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# Commentary on Marc Champagne's "We, the Professional Sages: Analytic philosophy's arrogation of argument"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The title of Marc Champagne's paper includes the phrase *Analytic Philosophy's Arrogation of Argument*. Indeed, a main issue, if not the main issue, discussed in the paper is the alleged claim by analytic philosophers "that what sets their camp apart from long-time rivals is a shared adherence to 'proper' norms of argumentation" (p. 2). I believe the only named "long-time rivals" are "continental" philosophers. So what are the alleged proper norms of argumentation that analytic philosophy has but continental philosophy lacks? Champagne identifies many features that are presented as distinguishing these two camps, but only some of these can with any plausibility be seen as representing norms of argumentation. That is my principal criticism of the paper—it seems too wide-ranging. It gives a worthwhile discussion of differences between the analytic and continental schools, but the different norms identified are not paradigmatically norms of *argument*. A better case can be made that some are norms of *argumentation*.

## 2. ANALYTIC VS. CONTINENTAL

Some of the supposedly distinguishing features appear to be nonstarters insofar as they merely delineate what it is to be an approach, camp, or school. In discussing how Thomas Kuhn's insights were differently appropriated, Champagne indicates that "the analytic world" was impressed with the idea that "dogmatism and willful intellectual closure can actually improve the overall institutional strength of a discipline" (p. 5). But surely this is just a bit of (slightly Machiavellian) political wisdom that applies to any discipline or movement. Another example is Champagne's fictitious entry for "juxtaposition" in a philosophical dictionary. Rather than illustrating the "gratuitous combination of arbitrary notions and exploration of ensuing myriad interrelations" (p. 7), the case seems to be better understood as illustrating ever increasing refinement of positions on an issue, something that could happen in any movement. Think of libertarianism and hard and soft determinism, and their variants, for example.

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Some of the distinguishing features have to do with the *content* of analytic and continental philosophy rather than with its argumentative form, and therefore are also nonstarters. Champagne indicates that analytic philosophy is characterized by the “piecemeal clarification of linguistic confusions” (p. 5) or (quoting Michael Friedman) “an obsession with specific technical problems in the logical or linguistic analysis of language,” which are of interest only to “a small circle of narrow specialists” (p. 1). This focus is held to be generally to the exclusion of considering the big problems of philosophy, the ones that draw ordinary people to philosophy in the first place, such as the nature of reality or the meaning of life. These are generally left to the purview of continental philosophers (p. 1).

The candidate distinguishing features that remain, so far as I can see, are as follows:

*Analytic philosophy is characterized by*

- (1) “clarity of method” (p. 1)
- (2) being “scientifically minded” (p. 1)
- (3) “a sustained uniformity in the vocabulary employed” (p. 4)
- (4) “cooperative cumulative progress in the formulation and assimilation of ‘results’” (pp. 1, 4)
- (5) “moving forward” but by “quite humble” increments (p. 4)
- (6) discipline “professionalization” (p. 4)

*Continental philosophy is characterized by*

- (7) “almost willful obscurity more characteristic of a poetic use of language than of ostensibly logical argumentative discourse” (p. 1)
- (8) “literary intellectuality” (p. 1)
- (9) “sophistry” (p. 2)
- (10) claims made “not by axioms, definitions, and syllogisms, but by means of imagery” (p. 3)
- (11) including “barriers of jargon, convolution, and metaphor” (p. 3)

Of course more of the putative features of continental philosophy are phrased from a (pretty derogatory) analytic point of view than are the putative analytic features phrased from a continental point of view. (About this tendency, Glock says “just as theists should

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not be allowed to define God into existence, analytical philosophers should not be allowed to define themselves into excellence” (2008, p. 211.) Otherwise, for the most part, I have no particular quibble with the accuracy of these attributions. My main questions are: Do these features represent norms of argumentation? Do they represent norms of argument?

Many of the features seem to be better described as representing general prescriptions of intellectual methodology that need not have anything to do with argument *per se* since they apply to any sort of discourse within the discipline. Consider (1) and (2), which, recast as norms, amount to *be clear* and *be scientific*. Presumably, one can and should obey—even when one is not reasoning toward a conclusion. This can be said as well about the remaining characterizations of analytic philosophy, except perhaps (6), which seems to represent neither a general methodological prescription nor an argumentative norm.

Regarding the characterizations of continental philosophy, consider the prescription(s) that (7) and (10) represent, viz., ‘avoid ostensibly logical argumentative discourse’ or ‘avoid axioms, definitions, and syllogisms’. Where ‘argumentation’ is understood as concerning the *presentation* of argument or the action or process of arguing, this prescription surely should count as at least a norm of argumentation. It seems to basically say ‘avoid formalization in the presentation of your argument’. And indeed, one is unlikely to see arguments being formalized in continental philosophy (I never have). Not only does formalization of argument appear to be disvalued, the study of formalization or symbolic logic is not a subfield of continental philosophy. Of course the situation is largely the opposite in analytic philosophy, so this case does appear to constitute a genuine and important norm of argumentation with respect to which continental and analytic philosophy differ.

This perhaps interprets the prescription represented by (10) ‘avoid axioms, definitions, and syllogisms’, somewhat charitably. I take it that it is *not* prescribing the avoidance of syllogistic reasoning or reasoning from first principles in one’s *thinking*. I hope we all agree that that would be impossible insofar as these are constitutive of what it is to reason at all. Rather, I take it that what is being prescribed is the avoidance of spelling out the elements of reasoning in an explicit stepwise, and often symbolic, fashion.

The other elements of the continental list (with one exception), like the analytic list, seem to represent general prescriptions of intellectual methodology that need not have anything to do with argument *per se* since they apply to any sort of discourse within the discipline. Consider, for example, (7)’s ‘be obscure’, which one can do whether one is reasoning or not.

There is, however, the norm of being sophistical represented by (9), which in a general sense seems to say that it is all right or desirable to engage in fallacious but plausible reasoning. Clearly, this has to do with argument, and not just argumentation. But is it a norm of argument? It seems that paradigmatically, norms of argument are far more specific; indeed, there seems to be a one-to-one correspondence between, on the one hand, positive and negative norms of argument, and on the other hand, valid and invalid or (more broadly) cogent and fallacious argument patterns. For example, a positive norm of argument would be that denying the consequent or Modus Tollens is a permissible pattern of reasoning, and a negative norm of argument would be that it is

impermissible to infer that the whole has all of the properties of the parts. If this is right, the prescription represented by (9)—be sophisticated—is better understood as a *meta* norm of argument or as a statement on the level of generality or vagueness as the claim that analytic philosophy has ‘arrogated argument’ or “that what sets their camp apart from long-time rivals is a shared adherence to ‘proper’ norms of argumentation.” I conclude, then, that Champagne has not given us a single clear case of a norm of argument with respect to which continental and analytic philosophy differ.

Nevertheless, the prescription *be sophisticated* is very suggestive. It does seem that not infrequently analytic philosophers charge continental philosophers with mounting arguments that are sophisticated in a particular way, and sometimes a defense is mounted that although the particular approach may differ from usual analytic norms, it is not fallacious. This applies almost exclusively to nondeductive reasoning patterns. Perhaps the best known case of this is the charge that Nietzsche commits the genetic fallacy in some of his writings on ethics, most notably his book, *The Genealogy of Morals*. A definition of the genetic fallacy is reasoning that an idea is objectionable (unobjectionable) on the grounds that it has objectionable (unobjectionable) origins. *The Genealogy of Morals* might be summarized as a detailed defense of the claim that altruistic values are to be disvalued because of the tainted historical and psychological circumstances out of which they grew. As a response to this charge, some defenders of Nietzsche predictably argue that he does not quite make the inferential leaps necessary to commit the fallacy; with respect to moral or altruistic values, they say his book was meant only to “prepare the way for their critique” (Loeb 2008, pp. 9–10). Other defenders of Nietzsche take the bull by the horns and argue that no fallacy is committed: Nietzsche is adopting and applying an aristocratic or noble standard according to which

questions of value or legitimacy are always decided by an inquiry into family pedigree, lineage, or heredity [...] Having discovered their ignoble origins, he concludes that altruistic values are “bad” in the aristocratic sense—that is base, pitiable and contemptible [...] Nietzsche [thereby] finds in the genealogical aspect of moral values a relatively given, essential, universal, invariant, and unitary determinant of their value. (Loeb 2008, pp. 2, 3, 14)

### 3. CONCLUSION

Champagne purports to discuss analytic philosophy’s arrogation of argument from continental philosophy. But of the many features that he discusses as distinguishing these two approaches, only one clearly represents a norm of argumentation (‘avoid formalization’) and none clearly represent norms of argument. However, one feature, “sophistry,” is suggestive of norms of argument with respect to which continental and analytic philosophy may actually differ.

[Link to reply](#)

[Link to paper](#)

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