by Evangelicals on the first question, while feminists opposing pornography are joined by Evangelicals and opposed by libertarians on the second. Politics really does make for very strange bedfellows.

Argumentation is the public sphere is always a multi-party affair. The proponents cannot be assumed to form a monolithic bloc. They do not necessarily share a single standpoint. They may argue from very different premises. All that is common is that they reach the same conclusion from their various arguments—although, on close inspection, there are likely be very different versions and interpretations of that conclusion, differences that are sublimated by the greater differences with the opposition. The same comments all apply to opponents’ coalitions.

These facts give rise to a problem. Suppose an important piece of environmental legislation is to be voted on by the legislature. Liberal progressive environmentalists are free to make their case for that legislation at the same time that Christian Evangelical “Creation Care” environmentalists make a very different case. Their separate voices simply combine here to make a louder call for the legislation at hand.

However, political exigencies can bring uneasy coalition-partners together in uncomfortable ways. If a liberal progressive environmentalist is called upon to present the case for the legislation before an assembly of Christian Evangelicals, rhetorical imperatives call for a Creation Care argument—which, in her voice, would be a Santa Claus argument! Similarly, if a member of the Creation Care Movement circulates a petition in support of the legislation, and the preamble to that petition begins, “Whereas all of Creation is a sacred trust having been created through and for Christ…,” political imperatives may call for a signature, but wouldn’t that make a non-Christian environmentalist party to—and guilty of—a Santa Claus argument just by signing on?

Public, political arguments involve coalitions. Coalitions do not (or rarely, if ever) engage each other epistemologically. Epistemological engagement is a necessary condition for a genuine argument, and only genuine arguments can be good in the full, robust sense of the word. Therefore, to complete the sorites, public, political arguments can never be genuinely good arguments in the full and robust sense, although there is nothing to prevent individuals within opposing coalitions to engage in argumentation of the very best sort.

In a final irony, Santa Claus arguments may, in the end be unobjectionable in the political sphere precisely because political debates involving coalitions are more about political manoeuvring than epistemic engagement and genuine argumentation. That is, in the context of public controversies, Santa Claus arguments are not necessarily bad arguments because, necessarily, they are not really arguments.

Link to commentary

---

9 This is adapted from the sermons sections of the web site “Creation Care for Pastors,” at: http://www.creationcareforpastors.com/in-the-bible/
REFERENCES


