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Commentary on Schwed

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In Response to: Menashe Schwed's *Descriptive theories of argumentation*

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Naturalized Epistemology might well have been called “*Empiricized* Epistemology” instead because it had both broadly general epistemological motivations and specifically empiricist motivations. On the one hand, there is the *empiricist* imperative to naturalism: if rationality could be successfully characterized descriptively rather than normatively, then an *empirical* basis would ground (or at least provide some parameters for) the theorizing. On the other hand, there is the perennial epistemological problem of skepticism. Naturalized epistemology would, it was hoped, finally provide the answer to the *skeptical challenge* by seeing knowledge as one more natural phenomenon to be explained by empirical means in the vocabulary of the natural sciences. In practice, this meant breaking out of (or into) the justificatory circle by looking at the *causes* of knowledge.

Menashe Schwed claims that the contemporary movements to naturalize epistemology fail on both counts: first, normativity is so deeply inherent in the epistemological project that it cannot, in the end, be eliminated or avoided. The desired sort of naturalistic account of justification cannot be achieved. Second, and consequent to the first, the specter of skepticism still haunts epistemology.

How does this epistemological drama play itself out on the stage of argumentation theory? Schwed proves himself an able observer by surveying the scene, identifying the *dramatis personae*, and noting the counterpart movements. There are, however, some important and relevant differences between argumentation theory and the larger discourse of epistemology that go unnoted here. At first, they serve to re-enforce Schwed's conclusions, but in the long-run, they may suggest something different.

The contributions and methodological orientations of Stephen Toulmin and of Chaim Perelman & Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, for example, are both in the descriptive — specifically, anthropological — camp when it comes to theorizing about arguments. The appropriate methodology would be something like Daniel O'Keefe's use of “paradigm cases.” The working assumption is that the goals of argumentation are *rhetorical* and so the relevant criteria for evaluating arguments are *rhetorical*, e.g., something like audience satisfaction. Hence, the disciplinary-relativism of Toulmin and the cultural-relativism of Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca. In contrast, the pragma-dialectical school is aligned with normative epistemology, oriented as it is by its recognition that one of the goals of argumentation is to reach “more critical decisions.”

John Biro & Harvey Siegel's situating of argumentation theory in the larger epistemological project is what is used to connect Willard van Orman Quine's proposal to naturalize epistemology with descriptive argumentation theories — and also to explain the presence of “the skeptical challenge.” The external standpoint — the possibility of a view from nowhere — is presupposed by the evil demon and brain-in-vat sorts of arguments for skepticism. But that possibility can also be seen as the source for real normativity in argumentation theory. That is, the possibility of such a standpoint is a presupposition for what could be called “categorical,” rather than merely assertoric or hypothetical imperatives for evaluating arguments. Raising the truth condition for premise adequacy, for example, is always a fair move.

The conceptual and doctrinal components to Carnapian Foundational Reductionism are attributed — curiously — to Quine and then imported — fallaciously — into the naturalization project. That two-fold project cannot be accommodated by Quinean holism: the holism of justification blocks the doctrinal part, as well as implies the systemic holism of semantics, which, in turn, undermines the first, conceptual part. Schwed then sees the failure of naturalized argumentation as its inability to accommodate the normative, à la Hilary Putnam, Jaegwon Kim, Barry Stroud, *et al.*, in regards to naturalized epistemology. Of course, the failure to justify the normative would not be counted as a failure for those who see the proper project as one of explanation rather than justification. The felt need for normativity might itself be simply one more phenomenon about argumentation to be explained naturally. Others, like Hilary Kornblith, have argued that the resources of a naturalist epistemology are indeed adequate to recover the normative.

Schwed sees the **normative** dimension as a necessary resource in the argument against **skepticism**. But he also thinks that the normative has not been successfully or completely eliminated from attempts at a naturalistic account of argumentation. The traces that remain, however, are inadequate to the job at hand. A more robust normativity is needed. This assumes, of course, that the kind of skepticism that cannot be avoided that way really is something that does need to be avoided! All of this is to say that Schwed's general epistemological intuitions and sensibilities, as well as the conclusions he has reached after all due reflection outweigh whatever specific doctrinally orthodox empiricist tendencies he may have. (Because I can be characterized in the same way, I do not mean this to be taken as a bad thing!)

There are, however, other responses and conclusions available to non-naturalists, and ones that I believe are more clearly visible and readily available within the context of argumentation theory than within the more traditional contexts of epistemological discourse. Suppose Stroud were right, and the relevant class of arguments for the relevant forms of skepticism could get started only if an external point were available — and were really and truly external. Then there would have to be an answer to the naturalists like Hilary Kornblith who have argued that the mere possibility of an evil demon merely establishes the mere possibility that our justified beliefs are not knowledge. It implies the **possibility** that what we commonly take to be knowledge **is not really** knowledge. It does not imply the stronger claim that **in actuality it really is not** knowledge.

The external standpoint needed for that stronger variety of skepticism would have to be so completely external as to be altogether **incommensurable**. The reason for this is that it is not enough for an argument for radical skepticism to call into question the reasons, grounds and evidence we use to construct our theories of the world; it also has to call into question the criteria we use for evaluating those reasons, grounds and evidence. It has to call into question the canons of rationality themselves. Any substantial argumentation theory — whether explicit or only implicit — would have to be part of the target. But in the complete absence of any account at all of what constitutes a good argument, we cannot even begin to argue.

And yet: **skepticism is something we can argue about!**

The simple possibility of argumentative engagement belies the requisite sort of **incommensurability**. It is an operational assumption of argumentation theory, a methodological posit, as it were, that where we can argue, we can reach resolution — and we can argue everywhere. The act of argumentative engagement itself holds out the hope for a rational

resolution of the disagreement, i.e., for achieving some sort of consensus. Admittedly, this is *pragmatically implied* rather than *logically entailed*. Even so, that engagement remains. And whether or not the argument succeeds in *finding* Descartes' Archimedean point, the argumentation serves to *create* and *expand* whatever common ground is to be had.

And finally, what's so bad about skepticism? It might be a further corollary, again by way of pragmatic implication, that knowledge claims and justification stories *invite* skeptical arguments. Argumentation may presuppose the possibility of rational resolution, but it certainly does not guarantee it. On the contrary, if everything is arguable — everything interesting, at least — then argumentation positively prevents it! There are questions for which the arguments pro-and-con are open-ended. These arguments can be extended indefinitely. No last word is possible. We have a word for such arguments: *Philosophy*. And we have a word for the permanent possibility of endless argumentation, too: *Skepticism*.

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