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# The epistemic approach to argument evaluation: Virtues, beliefs, commitments

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper will have two parts. In the first, it will point out the agreement between lists of paradigm epistemic and argumentative virtues, and it will take that agreement as prima facie support for the epistemic approach to argument evaluation. Second, it will consider the disagreement over whether successful argument resolution requires change of belief or whether it only requires change of commitment. It turns out that the epistemic approach is neutral on that question.

**KEYWORDS:** virtue epistemology, virtues of argumentation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is a virtue of argumentation, and how can we bring the notion of a virtue of argumentation to bear on questions of argument construction, reconstruction, delivery, analysis, evaluation, and so on? That, I take it, is the theme of this conference. In this paper, my approach will be to approach virtues of argumentation through the lens of virtue epistemology.

I want to begin with an explanation, of sorts. This paper is an instance of an unfortunate tendency of mine that happens with an undeniable frequency: I set out to write one paper, and I end up writing quite a different paper from what I had intended. (I console myself that even very good philosophers do this on occasion.) For this paper, as the abstract indicates, I had intended to argue in support of an epistemic approach to the theory of argument, by compiling and comparing lists of paradigmatic epistemic or intellectual virtues, on the one hand, and paradigmatic virtues of argumentation, on the other.

But, of course, there aren't any definitive or widely agreed-upon lists of virtues of argumentation,<sup>1</sup> so it's not possible to simply compile lists of paradigmatic argumentative virtues from extant literature on the subject. My plan was therefore to provide a *criterion* of virtues of argumentation, which would be analogous to the

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<sup>1</sup> There is a good initial list of virtues of argumentation in (Aberdein, 2010, p. 175), but it's not intended as an exhaustive or a definitive list, and there aren't any attempts at definitive lists that I am aware of.

rough criterion of virtues in epistemology. An *epistemic* virtue, we might say, is a stable disposition in a person's cognitive makeup, which promotes intellectual flourishing, or which promotes the achievement of what is epistemically *valuable*, where what is epistemically valuable is usually taken to be to believe the truth and to avoid error.

An analogous criterion, for virtues of argumentation, would be that virtues of argumentation are stable dispositions in people, which promote the achievement of what is valuable in arguments. On the basis of this kind of criterion, I had intended to compile my list of virtues of argumentation, and then to note that the list I had compiled looks very much like a subset of the epistemic or intellectual virtues. So, I had planned to conclude, insofar as it is plausible to make use of epistemic virtues in doing epistemology, and the virtues of argumentation are a subset of epistemic virtues, it makes good sense to do the theory of argument from an epistemic perspective.

But the problem with that strategy, I came to realize, was that in providing a criterion of virtues of argumentation, I would be appealing to what is valuable in argumentation. And, of course, there *isn't* any widespread agreement about what is valuable in argumentation. There are all sorts of views about what a good argument aims to achieve or promote – for example, to get issues on the table, or to arrive at true belief, or to achieve rational persuasion, or to rationally resolve disputes. Some theorists think that there is no particular thing that arguments ought to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

So in proposing a criterion of virtues of argumentation, in terms of the promotion of the good of argumentation, for the purpose of generating a list of virtues of argumentation that would be mostly a subset of the epistemic virtues – in order to argue ultimately in favour of an epistemic approach to the theory of argument – I would have to beg the question, and presuppose that the good of argumentation is an epistemic sort of good. Otherwise, the criterion of good argumentation will not likely generate the kind of list of virtues that I am looking for.

I don't want to beg the question in that way, and so I have given up the project in that form. But I am still interested in trying to apply epistemic virtues to the domain of argumentation. What I will do in this paper, then, is take it for granted that the epistemic approach to the theory of argument is reasonable. I will not assume that it is categorically the *best* approach, but it is a worthwhile approach, and that is what I will be working with.

Moreover, if we are interested in a virtue-style theory of argument, it makes good sense to come at this idea from an epistemic point of view. The only alternative would be to take an *ethical* approach to the study of argumentation, which just seems unmotivated (since most of ethical virtues other than the epistemic ones do not themselves typically bear directly on argumentation). Or at best, that approach would be radically incomplete. If anything, some ethical virtues can make for poor argumentation (e.g. righteous anger can make for poor argumentation, even if it is

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<sup>2</sup> See Johnson (2000), Biro & Siegel (2006), Goodwin (2007), Blair (2004), and van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004) for a variety of views about whether there is a purpose of arguments, and if so, what that purpose is.

how the virtuous ethical agent would react to some sorts of situation). What this means is that perhaps it is not always ethically best to strive for good argumentation.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In sections 2 and 3, I set out some of the basics of the virtue approach in epistemology. I also explain one view within virtue epistemology which I am particularly keen on avoiding: the view that the primary bearers of justification are the epistemic virtues, while beliefs get their justification in a secondary manner, by being produced by epistemic virtues.

In part 4, I apply the virtue epistemology framework to the theory of argument. I propose a criterion of good arguments and of virtues of argumentation, and I show that that criterion can account for what appear to be clear virtues of argumentation. In part 5, I answer the objection that, because the virtues of argumentation are not primary tools of the theory of argument, on my view – they derive their goodness from the fact that they promote good arguments, not the other way around – it follows that the virtues are unnecessary for the theory of argument. Finally, in section 6, I sketch out how we might discuss two of the traditional fallacies in terms of the virtues, as an illustration of the usefulness of theorizing in terms of the virtues. The first fallacy, following Aberdeen, is the *ad hominem*; the second is the *tu quoque*.

## 2. VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology generally is the study of knowledge, justified beliefs, proper belief-forming practices, and the like. To take the epistemic approach to the theory of argument is to approach argumentation as a practice in which people are putting forward reasons that are intended to justify the belief in or acceptance of their conclusions, and to assess the quality of argumentation based on how well it conduces to achieving that goal.

Now there are two basic ways that epistemologists have tended to think of the epistemic virtues, dividing into roughly two sorts of view: there are virtue *responsibilists* (e.g. Code, 1987; Zagzebski, 1996; Montmarquet, 1993), and virtue *reliabilists* (e.g. Goldman, 1992; Sosa, 2003). Both types of virtue theorist focus on mental traits and dispositions which promote the achievement of healthy cognitive lives, and a cognitive life is healthy largely in virtue of whether the agent has mostly true beliefs (or is disposed to have mostly true beliefs). A healthy cognitive life is also part of a healthy life overall; it is an integrated part of a healthy and well-functioning person. So a healthy cognitive life is also a matter of whether the agent has *many* true beliefs – merely having a high *ratio* of true to false beliefs isn't enough to guarantee a healthy cognitive life, since a skeptic who only believes in her own existence, and suspends judgment on everything else, would have one true belief and no false beliefs, which is a perfect ratio, but that doesn't strike us as a healthy cognitive life. (Of course, a skeptic would say that the healthiest cognitive life is one where you have all of the true beliefs that are rational to believe, and no false ones, and that there's nothing that is rational to believe in other than one's own existence. So it is perhaps controversial to rule out the skeptic's position as an unhealthy way of conducting one's cognitive life. But most of us are not in fact skeptics, so it's at

least a fair, if defeasible, starting-point from which to begin the discussion of epistemic virtues.)

Similarly, a healthy cognitive life usually involves having many true beliefs about a broad *range* of subjects: a person who has an obsession to learn many things about one narrow subject matter, to the detriment of his other life projects, does not have a healthy cognitive life. (Think of the Nutty Professor, who was so obsessed with his Flubber that he forgot about his own wedding.)

We can bear all of that in mind, though, without making it the focus of the discussion of epistemic virtues. It is the background against which most of our belief-formation occurs. Most people are, after all, interested in a wide range of things, particularly those things that are important for achieving their important life projects. And again, people typically are not skeptics; they do as a matter of fact have many beliefs. So the primary focus, at least, in a discussion of epistemic virtues, is going to be on whether people's cognitive traits are conducive to achieving mostly true beliefs, i.e. whether they are conducive to having a good true-to-false belief-ratio.

Now a virtue *responsibilist* will say that cognitive traits are virtuous if they are responsible ways of forming beliefs: they involve responsible *collection of evidence*, and responsible *evaluation* of beliefs in light of the evidence, and responsible consideration of the views of *experts*, and so on. This is a very internalist sort of approach to the epistemic virtues, where the focus is on the deliberative aspect of our cognitive lives: it is about doing the best we can to acquire true beliefs about important matters.

Virtue *reliabilists*, by contrast, require that our cognitive traits are in fact reliable at getting us true beliefs and avoiding false ones, in order for those traits to count as virtuous. Sense-perception, for example, is a paradigmatic reliabilist virtue, because it is in fact widely recognized to be typically a reliable source of true beliefs, when used in appropriate conditions.

Of course there is a good deal of overlap between the two ways of thinking of the virtues: responsible cognitive practices and dispositions will typically be reliable, and it will typically be responsible to form beliefs according to reliable cognitive dispositions. The difference is in the focus of the theories, and on the relevant concepts that need to be spelled out and defended. The approach to epistemic virtues in terms of their reliability has to spell out the notion of reliability, and it has to have something to say about the generality problem which threatens ordinary (non-virtue) reliabilist approaches to epistemic justification. Responsibilists have to have something to say about what makes a cognitive trait responsible in the first place.

### 3. HOW NOT TO DO VIRTUE THEORY

I do not want to endorse the virtue approach to epistemology or ethics wholesale. In ethics, virtues are stable dispositions to choose or act well – but people can do things that are morally right, even if they do not have any such stable dispositions. (An evil person can on occasion choose to do what is right; his evil tendencies do not prevent his occasional good actions from being good.) Similarly, regarding epistemic

virtues, a person who is highly prone to denying evidence that is contrary to her views may on occasion take contrary evidence into account. And in those cases, she might achieve a justified belief, even though it hasn't resulted from a stable disposition to form beliefs on the basis of a careful consideration of all of the available evidence.<sup>3</sup>

What I want to deny, then, is the view (typical of virtue theorists) that it is *agents* and/or their virtues that are primarily epistemically justified (in epistemology) or primarily morally good (in ethics), while their *beliefs* or *actions* are only epistemically justified, or morally good, in a *secondary* fashion, by virtue of being the result of the epistemic or ethical virtues. Beliefs can be epistemically justified just because they are formed responsibly, in the light of appropriate evidence, even if the agent in question is not a virtuous epistemic agent.

Nevertheless, there is fruitful work to be done in epistemology, in terms of the epistemic virtues. The mere fact that they are not the *primary* bearers of justification does not make them useless for epistemic theorizing and pedagogy. Even though they are neither the primary tool of epistemology nor of fundamental epistemic value, they are both interesting and important, insofar as they promote the achievement of what is of fundamental epistemic value. Similarly, in ethics, the primary unit of moral evaluation is particular actions, not virtues of character. But being a virtuous person makes it more likely that you will do good actions, since the virtues just are dispositions to choose and act well. So of course we should try to be virtuous people, even though the goodness of the ethical virtues is parasitic on the goodness of particular good actions.

#### 4. VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY AND ARGUMENTATION

With those basics of virtue epistemology in mind, and with that proviso about how not to do virtue theory in mind, we can move on to developing the epistemic virtue approach to argumentation. It makes the most sense to me to think of virtues of argumentation as *responsibilist* sorts of virtues, since argumentation is precisely the sort of thing that we engage in when we are trying to provide rational justifications for beliefs – we are trying to achieve a reflective basis which responsible agents would employ as a basis for their beliefs. A responsible agent *would* form a belief on the basis of good, reflectively available reasons – and in an argument, of course, the reasons for and against a belief are as reflectively accessible as they can be.

Now, in thinking about what makes for a good argument, it is important to bear in mind the familiar point that there can be good arguments for false conclusions. This means that soundness is not a good criterion of good argumentation. Neither is Aberdeen's proposal that good arguments "*propagate truth*"; for Aberdeen, virtuous arguers "are disposed to spread truth around" (2010, p. 173). But we need to be careful: because there can be very good arguments for false conclusions, it follows that even though the truth is what we are striving for,

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<sup>3</sup> Brogaard (forthcoming) argues, similarly, that because cognitive success can occur even in the absence of the exercise of intellectual virtues, traditional reliabilism in epistemology is superior to both of the main strains of virtue epistemology.

good arguments can spread around falsehoods too. So the propagation of truth as a criterion of good arguments is on the right track, but it needs to be qualified so that it allows good arguments for false conclusions.

It seems to me that the following is an appropriate general criterion of virtues of argumentation: virtues of argumentation are dispositions to engage in argumentation in a *responsible* manner, where responsible engagement in argumentation involves accepting the conclusion on the basis of the premises, when (and only when) the premises give the arguers a good reason for thinking that the conclusion is true.<sup>4</sup> Virtuous arguers will be disposed to spread around good reasons for thinking that propositions are true. They will also be disposed to provide criticisms of arguments, when the argument at hand does not appear to provide good reasons for accepting its conclusion. This characterization of the goal of argumentation, and of the dispositions characteristic of virtuous arguers, is consistent with the fact that we can have good reasons for accepting false conclusions.

Now, that is only a rough criterion of good arguments and virtuous arguers; it doesn't tell us what the virtues of argumentation are, and the notion of responsibility is not very precise. Still, there is an ordinary understanding of responsibility, which is good enough for our purpose right now. And it does seem that this criterion of the virtues of argumentation can capture many of what appear to be clear cases of virtues of argumentation which Aberdeen identifies (2010, p. 175).

Consider just a few examples of what are plausible to take as virtues of argumentation: *being communicative*, i.e. being willing to share one's reasons for holding a belief, or for questioning a proposition, etc., is what a responsible agent would do when trying to arrive at a justified belief in the truth of a proposition, on the basis of an argument. A responsible agent would not keep her thoughts to herself, for (1) then the other participants in the argumentative exchange will not have the benefit of the agent's reasons, and (2) the agent herself will not have the benefit of the critical reactions that other participants in the exchange might offer.

*Sensitivity to detail* is another apparent virtue, which is clearly important for responsible engagement in argumentation, because details which can appear small and unimportant sometimes make a big difference in whether a set of premises makes a conclusion likely to be true. Suppose, for example, that we are trying to provide an inductive argument that most members of some population P have a characteristic C. And suppose that there are two kinds of Ps, which are the same in all but a few respects, and so for most purposes we can treat them the same way. But suppose that C is one of the few characteristics where the two kinds of Ps differ. In such a case, if we are not sensitive to details, we might gloss over the difference between the two kinds of Ps, and draw our inductive inference based on an unrepresentative sample of the population of Ps.

The criterion of virtues of argument I've proposed, then, of responsibly engaging with arguments, which involves accepting the conclusion when and only

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<sup>4</sup> Or, if the agents already believe that the conclusion is true, then the aim would only be to provide further justification for the belief.

when the premises provide good reason for thinking that the conclusion is true, can account for the virtuousness of being communicative and sensitivity to detail. Similarly, I think that it is clear that that criterion captures other apparent virtues of argumentation, such as *recognition of reliable authority, care, and thoroughness*.

But again, as I have argued regarding epistemology and ethics, the basic unit that comes up for evaluation in argumentation ought to be particular arguments, not the virtues of argumentation. Virtues of argumentation *are* virtues, because they promote good argumentation; good argumentation is not good in virtue of being carried out by virtuous arguers. Bad arguers can make good arguments, and can engage responsibly with arguments put forward by others.

##### 5. ANYTHING WE CAN SAY IN TERMS OF VIRTUES, WE CAN SAY WITHOUT THEM!

I anticipate the following objection: “if you do not think that the primary unit that comes up for evaluation in epistemology is the epistemic agent (or the epistemic virtues), or in ethics, the ethical agent (or the ethical virtues), then you do not get to call yourself a real virtue theorist.” I accept this objection; I am not overly concerned with the label “real virtue theorist.” But as I said in section 3, there is still useful work to be done in terms of the virtues, even if they are not the basic elements of a good approach to the theory of argument.

“But if you do not think that the virtues are a basic tool of argumentation theory, then presumably, anything that you can say in terms of the virtues, you can say without them too. So they’re superfluous.” I accept this objection as well. But just because they are strictly speaking superfluous, it does not follow that they are useless. Consider, by analogy, Kant’s ethical system: everything comes down to the Categorical Imperative (CI), for Kant. Any ethical claim you make can be brought back to that ultimate principle. But that doesn’t mean that every time we are considering what to do, we have to slam down the CI. It is sufficient, most of the time, to behave in accord with principles that we know are generally in line with the CI. In fact, Kant himself develops an account of ethical virtue – it is the subject of the second half of his later ethical work, the *Metaphysics of Morals*. So in Kant’s ethical system, the virtues are not the primary tool for theorizing, or the primary element that comes up for evaluation (it is *actions* that are primary objects of evaluation, for Kant). Still, they have a role to play.

Or consider another analogy, which is less directly connected with virtue theory, but where it is even more obvious that strictly superfluous units still have a role to play. In teaching and using formal logic, it is typical to use five logical connectives: AND, OR, IF-THEN, NOT, and IF AND ONLY IF. Now strictly speaking, we do not need five connectives; we can make do with just one. But if we employ just one logical connective, the logical formulae become so impenetrable, and so distant from the way that statements are expressed in a natural language, that it is very useful to have at least four connectives, even though some of them are strictly superfluous.

So I accept that, on the way that I am setting things up, virtues of argumentation are superfluous, because the primarily good is particular instances of argumentation, where good argumentation succeeds in establishing justification for

thinking that the conclusion is true. But it does not follow that the virtues have no useful role to play.

## 6. QUESTIONS WE CAN ADDRESS WITH THE VIRTUE APPROACH

Now I want to attempt to address some questions in the theory of argument via the virtue approach to argumentation. The idea is to illustrate the usefulness of thinking in terms of the virtues.

My initial idea was to address the question: does successful resolution of a disagreement via argumentation require a change in the beliefs of (at least one of) the parties to the argumentative exchange, or does it only require a change in their commitments?<sup>5</sup> The approach to that question would be to consider what the virtuous arguer would do, or else to consider whether the habit or disposition of changing one's beliefs or one's commitments best promotes the goal of argumentation.

But it turns out that this question, while interesting, is not an appropriate one for approaching with the virtues of argumentation in mind. Recall that in trying to get an account of the virtues of argumentation going, I am taking virtue epistemology as a guide. And the goal of argumentation, from an epistemic point of view, is to arrive at true beliefs via argumentation – or, better, it is to arrive at justified belief that the conclusion of an argument is true. So it follows straightforwardly from the epistemic approach to argumentation that merely changing one's commitments is insufficient as a response to an argument; in a successful argumentative exchange, at least one party will end up with a change in belief.

A better topic to approach with virtues of argumentation in our toolkit would be the fallacies. Many of the traditional fallacies are really only misuses of types of arguments that can have perfectly legitimate uses. The ad hominem fallacy, for instance, can be understood as a misuse of the *ethotic* argument: the type of argument where an arguer's character is in question. (See Hitchcock, 2007 for the case that there is in fact no real ad hominem fallacy.) Ethotic arguments have perfectly legitimate uses: given that an arguer's (perceived) character can be very influential, say, when it comes to whether an audience will accept the premises that the arguer offers, it is often important to be able to show (for example) that the arguer has appropriate credentials, or perhaps that he is known for inventing statistics on the fly. The ad hominem is only a misuse of that kind of argument, when the arguer's credibility is not a potential issue for the acceptability of any of the moves in the argument. Aberdein (2010, p. 171) argues that the virtue approach can help us account for the difference between good and bad ethotic arguments: the good ones draw attention to argumentative virtues and vices; the bad ones attack an arguer for her non-argumentational vices, or for behaviour that is not in fact vicious.

Similarly, other fallacies might be profitably approached with virtues in mind, such as the *tu quoque*. The *tu quoque* occurs when one person argues against

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<sup>5</sup> There is a good treatment of this question in Godden (2010).

a type of action, and someone objects, “but you don’t follow your own advice – you do it too!” This type of argument can have legitimate uses – for example, if the fact that an arguer does not follow her own advice is evidence that she does not *believe* her own advice, then that can be a reason to reject her argument. But sometimes an arguer will not follow her own advice, even though she does believe it: imagine a doctor who smokes, and advises a patient to quit smoking, but continues to smoke herself. This doctor can still give a perfectly good argument for quitting smoking, which the patient ought to accept, even though the doctor doesn’t follow her own advice. The doctor might continue smoking because she is addicted, but know perfectly well that smoking is bad for your health.

So there can be good and bad uses of *tu quoque* arguments. All *tu quoque* arguments are attempts to highlight vicious argumentation, where an arguer is criticizing a type of action, but where she does not believe premises of her own argument, as evidenced by her failure to follow her own advice. *Good* *tu quoque* arguments do just that: they identify vicious argumentation, where an arguer’s failure to follow her own advice is evidence that she doesn’t believe her own argument. *Bad* *tu quoque* arguments fail to do that: they attempt to identify argumentative vice, but where the argumentation is in fact virtuous. They either identify failures to follow one’s own advice, where that failure is not evidence that the arguer does not *believe* her own argument; or else they claim that the arguer does not believe her own argument, on the basis of her failure to follow her own advice, but the arguer does not in fact fail to follow her own advice.

## 7. CONCLUSION

To sum up: in this paper, I have taken the epistemic approach to the theory of argument for granted. On that basis, I have explored the notion of a virtue of argumentation, taking the epistemic virtues as my guide. The criterion of virtues of argumentation, I claimed, is responsible engagement in argumentation, where responsible engagement involves accepting the conclusion of an argument on the basis of the reasons offered when (and only when) the reasons offered are good ones for thinking that the conclusion is true.

I have argued, however, that we should take particular arguments as the basic units that come up for evaluation as good or bad, while agents and their virtues are secondary units of evaluation. Virtues *are* virtues because they promote good argumentation; good argumentation is not good *because* the arguers are virtuous. Nevertheless, there is useful work to be done in terms of the virtues of argumentation.

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