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Commentary on: Katharina von Radziewsky's "The virtuous arguer: One person, four characters"

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is so much to like about von Radziewsky's paper that the wisest thing I could do would be simply to say a hearty, "Amen!" and sit down before doing any damage. That would avoid some of the more dangerous pitfalls for commentators in my position – things like nitpicking about unimportant matters, simply repeating the positive parts of her argumentation, and piling on against the positions she has already successfully defeated. But those are all things I try to avoid since I include *quibbling*, *beating a dead horse*, and *preaching to the choir* as clear examples of unvirtuous argumentation, even though none of them properly qualifies as a logical fallacy since they do not necessarily involve inferential failures of any sort. Arguing virtuously is a broader category than arguing non-fallaciously. Virtue argumentation sets a higher standard.

Wisdom is apparently not one of my virtues: I will not resist the temptation to say more than just "Amen." I will ignore my own advice at the same time that I will give it to others. That is, if I may resort to more technical language, I will use my role as commentator to be a *kibitzer*. Unfortunately for me, von Radziewsky also sets a high bar for *kibitzers*.

2. ON THE VIRTUOUS ART OF *KIBITZING*

For those who are unfamiliar with this very useful Yiddish term, a *kibitzer* is someone who offers unsolicited, unwanted, and often unhelpful advice, like a back-seat driver. The term is commonly used to refer to the person standing behind you at a card game telling you what you should have played. Kibitzers at card games are spectators, not players, so they are not really part of the game. But arguments are different: *kibitzers are part of the game*. When it comes to evaluating arguments, *kibitzers have to be recognized as participants*. They can be held accountable for their contributions to the argument, both what they add and what they subtract. Von Radziewsky has done us the service of showing how virtue argumentation theory provides a framework for expanding our understanding of who should count as part of the argument and how to evaluate the parts they play.

Here is my attempt at putting her lessons into practice, in six acts of *kibitzing*.

First, von Radziewsky begins with an account of arguers and arguing as aiming at “the bettering of belief systems.” While that is a very good first pass at identifying the *telos* of argumentation, I think it would be better to change that to “the bettering of *cognitive* systems” so as not to rule out the other cognitive gains that can come from arguing, like those elements of understanding and appreciating a position that are not reducible to propositional belief. This is offered by way of a friendly amendment, which is exactly what kibitzers do.

Second, since offering a friendly amendment to a position is clearly an attempt at improving the arguer’s position, it immediately follows from her definition of an argument that anyone who does that is contributing to the argument and, therefore, counts as a participant in the argument. I thoroughly endorse the idea of widening the scope of who counts as a participant in an argument. Kibitzers may not be arguers, in the ordinary sense, but they are certainly participants.

As a further aside, the same reasoning can be extended to include juries, judges, spectators, and any one else whose presence in an argument can have an effect.

Third, as participants in an argument, kibitzers are subject to critical evaluation. How good was their contribution? How well did they fill their self-assigned role? More specifically, what are the relevant virtues? These are all fair questions to ask, but there is not enough in the discussion so far to provide an answer. The act of volunteering improvements to an argument does not fall neatly under the job descriptions of any the four arguers that have been identified – prosecuting attorney, defense lawyer, teacher, and student. So, I suggest we can improve things by making room in our account of virtues for the virtues of other participants in an argument, like those who suggest improvements in the argument.

Now that suggestion might not seem like a very good example of unhelpful kibitzing because von Radziewsky’s characterization of cooperative argumentation explicitly includes space for nurturing – improving – another’s arguments. It would seem, then, that I have misrepresented or misunderstood her. In that case, I would need to better exercise the virtues called for in the first phase of an argument, the understanding phase – which brings me to my fourth kibitzing moment: trying to understand an argument is not the same thing as trying to improve it. Both can be thought of as cooperative endeavours, but it is the former effort that arguers need in the first stage of an argument; kibitzers engage in the latter. More relevantly, excellence in those endeavours requires the virtuous use of different skills, i.e., different virtues. Does that mean there are now five arguers? Not necessarily because not all arguments are lucky, or unlucky, enough to be blessed with kibitzers. Of course, not all arguments have distinct proponents and opponents either.

So, fifth, despite the intriguing and provocative image of four arguers in one person who emerge in different stages of the argument, there are reasons for preferring to think in terms of the variety of roles that can be played and moves that can be made during an argument – including the role of a commentator who is neither a proponent nor an opponent in adversarial argumentation and neither teacher nor student in cooperative argumentation, but simply an interested colleague joining in.

3. CONCLUSION: VIRTUOUS ARGUERS ARGUING VIRTUOUSLY

The first of von Radziewsky's two main points is well taken: the idea of "the virtuous arguer" has to include so many different skills and virtues – including contrary virtues – that it does indeed seem to call for fracturing the notion into separate arguers within each person. But that does not by itself mean that we have to abandon an integrated notion of a virtuous arguer. What it does mean is that we have to remember that virtues are dispositions. There is nothing contradictory about the simultaneous presence of dispositions to contrary actions. The dispositions themselves are not contraries. They just cannot be actualized simultaneously. However, since the value for a given argument of its arguers' unactualized virtues is arguable at best, perhaps it would be advisable to shift our focus away from substantive concepts of virtues and virtuous arguers to the adverbial counterpart, arguing *virtuously*.

And indeed, that would have been my counsel all along but for von Radziewsky's second main point: arguing is an art form. It requires the practical wisdom that can only come from experience. And practical wisdom reintegrates the fragmented notion of a virtuous arguer. That brings me to my final act as a kibitzer, a question: What *is* practical wisdom? Is it a virtue in its own right? That doesn't seem right, because there are no specific acts for which it is the disposition. Perhaps then it is a meta-virtue regulating the other virtues? But that does not seem right either because virtues, unlike skills and talents, do not need separate, external regulation. They are self-regulating. A disposition to act in a certain ways that allows for inappropriate or improper expressions can be a skill or a talent or a character trait of some other sort but it would not really be a *virtue*.

Perhaps this is all that is meant by the old doctrine of the unity of the virtues.

But even that cannot be quite right because the virtues can indeed get in each others' way. They may not be in need of external regulation individually, but the presence of contrary dispositions does mean that they do need it collectively. There does have to be some integrating factor for the four – or five or however many – arguers within us. And among its other responsibilities, it must be able to rein in our – or at least my own – inner kibitzer.