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Commentary on Fabio Paglieri's "Ruinous arguments: Escalation of disagreement and the dangers of arguing"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Paglieri has written us a welcome appreciation of the prospects and likely facts of argument escalation. As he observes, our community has an unconsciously optimistic point of view about argument processes. For the most part we expect properly conducted arguments to approach consensus or some sort of happy mutuality. When this does not happen, we are inclined to find fault, either with the arguers, their argument schemes, or the argumentation process. Paglieri helps us to understand that intelligent people operating with reasonable competence may nonetheless accomplish destructive escalation. Although we may be able to understand and predict this outcome, we may nonetheless find ourselves with no person, text, or process to blame. Escalation is not necessarily diagnostic of bad arguing or bad arguers: the encounter may simply have begun with awful prospects.

I find several aspects of Paglieri's development to be unusually interesting, and so I will confine my remarks to those. In particular, I am impressed with his analysis of matters pertinent to argument engagement—that is, the decision whether to engage or not. This is an important and under-researched topic in argument studies. I consider that Paglieri has already explored escalation rather thoroughly, so I will confine myself to appreciating and projecting his thinking onto the topic of engagement.

2. ARGUMENT ENGAGEMENT

Paglieri treats two sets of ideas that each tell us something about whether or not a person will engage in argument. They do so from points of view that are distinguished in their abstractness. Paglieri treats these for their relevance to whether an argument will escalate, but they are also informative about the engagement decision.

The more abstract set of ideas is the first one, which Paglieri uses to develop some ideas that are theoretical on their face, and which may well be appreciated at some level by naïve actors. These include four factors: epistemological, cost/benefit, articulation, and socio-cultural. The epistemological factor refers to the chance that an argument will

escalate as the arguers begin to regard one another as not simply disagreeing, but as being blind to good reasons. The cost/benefits factor recognizes that as an argument proceeds it takes up more and more resources, so that a failure of agreement is more frustrating and costly at the end of the encounter than it was in the beginning. The articulation factor is somewhat similar to the epistemological one: here, the process of arguing exposes the arguers' reasons and beliefs, leading to an explosion of subsidiary disagreements. Finally the socio-cultural factor refers to the social appropriateness of arguing at that time, in that place, on that topic, with that partner.

Pagliari offers these as potential sources for escalatory pressures. But since none of these are beyond the natural experience of arguers, we should entertain the idea that ordinary people are sensitive to these matters in some degree. I take as a base assumption the proposition that people will not voluntarily engage in an argument that is going to explode. There will be exceptions to this generalization: sometimes a person will want to incite, a particular situation may punish avoidance more than escalation, an arguer may have lost emotional control, or a person may simply be quite verbally aggressive. We will need to think differently about these sorts of circumstances and make allowance for them in our theorizing. Today, however, let us simply take as given the idea that when people have reason to anticipate escalation, they will not engage in arguing.

Given this assumption, Paglieri's thinking offers us a number of testable hypotheses about argument avoidance. These need only be slightly revised from his more or less explicit hypotheses about which arguments will escalate. The engagement hypotheses following from his first set of ideas are these:

1. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they anticipate that the other person will not be reasonable.
2. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they anticipate that the costs of arguing will exceed the projected benefits from that particular interaction.
3. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they anticipate that the process of arguing will reveal more and more disagreements than were apparent at the point when the engagement decision needed to be made.
4. People are less likely to engage in an argument when arguing would be socially inappropriate.

Conceptually, this is a small step—moving from the reasons for escalation, to the possibility that arguers can anticipate escalation, to predictions about whether they will engage.

Pagliari's second set of ideas is more explicitly concerned with the engagement decision. He, too, shares the assumption that people will try to avoid escalatory episodes and seek out those more likely to generate agreement. Here we discover him proposing engagement hypotheses directly. His predictions are these (I have expressed them as being about avoidance):

5. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they feel their reasons are weaker than those of their cointeractant.
6. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they estimate that the other person's disagreeing thought is so important to the other person that change in view is unlikely.

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7. People are less likely to engage in an argument when they consider the argument's domain so complex that a completely satisfying exploration would be unacceptably costly in terms of resources.

8. People are less likely to engage in an argument when its topic or implications are sensitive to self, other, or relationship.

9. People are less likely to engage in an argument when social considerations strongly indicate that they should be agreeing and not disagreeing.

10. People are less likely to engage in an argument on topics where the fact of disagreement would be personally consequential. (Topics such as disagreements about music or sports are expected not to imply personal consequences.)

11. People are less likely to engage in an argument as part of a persuasion dialogue than an inquiry dialogue.

12. People are less likely to engage in an argument when the interlocutor has higher power *and* one's position is weak or picayune.

13. People are less likely to engage in an argument in public than in private.

Some of these more specific hypotheses are similar to those following from the first, more abstract, set of considerations. I think that all of them can be understood as particular manifestations of people's anticipations about epistemology, costs and benefits, articulation, and socio-cultural matters. In fact, I believe that all of them can be subordinated to the general topic of costs and benefits.

In other words, my reading of Paglieri's paper suggests that he has given us a three layered theory of argument engagement and escalation. The highest level concept is costs and benefits. These are subjectively understood and projected by the arguers. The ratio of costs to benefits should permit us to predict the decision to argue or not. A highly accurate theory requires not only that we have a fairly full description of potential rewards and punishments, but also that we know what alternative activities are available to the arguer. For instance, a person might well choose to participate in a punishing argument if the immediate alternative were an embarrassing conversation with someone else.

The theory's second layer gives more detail to the ideas of costs and benefits. The chance of attaining one's argumentative goals is a benefit, the effort involved in arguing is a cost, the prospect of escalation implies further costs, and social conventions automatically identify costs and benefits in various circumstances.

The last layer of considerations also details costs, benefits, and some factors that make them more or less likely, more or less valued. These include more specific elements contributing to the chances of success; prospects for personal harm to self, other, or the relationship between them; the likelihood of emotional reactions, positive or negative; and how the immediate social setting and norms affect everything else.

3. CONCLUSION

This particular appreciation of Paglieri's ideas reforms them into a cost/benefit theory of both engagement and escalation. The very factors that make escalation more likely also make engagement less likely. By implication, his theory should also account for arguments that don't escalate—those that resolve in the way we usually hope for—as well as decisions to participate. So we have four possible outcome events, organized as

alternatives at two points in time. First is the engage-avoid pair, and if the argument does take place, at its end we have predictions about escalate versus resolve. All four events are predicted by the same set of variables.

The theory has good prospects for empirical support. Cost-benefit theories appear with different terminology across the social sciences. Besides cost/benefit, we find terminology such as Subjective Expected Utility and Predicted Outcome Value. By and large, if a voluntary human decision can be pressed into a frame in which it makes sense to assess probability and value of outcome, the theory will find good empirical support when it predicts the decision or outcome (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen 1975, Lave & March 1975, Marek et al. 2004, Thibaut & Kelley 1959, Uehara 1990).

Paglieri's thinking offers an opportunity for advance in our understanding of argumentation. Escalation and unproductive arguments have been widely studied in the conflict management literature (e.g., Deutsch 1973, Folger et al. 2005), but as we know, not always from a perspective well informed by argument studies. The decision to engage in an argument appears from time to time in our argumentation and communication theories (e.g., Dillard 2004, Trapp & Hoff 1985). However, it is mainly theorized in the context of trait perspectives (e.g., Rancer & Avgis 2006), and therefore does not reach the precision and sensitivity of Paglieri's thinking. Paglieri's paper forms the basis for what could be a productive research program concerned with how people decide to argue, or not, and with whether their arguments are productive or destructive.

[Link to paper](#)

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