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Virtue reversed: Principal argumentative vices in political debate

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ABSTRACT: Contributing to an understanding of the true virtues of argumentation, this paper sketches and exemplifies a theoretically reasoned but simple typology of argumentative vices or 'malpractices' that are rampant in political debate in modern democracies. The typology reflects, in negative, a set of argumentative norms, thus making a bid for something that civic instruction might profitably teach students at all levels about deliberative democracy.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, debate, norms, vices, typology, deliberation, citizens, politics, answer.

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to highlight the true virtues of public argumentation, I will sketch and exemplify a theoretically reasoned but simple typology of argumentative vices that are rampant in political debate in modern democracies.

The typology is based on reflections on what functions political debate might have and ought to have in a modern mediated democracy. This functional understanding underlies a view of what 'virtuous' political argumentation might be like, which again implies the proposed typology of vices. I see such an approach as essentially rhetorical, while integrating concepts and insights from, primarily, Informal Logic. I further draw on insights from several practical philosophers and political theorists.

My typology, I suggest, could be a useful tool not only for academic observers of political debate but also for political reporters, commentators and journalists acting as interviewers or moderators in debates; with it, they might better identify and respond to the argumentative vices they meet. Moreover, I propose the theory, the set of norms, and the typology as a bid for something that civic instruction might profitably try to teach students at all levels about deliberative democracy – or, with a term I prefer, Rhetorical Citizenship (Kock & Villadsen, 2012).

2. WHAT CITIZENS NEED

I believe we should assess the virtues of political argumentation from the point of view of *citizens*. In contrast, political commentators and 'pundits' tend to primarily

estimate or second-guess how politicians' pronouncements and debate behavior will benefit politicians themselves, speculating about their underlying strategy and on how given voter segments or political factions will respond. This 'strategic' framing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) represents a prevailing, while often implicit, view that politicians are motivated, mainly or exclusively, by a desire to strengthen or consolidate of power. In the strategic framing, politicians try to do by pleasing other politicians and mainly by pleasing the voters, or certain segments of voters. To counterbalance this trend I suggest that argumentation scholars should come forward in the public sphere and assess to what extent politicians' contributions to the debate are useful citizens.

To do this, we need norms. What must political debates and debaters deliver to meet citizens' needs?

My starting point is that political debate should function as citizens' *basis for making choices.* It should help us estimate what problems we face, what ought to be done about them, and who has the best approach. Debates should help each one of us take a stand on what should be done - *before* it is done. In short, public debate should be deliberative to help us citizens deliberate.

The political theorist Robert Goodin has referred to this stand-taking by citizens as "deliberation within" (2000). Simone Chambers, another political theorist, agrees that deliberation is central to democracy, but insists that "the mass public can never be deliberative" in the active sense of the word, i.e., we shall never see all the members of the mass public engage in deliberative debate with each other. However, the public rhetoric we hear, mainly through the media, does have a potential for providing deliberation to serve deliberating citizens' needs - but only a potential. Most public rhetoric is what Chambers calls "plebiscitary," based on pandering and manipulation. So scholars should critically assess public rhetoric, and the media that provides it, in hopes of "making the mass public more rather than less deliberative." She says: "If rhetoric in general is the study of how speech affects an audience then deliberative rhetoric must be about the way speech induces deliberation in the sense of inducing *considered* reflection about a future action" (2009, p. 335).

I agree with Goodin and Chambers that we need public political debate that is deliberative, not plebiscitary, mainly in order that we citizens may be optimally prepared for "deliberation within." This is the normative basis on which I build a categorization of argumentative virtues and vices, intending it to be simple and useful.

The cardinal virtues, in brief, are these: First, debaters who seek our adherence should do so by explicitly offering arguments, rather than trying to gain it with strategies that bypass arguments. Second, the arguments should withstand critical scrutiny by criteria to which I will return. Third, debaters should provide answers to counterarguments and criticisms from opponents or questioners.

The typology of argumentative vices I propose is a mirror image of this triad. The first major category of vices comprises strategies by which our adherence to policies is sought without any arguments being given. In the second category, arguments are offered, but they are deficient or useless from a citizen's point of

view. The third category comprises ways in which responses to criticism or counterarguments may be lacking or deficient.

3.   VICES, TYPE I: NO ARGUMENTS

First, a look at some strategies by which politicians try to win voters' adherence to policies without providing argumentation. In my critical work with political debate, most explicitly in my book in Danish for a general audience *De svarer ikke* ('They Don't Answer,' 2011; 2nd ed. 2013) I discuss some related ways of presenting questionable ideas for the hearer's acceptance without making it explicit that this is what one is doing, i.e., without asserting them or arguing for them. Because the ideas have not been asserted, the chances are that hearers will accept them unreflectingly and without asking for arguments.

The range of linguistic features that can work like this includes such phenomena as 1) Orwellian "Newspeak," i.e., words and expressions "intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them," as Orwell explains (1949); p. 2) "framing" language as discussed by, among others, George Lakoff (1996, 2004); for example the term *death tax* for *estate tax*; 3) 'illicit' use of presuppositions (Harder & Kock, 1976). Presuppositions are assumptions tied to words and expressions which are taken for granted even if the sentence in which they occur is negated or turned into a question. In the standard case, such assumptions should be shared by the speaker and the hearer; the illicit use of them occurs when a speaker introduces presuppositions *not* shared by the hearers, perhaps aiming to get the hearer's unreflecting acceptance of them.

I will discuss a fourth phenomenon: implicatures – ideas that hearers understand and derive from an utterance, often involuntarily, although they are not asserted in it. Linguists, following Grice (1975), tend to distinguish between two types: *conventional* implicatures, which attach to a statement whenever it is uttered, regardless of context; and *conversational* implicatures, which hearers derive from a statement as a function of its specific context.

Consider this passage from George W. Bush's "State of the Union" speech on Jan. 28, 2003.

> Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained.

In the first sentence, why is it relevant to say, in the past tense, that many believed Saddam could be contained? The most obvious reason would be that now people no more believe this. That may also provide relevance to the phrase *Before September the 11th*. Ostensibly, that way the day people gave up their former belief – for if they had kept it even after September 11, it would be irrelevant to specify the date. But if precisely that date refuted the belief that we can contain Saddam, then the most obvious reason for that would be that Saddam was partly or fully responsible for what happened that day. (There might be other reasons, and Bush did have another, much more convoluted reason in mind, but this is certainly the most obvious one.)

Perelman and others have reminded us that what we call 'style' is an integral part of argumentation. A great merit of Jeanne Fahnestock's *Rhetorical Style* (2011) is to have shown this in detail. For example, in her chapter about 'interclausal relations' she demonstrates how rhetors can call on readers' or hearers' *discourse knowledge*, a knowledge of the kinds of meaning relations that *can* exist between clauses (p. 356). This may cause listeners' minds to act involuntarily, constructing possible links between the parts of an utterance.

Now consider both sentences of the above quote together. This likely causes more implicatures to arise, most obviously that Saddam *had* chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks, and that these were involved in 9/11. Otherwise the second sentence would be irrelevant to the first.

Many similar examples from the second Bush administration's rhetoric on Iraq could be cited. The point is that the use of implicatures is one of a range of devices by which politicians may transfer questionable beliefs to citizens without explicitly giving arguments.

4. VICES, TYPE II: DEFICIENT ARGUMENTS

Now for the second main category of argumentative vices. If arguments are in fact given, what criteria should they meet? Taking the reverse view, what can be wrong with them?

I start with the observation that there are usually 'good' arguments both for and against a particular policy.

From this it follows that a good argument is not what logicians call a 'valid' argument. Many textbooks still cling to 'validity,' defining a 'valid' argument as one where the truth of the conclusion necessarily follows from the truth of the arguments ('premises'). When this is so, we speak of 'deductive reasoning,' 'entailment,' or 'demonstration.' But to Chaïm Perelman (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958), 'argumentation' is reasoning where demonstration is precisely *not* attainable; and argumentation thus defined is 'the realm of rhetoric.' Similarly, it is a defining feature of 'Informal Logic' that it looks at how argumentation can be reasonable *without* being deductively valid.

Is the validity criterion any use to us, then? Yes, it is of some use, because we often hear debaters pretend, explicitly or implicitly, that their arguments for a proposal *entail* an adoption of that proposal. Such false pretenses should be exposed. In politics, the logical yardstick of deductive validity has this, rather limited, use. Where policies and decisions are concerned, we are dealing with what many philosophers, citing Aristotle, call practical reasoning; here I claim that there is never, in principle, any deductive entailment from the arguments for a proposal to the adoption of it. Although there are good arguments for it, there are, as a rule, also good arguments against it. As the philosopher Anthony Kenny has it, "if a project or proposal or decision is good, that does not exclude its being also, from another point of view, bad" (1979, p. 146). Hence we cannot blame debaters for not presenting arguments which *entail* their proposal; we can, however, blame them if they will make us *believe* that they do.

Add to this that for any problem one would like to do something about, there are often several alternative policies. Even if one of them is good, another might be better.

All in all, assessing argument merit is much more complicated in politics, and in practical reasoning generally, than in logic. This is so not just in practice, but also in theory. So how *can* we go about it?

Building on 'Informal Logicians' such as Johnson & Blair (2006), Blair (2012), Johnson (2000), and Govier (1987, 2010), I would posit the following three dimensions of argument appraisal in practical reasoning. Arguments should be:

1) Accurate
2) Relevant
3) Weighty

Accurate means that one can answer 'Yes' to the question, 'Is that so?' I prefer the term 'accurate' to the Informal Logicians' preferred term 'acceptable' because 'accurate' refers more to the relation between statements and reality, whereas 'acceptable' refers more to the relation between statements and hearers.

This is the ground covered by fact-checking organizations like the websites Factcheck.org or Politifact.com. Political debate abounds with alleged facts and statistics that should not go unchecked.

It is important that outright falsity is not the only vice here. Accountants and lawyers use the expression 'true and fair.' This means that alleged facts and numbers provide *a good and trustworthy account* of how things are - not just that the numbers, taken in isolation, are 'true,' but that we get a *full* picture.

Further, terms used in such information must, as Jamieson & Waldman (2002) have discussed, have a clear definition - and one that tallies with how the same terms are used by other debaters and understood by the public. But loose and idiosyncratic use of terms is one major vice in political debate; I suggest calling it 'fuzzy facts.'

Another major vice, one degree worse, is what we may call 'fudging facts': 'factual' information which is not downright false but which distorts by inviting us to believe falsehoods. We have just seen how deftly worded communication can invite people to believe things that aren't so.

The rampant use of fuzzy and fudging facts makes much public debate useless for citizens. That is why Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said: "Everyone is entitled to their own views, but not to their own facts."

Relevant: relevance concerns the relation between arguments and their warrants, whether these be explicit or implicit, as they often are. Problems arise in two kinds of situations: when an argument is not in fact covered or subsumed by the warrant it depends on; and when the warrant it depends on is one that the hearers cannot endorse.

The warrants appealed to in practical argumentation will often be value concepts and ideological positions endorsed by the debater, but not by his opponents or hearers. Warrants are often differentially recognized by different individuals. It is a fact that the Falkland Islanders have voted overwhelmingly for

staying British, but Argentina does not recognize popular majority as a warrant and instead bases her claim for the islands on a territorial warrant – which in turn is not recognized by Britain. This example makes it clear that relevance appraisal in argumentation, more than the assessment of factual accuracy, allows for a certain amount of disagreement, even deep disagreement, and if you prefer, subjectivity.

The insight that underlying values are sometimes not shared should also tell us that if we want to influence our opponents' views, we should search for values on even deeper levels that we do share with them. The principle that there has to be this sort of common ground is central to Perelman's concept of argumentation. Ideally, we should expect debaters on public issues to base their case on warrants that are shared by *every* member of the public. And a corresponding vice is to base one's case on values and other warrants that are only shared by a narrowly targeted faction. We should expect public argumentation that does not simply pander to the pre-existing policy preferences of selected segments, but which tries to *change* some people's policy preferences by appealing to underlying shared warrants.

Whether an argument is covered by a warrant is often a matter of interpretation. Everyone agrees that killing innocent human beings is wrong, but does this notion cover abortion? We need debates in which debaters recognize that their disagreement with opponents is not necessarily a disagreement over deeply held values, but a difference in the *interpretation* of those values (Warnke, 1999).

Coming back to what we actually get, a rampant relevance-related vice that is objectively and unconditionally vicious is argumentation directed at 'straw men,' i.e., distorted versions of opponents' standpoints or of their arguments (these are two different things). A straw man version of an opponent's standpoint tends to radicalize and transmogrify it into a caricature that is easy to reject; we may call it a 'detestable straw man.' While a 'straw' version of one's opponent's standpoint may well be detestable, however, there is no warrant for concluding from this that one's opponent's real standpoint is detestable too. As for straw versions of an opponent's *arguments,* these are routinely weakened and emasculated into something we might call 'pitiable straw men.'

Another relevance-related vice which is perhaps not quite so objectively and unconditionally wrong is the ascription of sinister ulterior motives to opponents. The possible presence of such motives has at most marginal relevance. There are accuracy problems as well – how can we know whether an opponent really has the hidden motives ascribed to him if they are hidden? Even if it is shown that some of those who advance a proposal do have hidden motives, should the proposal not be judged on what it actually does, rather than what someone intended it to do?

Even if an argument is clearly relevant, and factually accurate too, our argument appraisal is not done. As we have seen, the warrants for arguments in political debate are typically value concepts; but a policy might be good according to one relevant value, for example that one should keep one's promises – and at the same time bad according to another relevant value, for example economic prudence. A government may have made pre-election promises to implement certain policies – but doing so turns out to be enormously expensive. Many citizens in such a case would probably feel that both these warrants have relevance, so the task for citizens engaged in 'deliberation within' would be to *prioritize*. That would be each citizen's

personal responsibility, since there is no pre-ordained or intersubjective way to determine whether the ethics of promises or economic prudence has more weight in a particular case.

This shows that relevant warrants in practical argumentation are typically multiple (Kock, 2006); that they can easily conflict (Stocker, 1990); and that they are often not commensurable (Raz, 1998) in any agreed and pre-ordained way.

As you may have noticed, the *weight* criterion just popped up. In choosing the term 'weight' I deviate from the term preferred by Informal Logicians such as Anthony Blair: "sufficiency." The problem is that sufficiency is dichotomous. A quantity is either sufficient for some purpose, or it isn't; it cannot be 'rather sufficient.' Do I have sufficient time to catch my plane? I cannot catch my plane 'to some extent.' Sufficiency is known in mathematics in phrases like 'the necessary and sufficient condition.' A condition is sufficient for something to be the case if that something *necessarily* follows; that is, deductive inference obtains. Informal logicians rightly want to abandon deductive inference as a necessary criterion of good argumentation; but if they include 'sufficiency' in their criteria, then either deductive inference is again required – or it has some other meaning which is fuzzy and idiosyncratic.

Furthermore, the weight of an argument is of a peculiar, metaphorical kind because one cannot assess it for one argument taken by itself; one has to look at it in relation to the other good arguments on the same issue – and there are usually several on both sides. So *weight* means *relative weight*. All the arguments on both sides are in play when we want to 'weigh' an argument.

This metaphorical 'weighing' of arguments against each other will be additionally complicated by the presence of the elements of individuality or 'subjectivity.' As I have shown, these complications arise in regard to the recognition and the interpretation of warrants, and they arise even more when arguments are to be prioritized or 'weighed.'

That is because, for one thing, arguments have warrants belonging to different dimensions (Kock, 2006). Should the economic argument that cutbacks are (perhaps) prudent trump the moral argument that promises to the contrary were made? There is no objective or 'philosophical' answer, so citizens must try to decide for themselves. But before they do, they need all the help they can get. And this kind of help they should expect from public debaters – as well as from journalists, pundits and academics in the public sphere. They need to hear the good arguments on both sides, and to be able to weigh them against each other they especially need debaters on each side to *hear* and then *answer* arguments from the other side.

4.   VICES, TYPE III: NO ANSWERS

This brings us to our last category of vices. Flouting the 'dialectical obligation' (Johnson, 1996, 2000, 2002; Kock, 2007) to sincerely hear and answer counterarguments or critical questions is perhaps the chief vice that makes public debate near useless for citizens. There is reason to believe that a great deal of what communication consultants do for the politicians they serve is teach them how to *appear* to answer counterarguments and critical questions, but which in reality

bypass them. Not every response is an answer. The obligation to answer can in principle only be satisfied in two ways:

1) *Either* one tries to show why the counterargument is deficient – i.e., that it is either inaccurate or irrelevant, or both.
2) *Or* if the counterargument happens to fulfil the accuracy and relevance conditions, as it often does, then one explains why one still sees the arguments *for* one's own position as weightier than the arguments *against* it.

These two kinds of behavior are rarely found in public debate. Instead we get responses in which counterarguments are either bypassed in silence, distorted into pitiable straw men, or blankly dismissed, i.e., without any reasons being offered for the dismissal. These vices are often camouflaged with repetitions of stale talking points, or talk about other subjects, including 'straw' versions of opponents' views and denunciation of their hidden motives.

It is the discussion of arguments pro and con, as in 1) and 2), that constitutes true deliberation. This is the kind of input that will most help citizens and voters engage in 'deliberation within.' It will help them muster the available arguments on both sides, what the issue involves, what arguments pertain to it, which arguments are accurate and relevant, and what the other party has to say in answer to them.

That kind of deliberation will not result in universal consensus; there are reasons why we have such a thing as 'reasonable disagreement' (Rawls, 1989, 1993). Perhaps there will not be many people who change their views. Even so, it will probably still be the case that a citizen who engages in 'deliberation within' will realize that other citizens who prefer other policies than he does may have reasons to do so which might make him wiser. He may understand that their reasons may say something about reality that he has not yet thought about, but which may be accurate and relevant, and which may even have some weight. Such an insight does not entail that our citizen should necessarily endorse his opponents' preferred *policies*. As we saw at first, that kind of entailment has no place in practical reasoning. This implies that we should not be afraid to admit that our opponents may have some points that we have not yet given enough thought. In other words, even though we may never agree on divisive issues, it might do us good to sit down and talk. It might even do our politicians good.

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