

May 14th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Govier

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Bickenbach, Jerome, "Commentary on Govier" (2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 32.
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Commentary on: T. Govier's "Emotion, Relevance and Consolation Arguments"

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Trudy Govier thinks there is a problem with Consolation Arguments, not because of their link to emotions, but because of irrelevance. I wholeheartedly agree with her that arguing about – or even with – emotions does not of itself make arguments fallacious. (There is a point in arguing about emotions, and if an argument about emotions is fallacious, it is not because it is an argument about emotions.) But I am not convinced Consolation Arguments are fallacious because of irrelevance (they may be fallacious for other reasons, of course). And I believe this because of what she says at the end of her paper, namely that an exception has to be made for Consolation Arguments that involve an implicit comparison between the fate of the person being consoled and that of others. It seems to me all Consolation Arguments *must* rely on this comparison of fates, if they are to be consoling.

Govier characterizes a Consolation Argument as one offered to console a person sorry or depressed by their fate by arguing that, as the fate of others is similar or even worse than theirs, they should not feel as sorry or as depressed as they do. I'm willing to live with this, except for one clarification: It seems to me that any argument that presumed, or depended on a true ordering or ranking of conditions of ill-fate (if you give me that term for convenience) would be open to such substantial difficulties of premise acceptability that it could be cast out to the dustbin of failed arguments long before the issue of relevance even came up. Obviously, the point of a Consolation Argument is to console – that is to comfort – and to object to them on the grounds that we lack a metric for ranking states of ill-fate is to radically miss the point.

I therefore insist – and there is enough evidence in her paper to suggest Govier would agree with me – that Consolation Arguments depend on the intuitive plausibility of providing comfort to the ill-fated person by arguing 'you are not the only one'. It is important to insist on this to avoid begging the question as to the point or rational value of Consolation Arguments. The point is not to convince someone that their fate was not really bad – or really *that* bad – or that the pain they are suffering is unreal, unwarranted, or the sign of moral weakness. Logically, consolation involves recognition of ill-fate and the appropriateness of some measure of suffering. Why else would one be trying to comfort the person? 'Snap out of it, you wimp, everyone gets a cold now and again' is not a Consolation Argument; it is an attempt to show that the person's whining is inappropriate, excessive, or a sign of a weak character.

This means we have to take care not to confuse true Consolation Arguments with another kind of argument that only pretend to be consolation. I am thinking of an argument that is closer to true analogy, of the sort that parents, often in exasperation, try out on their children: 'Why are you so depressed, Jimmy broke his arm just like you did, and he is happy as a clam.' Any child worth his or her boombox knows the answer to this one: 'Well I'm not Jimmy, am I?' This is not an inappropriate response because the point of the argument was not to console, but to cast blame on the basis of an analogy. Let's call these pseudo-Consolation Arguments. They attempt to convince a person of the inappropriateness of his or her suffering; and that's not consolation.

So, why is Govier inclined to find irrelevance in Consolation Arguments? If A is the depressed, ill-fated individual, B the consoler and C another person to whom B compares A's

fate, Govier argues that since A's depression depends on A's beliefs, evaluations and circumstances, dragging in the beliefs, evaluations and circumstances of another person, C, is just irrelevant. That is, as Govier puts it: "If B is trying to console A, B should attend specifically to the content and intensity of A's own emotion."

This is a forceful point. Unfortunately, Govier dilutes its force by going on immediately to say – putting her point in psychological terms – that by shifting the attention to the miseries of C, B is refusing to acknowledge A's feelings, or worse, is insulting A by denying that she or he is entitled to them. If this were B's intention, then he is not engaging in consolation at all, he is trying out what I have called the a pseudo-Consolation Argument. A fraud, consolation-wise.

In her defense, Govier would say that she is only making a psychological point about A, namely that "irrelevance *is felt by* A as lack of acknowledgement and even as an insult." But we can't make too much of this, since A's reaction to B's argument can't on its own count as evidence that B's is trading on an irrelevant comparison or engaged in pseudo-consolation. If A reads B's argument this way, we might just as well accuse A of indulging in self-pity. If we are going to make anything of A's reaction, we need to know if it is justified or accurate; and that requires an independent judgment about the relevance of B's comparison.

This leads me to Govier's exception to her general claim that Consolation Arguments trade on irrelevance. She says that when A's feeling of depression is grounded in the sense of injustice captured by the implicitly comparative plea of 'Why me?', then A's grief and suffering presupposes beliefs about the comparative fates of others, and in particular which fates are deserved and which are not. If this is A's story, then it is indeed relevant to argue, as B does, that others suffer similar, or worse, fate, and their fates are not deserved either. A's belief that she or he has been singled out, unjustly and undeservedly, is directly addressed.

But when would A's suffering and grief *not* be implicitly comparative? When, as Govier puts it, "A was feeling depressed about his own situation in particular, and in itself". We are asked to imagine a case (which Govier hints is typical) in which A is miserable, depressed and in grief with respect to his ill-fate, alone and in isolation. A cares not about whether others have done better, or worse than, he has. Their fates are irrelevant to A.

Now, assuming cases like this exist, and assuming that I am correct that an argument denying the legitimacy or appropriateness of A's suffering is not a true Consolation Argument, the conclusion Govier wants us to come to is that a non-fallacious Consolation Argument addressed to A is just not possible.

I think this is the wrong conclusion to come to. If A is truly interested only in his own fate and suffering, then the *only* consolation we could possibly give to A is: 'you are not the only one.' If A does not see himself in the context of humanity at large, then as consolers, we must try to give A that perspective so that A may be consoled. Taking the wider view, and getting A to situate his grief within context of human grief, is the only consolation available that does not deny that ill-fate is ill, or that grief, sorrow and depression are legitimate reactions. That is why I believe that a Consolation Argument depends always on a comparison of A's fate and grief with the fate and suffering of others. If A does not make the comparison, then we have to make it for him, by way of consolation.

All of the Stoics saw this; indeed the central Stoic message about living one's life is that one is not alone, and that, so to speak, shit happens to everyone. Marcus Aurelius, for example, writes in Book 7 of *Meditations* (in Gregory Hays' new and wonderful translation):

“Evil: the same old thing. No matter what happens, keep this in mind: It’s the same old thing, from one end of the world to the other. It fills the history books, ancient and modern, and the cities, and the houses too. Nothing new at all. Familiar, transient.”

What I want to say is that a Consolation Argument reminding A that ill-fate is ubiquitous does not trade on irrelevance, since nothing else can be said by way of consolation. If A focuses on his own misery and grief, and cares not about others, all we can say to him by way of consoling argument is: evil is real enough; your grief is justified; but look around, it is the same old thing that happens to everyone.