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Commentary on Gough

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In Response to: Jim Gough's *The Differences Between Opinion and Argumentation*

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Jim Gough directs his attention to an investigation of opinion as something identifiably distinct from argumentation. Examining opinion in its own right, as something separate from argumentation, seems to me to be a useful endeavor. So I will offer what I hope are some helpful observations on this project.

First of all, I think it would be useful to distinguish between two uses of the word: "opinion." Suppose you were to turn to your spouse, the love of your life, or your best beloved, or however you choose to designate the object of your affections, and suppose you were to look deep into their almond brown eyes and say "I love you." And suppose they were to murmur back: "I hope you believe that." And you were to add: "Well, it's just an opinion." I don't think they would be impressed.

The problem is that the word "opinion" can be used in at least two different senses. "Mere opinion" is unsubstantiated, highly tentative or uncritical belief. It is suspicious belief, belief that cannot be backed up by firm evidence, belief that is irreparably uncertain. On the other hand, we might use the word "opinion" to denote the belief-set, the world-view of any particular individual person. In this latter sense, everyone has opinions. Socrates had opinions. Hegel had opinions. Yes, even the skeptics had opinions.

Because informal logic is essentially evaluative—the goal is to differentiate between good and bad arguments—students of the discipline often use the word "opinion" in the former, pejorative sense. Faced with a conspicuously bad example of reasoning, the Principle of Charity directs us to identify a passage as a mere opinion and forgo serious analysis. Opinion, in this sense, becomes a garbage bin into which egregiously bad arguments go. I agree with Jim Gough that the usual negative classification of opinions as arguments that did not quite make the grade is over-simple and even misguided. I suspect that Gough's dissatisfaction with this elemental scheme is the main driving force behind his paper.

I have two main questions. First, Gough seems to classify opinion as a form of performative discourse. J. L. Austin identifies performative discourse as discourse that brings into existence the reality it reports. If I say, "I promise to pay you five hundred dollars next Tuesday," the mere fact that I say this is what makes the promise real. If my promise-intention is never expressed in language (written or spoken), no promise ever took place. So performative discourse both reports a reality and somehow constitutes that very same reality. But does this hold true for arguments? Suppose I never express my opinion of you in language. Is that still an opinion? Are opinions necessarily linguistic?

If I run from a rabid dog that is frothing at the mouth, do I express an opinion? The mere fact that I run away demonstrates that I hold a certain belief. I believe that this is a dangerous dog. *In my opinion*, this is a dangerous dog. But is this unexpressed belief an opinion?

There are circumstances in which verbal articulation of a belief may be ill-advised. I may have definitive convictions in things I am silent about. To speak of opinion as a form of performative discourse seems to suggest that opinions only come into existence when we actually express them. It is when we fit them into words that opinions begin to be. But is this the case? It is the expression of an opinion that makes it an opinion. I think this is a worthwhile question.

One could pursue this line of inquiry further. Opinions do seem to be linguistic in that they are inescapably propositional. If I say my opinion is “Calgary,” or “red” or “raining” that does not make any sense. I need to say that “Calgary is the most beautiful city in Canada,” or that “the wallpaper is red,” or that “it is raining outside.” Opinions, in this sense, need to be expressed as complete units of thought. This leaves open the question of whether opinions exist before or independently of their expression as propositions.

I would also ask Jim for clarification on a second point. Are opinions psychological or epistemological, or perhaps both. If I report a feeling I am having is that report an opinion? If I say, “I am sad,” or if I say, pointing at my cut finger, “That hurts,” am I expressing an opinion? I would have thought that opinions have to do with belief more than feeling. I believe that the world is round. In my opinion, it is round. But I know my finger hurts. It is not merely my opinion that it hurts. This seems to be too weak of a formulation.

Opinion involves a pretense, a claim to knowledge. This is why people argue about opinions. One can't have an argument without an opinion. It is not merely, as Jim observes, that the conclusion of an argument is an opinion. The premises of an argument are opinions as well. They involve claims to knowledge. So opinionation and argumentation are not mutually-distinct endeavors. In both cases we have a claim to knowledge that is or is not supported. But this seems to suggest that opinions are epistemological and that they involve more than matters of simple taste or personal preference.

Gough writes: “It cannot...be presumed that argumentation is necessarily always better than opinionation.” In modern discourse, philosophy tends to be associated with argument. But the traditional goal of philosophy is some kind of wisdom. On this more ancient view, the point of say philosophy is not to have the right arguments but the right opinions. Opinion is more important than argument in that argument is only as a means, a conduit to true belief. Someone who has true opinions (in the second, non-pejorative sense of that term) has accomplished the goal of philosophy.

Definitely, we can evaluate opinions. Gough himself suggests that there are good and bad opinions. But I would suggest that another distinction might be necessary. Opinions may be “good” because of their substantive content, or they may be “good” because they adequately express what the subject truly believes. So we can invoke a substantive or procedural account of opinion evaluation. The racist may adequately express his racist world-view, but this is still—in a moral sense—a bad opinion because it has the wrong content. Perhaps argumentation is a tool that can be used to investigate and evaluate opinion in both substantive and procedural sense.

As a philosopher, it is humbling to think that ordinary people often come to the right or the true belief without argument. Consider the person who makes the right moral decision without any appeal to argument. Let me use, as an illustration, a true story from an unlikely source.

Several years ago, there was a South African expedition to Mt. Everest that was racked by political troubles. The reporters assigned to the expedition were told to leave and then forced to return. When they arrived back at camp, the Sherpa cook was instructed to ignore them completely and to offer them no assistance whatsoever. The response of the Sherpa was a terse "Bullshit" as he proceeded to serve the unwelcome guests hot tea and biscuits. Note that the Sherpa did not argue the point. He did engage in dialogue, in logical moves intended to undermine the credibility of his superiors. Yet the Sherpa had a definite opinion about the political dissension in the camp. Surely, in such an inhospitable environment, it was the right opinion, the moral opinion. Argument, in such circumstances, seems beside the point.