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Compromise as deep virtue: Evolution and some limits of argumentation

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ABSTRACT: If argument forms evolve then the possible existence of localized argument forms may create an interpretive impasse between locally distinct argument communities. Appeal to evolutionarily 'deep' argument forms may help, but might be strained in cases where emergent argument forms are not reducible to their base conditions. Overcoming such limits presupposes the virtue of compromise, suggesting that compromise may stand as 'deep virtue' within argumentative forms of life.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, compromise, conflict, evolution, hope, impasse, Peirce, reason, reasonableness, virtue

1. INTRODUCTION

A central feature of modern evolutionary theory is the idea that an organism's 'nature' or 'essence' is not pre-established or pre-determined in some a-temporal, a-historical sense, but is instead something that has a history in the sense that it can be said to have come into being and may one day pass out of being over time. Closely related to this is the equally important idea that an organism's 'nature' or 'essence' is radically contingent in that it seems as if it could have been otherwise. Extended to questions of logic and argumentation, this would suggest that such things as logical rules, argumentation schemes, and so on, should also have an evolutionary history that might mark them as contingent in some important respect. If so, then we might ask ourselves whether there could be anything about our 'nature' that might be considered necessary or evolutionarily deep conditions of logic or argumentation. I want to explore this possibility and to suggest that some conditions may indeed be considered necessary, evolutionarily deep conditions of thought in general (and hence of logic and argumentation as well), and that included among these are certain virtues. I want to further claim that not only is compromise a virtue of argumentation, but that it may be an evolutionarily deep virtue as well. I shall argue that a willingness to compromise is an expression of reasonableness in a broad but fundamental sense, and that such a willingness may stand as a quasi-constitutive condition of our nature as logical animals. This paper is a tentative, incomplete gesture towards making this case.

2. ARGUMENTATION AND EVOLUTION

There has been a growing interest lately in the relation between argumentation and evolution. Part of the purpose of this paper is to take seriously some of the possibilities that evolution may have for the theory of argumentation. Of particular interest will be the possibility that the conditions underlying logic and argumentation may have evolved, and that this might have important implications for the possibility of argumentation between evolutionarily divergent groups. I want to explore this idea and see what doors it may open or close.

Expressed in broad philosophical terms, evolutionary theory takes an organism's *nature* to be openly determinable, with the determining power lying primarily if not exclusively in the external circumstances or *milieu* that make up the organism's environment. An organism's nature is said to be formed by selective pressures or constraints present within its external environment that select for characteristics, traits, and so on over time that are adapted to the environment in which such organisms are embedded. Since an organism's nature is taken to be determined primarily if not solely by its external environment, then the goodness or fitness of an organism's nature will always be relative to environment (as a relational notion). It follows that while functions or traits may be good (i.e. adaptive or fit) relative to the environment in which they evolved, those same traits may turn out to be bad (i.e. maladaptive or unfit) relative to some other environment. Thus, on this kind of evolutionary model, to speak of something being good or adaptive in an absolute sense would seem to strain the meanings of those terms.

Environment is here taken to be a dynamic notion that necessarily involves change over space and time. Environment can be understood in a taxonomic sense as a collection of distinct, separate regions or sets, and it can also be understood in a meronomic sense as a nested series one within another. Viewed in a taxonomic sense, environments might be seen as existing alongside one another as spatially isolated regions or temporally divided transformations or developmental stages, while viewed in a meronomic sense, environments might be said to be spatially larger and smaller or temporally older and younger. The implications for argumentation depend upon which sense of environment one has in view.

If we take the capacities for language, communication, thought, reasoning, cognition, and so on associated with argumentation as determinable parts of one's nature, it would seem to follow that such capacities would have been shaped by processes of natural selection. It would also seem to follow that the goodness or fitness of those capacities, e.g. their primary functions and so on, should be relative to the constraints, demands, and so on, of the environmental circumstances in which they evolved (as well as other sufficiently comparable environments). What does this suggest?

If the conditions for argumentation did indeed evolve in this Darwinian manner then it would seem that one must be open to the possibility that: 1) Argumentation schemes, styles, and so on, are not absolute but historically and environmentally determined (and hence are relative in some important sense), 2) Some argumentation schemes, styles, and so on, might be older and younger, broader and narrower than others, and 3) Argumentation schemes, styles, and so

on, that evolved in radically isolated environments might be incongruous, incommensurable, or incompatible. They might be incongruous in that each could be maladaptive or out of place within the environment of another argument group, they might be incommensurable in having no common measure of evaluation between divergent groups, and they might be incompatible in that two divergent could not co-exist within the same environment. If true, this could have a number of important implications.

2.1 The possibility of radical impasse and the limits of argumentation

In argumentation it is not uncommon to arrive at an impasse, i.e. a blockage or dead end of some sort that prohibits further advance of the argumentation process understood in a broad sense (e.g. inquiry, debate, rhetorical persuasion, etc.). Recognition of the importance of impasse in argumentation goes back at least to Aristotle, who characterizes it not as a dead end, but more as a knot or a tangle that one simply needs to untangle in order to then move forward once again. (Metaphysics, 995a 24-995b 10) Implicit in Aristotle's account is the presupposition that minds are pre-attuned or pre-adapted both to one another and to the world, making an impasse a temporary state that results from a faulty analysis, a deficit of information, or some other temporary condition that is capable of being overcome.

While this Aristotelian account of impasse may work well within a classical conception of being it becomes more problematic and questionable when placed within an evolutionary model, for within an evolutionary model the traditional presuppositions regarding the pre-attuned or pre-adapted relation of mind-to-mind and mind-to-world are called into question. On an evolutionary model it can no longer be presupposed, for example, that mind is pre-attuned to discerning the truth in things for there is no guarantee that mind has evolved to satisfy that epistemic function. Similarly, it can no longer be presupposed that minds are universally pre-attuned to other minds for it is possible that genetically isolated groups could have developed or emphasized different mental capacities or argumentative schemes whose adaptive functions are so distinct as to result in a radical breakdown in the possibility of argumentation across or between such groups. The possibility of such radical forms of impasse suggests that the universality of mental capacities, argument schemes, and so on, can no longer be presupposed but must instead be argued for as necessary move in an intriguing and important philosophical question.

The possibility of such radical forms of impasse also suggests that there may be real, insurmountable limits to the capacity for argumentation to promote or advance a common or shared understanding, appreciation, cooperation, and so on, between some groups. Such limits would seem to imply that there may be moments when a process of argumentation is brought to an end, not because of any unwillingness on the part of its participants to continue with the process, but because of some fundamental incompatibility between the argument schemes employed. While some might be willing to accept such limits and let things stand as they are, others might interpret those same limits as justification for adopting other, non-argumentative means of deciding things, as exemplified in Alexander the Great

who, rather than trying to untangle the Gordian knot, opted instead to simply sever it with his sword.

There are a number of ways in which one might respond to this 'just so' story: 1) One could take the possibility of such limits to argumentation as supporting a relativistic conception of argumentation, logic, truth, and so on (e.g. Whorf), 2) One could try and counter the implications of the evolutionary model with a transcendental argument regarding the impossibility of any principled impasse or claim to incommensurability (e.g. Davidson), or 3) One could adopt a quasi-Aristotelian approach and accept the reality of such limits as possible within some real, practical context, while also seeing those limits as revisable within a larger, evolutionary context (e.g. Whitehead). I will defend a combination of 2 and 3.

3. EVOLUTION AND LOGICAL ANIMALS

One of the earliest philosophers to fully embrace the evolutionary model in a broad, systematic sense was C. S. Peirce. Peirce's semio-illative theory of argumentation rests upon the idea of evolution, not merely in a biological sense, but in a much broader logical, cosmological, and metaphysical rendering of that notion. Central to Peirce's account of argumentation is that the principles of argumentation, i.e. the principles of logic, the forms of schemes of argumentation, and so on, evolve, that is, they come to be over time. It is the evolutionary development of the conditions of argumentation, taken in its broadest sense, that mark us as "in the main logical animals." (Peirce, 1877, p. 112) What makes us 'logical' in Peirce's broad use of that term is our capacity to learn and improve our condition in life through mental processes that are self-correcting. (Peirce, 1898, pp. 42-47) Put simply, as logical animals we possess the capacity to take the process of evolutionary development into our own hands, thereby improving our own condition in a self-directed manner. Peirce cautions, however, that while we are "in the main logical animals, "we are not perfectly so."

Logicality in regard to practical matters is the most useful quality an animal can possess, and might, therefore, result from the action of natural selection; but outside of these it is probably of more advantage to the animal to have his mind filled with pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth; and thus, upon unpractical subjects, natural selection might occasion a fallacious tendency of thought. (Peirce, 1877, p. 112)

The thing that we can count on to save us from our fallacious tendencies is our capacity for logical self-correction based on the evidence or work of *experience*, i.e. the unrelenting, existential demands of life and environment to which we must continuously or at least periodically adapt. (Peirce, 1877, p. 112; 1903a, p. 194)

Central to Peirce's account of our nature as logical animals is the idea that the principles, methods, and so on that underlie our argumentative practices have been shaped by evolutionary forces. This means that the particular principles, methods, and so on that we employ in our argumentative practices have come into being as adaptive responses to environmental constraints through experience. Thus, what Peirce calls the leading principles of logic, for example, i.e. the principles according

to which an inferential series can be said to follow from one another in what we take to be a 'logical' sense, are actually habits of mind that have been developed, tested, and reinforced against the checks and balances of experience. (Peirce, 1880, pp. 201-205)

On this account it seems possible that evolutionarily isolated groups could evolve different kinds of leading principles and argument schemes depending on the local environment that helped shape them. One could attempt to counter such hypothetical problems by appealing to those leading, logical principles that might be shared across all argument groups, but this seems to presuppose that newer or more recently developed leading principles can be reduced to older, evolutionarily deeper principles, and it is not clear that this is the case. It is even less clear how such a reduction could provide a sufficient basis for overcoming any impasse that might happen to arise. It is not clear, for example, that appealing to the deep logical principle of the *nota notae* (i.e. "the law that if *a* is *b* and *b* is *c*, it can be concluded that *a* is *c*", a principle that Peirce goes so far as to call the fundamental "law of thought" will go very far in helping to resolve an impasse arising from more recently developed argument schemes whose only commonality is their shared grounding in the *nota notae*. So where does this leave us?

If these kinds of radical impasses are indeed possible (and I want to suggest that they are), then this would imply that there might be important limits to argumentation that, when encountered, open the way to non-argumentative mechanisms or courses of action (e.g. Alexander's sword) that would 'kick in,' as it were, when the limit or end of argumentation is reached. There is little doubt that when a serious impasse or limit of argumentation is encountered (whether radical or not), recourse to non-argumentative alternatives does sometimes happen. I want to suggest, however, that even when such limits are encountered (whether they are apparent or real), such impasses do not mark the limits of argumentation in general, but rather the limits of some particular, historically situated conditions of argumentation. On the evolutionary model defended here, it would be a mistake to conclude that any particular, historically situated conditions of argumentation express the absolute or fixed conditions of argumentation in general. If we are to take such evolutionary accounts of argumentation seriously, then the conditions of argumentation are not to be read as having been given once and for all (as eternally fixed transcendental conditions in the spirit of Kant), but should instead be interpreted as elements of a dynamic, determinable, continuously evolving process that we might refer to as argumentation in general. Viewed in this respect, while there will always be particular limits to argumentation, such limits should always be taken as contextual and historically situated, and hence as capable of being traversed or overcome by the emergence or construction of new conditions that would eventually remove or resolve any impasse encountered. Put simply, while the kinds of radical, insurmountable impasses outlined here could indeed be possible (as marking the limits of the conditions of argumentation presently available to those argument groups), such limits should never be presumed to be fixed or absolute, but should instead be viewed as temporary, historically situated limits that can be traversed or overcome through the emergence of evolutionarily novel conditions. Thus, while such radical impasses would be real within the particular,

historically situated conditions of argumentation that happen to be employed by the groups involved, viewed from a broader, evolutionary perspective such limits should be seen as temporary and as capable of being surpassed or overcome.

3.1 Evolution and the historicization of limits

As we have already seen, the idea that impassable limits are temporary and are capable of being overcome goes back at least as far as the work of Aristotle, and likely beyond that. But the same cannot be said for the idea of limits. It has been claimed, for example, that one of the distinguishing features of western classical thought, at least as expressed within the dominant traditions, is the widespread belief that there are fixed, pre-determined *limits* to humanity's place in the world, including absolute limits on humanity's epistemic, logical, and argumentative capacities that cannot be overcome. (Jonas, 1974; 1979) The idea that limits are not fixed in the classical sense, but can be surpassed or overcome first arises in a serious way within the western theological belief that humans are created in the image of God, a belief that eventually gave rise to the idea that humans are inherently *creative* in a god-like sense. (Rose, 2002; 2009) This idea is gradually extended, in the work of Vico, Hegel, Schelling, and others, to a more historicized account of limits as part of the developmental phases of nature, thought, or being. Even so, it is not until the work of Darwin that the radical historicization of limits as part of a truly evolutionary, *unlimited* process, becomes widely established, an idea that is then very quickly taken up in the philosophical work of Peirce, Nietzsche, and others, as applying to nature, cosmology, and being as such.

I take this shift towards a more historicized account of limits as the result, at least in part, of lessons learned from rigorous study, research, and reflection over centuries of experience viewed in a collective, institutional, or dare I say a corporate sense. While the historicized view of limits may not be true in any final or absolute sense, it should at least be taken as truthful in some significant sense, that is, as revealing something important about the conditions of life and of being in general. I want to suggest that this historicized view of limits has been taken up and become ingrained within the human condition as an essential feature of our nature as logical animals. More precisely, I claim that this historicized sense of limit is embedded and expressed in what Leibniz, Peirce and others have identified as the *principle of reason* and the *principle of hope*. I want to also suggest that historicized sense of limit is also embedded and expressed in the virtue of compromise, a virtue that runs deep within our nature as logical animals.

3.2 Reason, hope, and the principle of reasonableness

As noted, the idea that limits are not absolute or fixed, but historical is expressed in two important and closely related logical principles that are taken up and developed by Peirce: 1) The *principle of reason*, and 2) The *principle of hope*. The principle of reason, as re-formulated in Peirce's evolutionary philosophy, can be summarized in two logical imperatives or maxims: 1) "Do not block the way of inquiry," (Peirce, 1898, pp. 48-50) and 2) "Never allow yourself to think that any definite problem is

incapable of being solved to any assignable degree of perfection.” (Peirce 1903a: 188) Closely related to this is the principle of hope, which Peirce identifies as the most basic, underlying principle of abduction, namely, the “fundamental or primary... hypothesis that the facts in hand admit of rationalization, and of rationalization by us.” As logical animals “we are bound to assume” that our minds are capable of advancing beyond our present cognitive state “independently of any evidence that it is true.” (Peirce, 1901, pp. 106-107) Both the principle of reason and the principle of hope rest upon the presupposition that there is “an element of Reasonableness” in the world, an *element* that not only makes people and things inherently intelligible in the present sense, but that also includes the possibility that what might now appear less intelligible or less reasonable can become or be made more so in the future (both in an epistemic and an ontological sense).

I want to follow Peirce in claiming that this *element of reasonableness* understood as an inherent openness to reason and reasonability is part of our very nature as logical animals, and hence is an essential aspect of argument and argumentation in general. (Peirce, 1869, p. 72, 72*n*; 1903b, p. 255; 1904, pp. 307-308, p. 313, pp. 322-324; 1905, p. 343) What Peirce calls the *element* of reasonableness in things manifests itself in the intertwined principles of reason and hope, principles that I want to suggest run so deep within our evolution as logical animals as to stand as something akin to what Apel calls principles of “transcendental pragmatics,” i.e. “the transcendental pragmatic foundation” for the possibility of “practical discourse” and argumentation in general. (Apel, 2001, pp. 166-177) Understood in this sense, the principles of reason and hope would indeed stand as constitutive, enabling, transcendental conditions for the possibility of argumentation, but they would stand so in a historicized, evolutionary, pragmatic sense rather than the kind of “dogmatic transcendentalism” expressed in Kant (and others) (Apel, 2001, p. 168). Thus such principles would be more akin to the kind of “relativized, historicized, and dynamical” a priori principles outlined by Michael Friedman, principles that have a “constitutive function of making possible” but which are at the same time products of a historical, evolutionary process. (Friedman, 2004, pp. 86-87) Central to this proposal is what I would characterize as a deep-seated, growing belief that difficulties or problems encountered in the general work of argument and argumentation (including the advance of knowledge) are historical in nature and hence are inherently open to being traversed or overcome by a future state of consensual, truthful agreement “which would be the same for all,” a belief that Peirce calls “the faith of the logician” and which he claims to provide logic with “its reason of existence.” (Peirce, 1880, p. 202) I want to further suggest that this same spirit of reasonableness also extends into the virtue of compromise, with compromise itself being a further, more practical expression of these fundamental principles.

4. COMPROMISE AS A VIRTUE OF ARGUMENTATION

According to J.P. Day, compromise is “an agreement between A and B to make mutual concessions in order to resolve a conflict between them.” (Day, 1989, p. 472) As Day rightly notes, compromise is part of what he identifies as the “Give and

Receive Family” of relations, and differs from other members of this family (such as gratitude or exchange) in that with compromise each side of the relation must both gain and lose something. (Day, 1989, p. 476) I would add that in its *ideal* sense, compromise requires not only that the concessions in question be mutually and voluntarily agreed upon, but they should also be deemed fair and duly proportioned by the parties involved (with no evidence of deception or self-deception within either party). Understood in this qualified sense, compromise can indeed stand as a better or preferred means of resolving disputes than other alternatives such as adjudication, as Day rightly claims. (Day, 1989, p. 476)

I want to suggest first that compromise is a virtue of argumentation. Expressed more precisely and with respect to Andrew Aberdein’s point that virtue theories of argumentation should be “agent-based” (Aberdein, 2013, p. 4); I want to suggest that a *willingness* or *openness* to compromise is a virtue of arguers. It is a virtue in both argument construction as well as argument appraisal, for it involves a tacit (or in the ideal case, an explicit) recognition and appreciation of the value of other arguers, the value of autonomy, the partiality of one’s own perspective, and the complex, dynamic, evolutionary nature of the world we inhabit. What I am calling a willingness or openness to compromise is compatible with what Dan Cohen has identified as “especially important critical virtues—open mindedness and a sense of proportion.” (Cohen, 2009, p. 50) Cohen characterizes open-mindedness as “a willingness to take what others say seriously” and a willingness to revise or modify one’s own position, (Cohen, 2009, p. 56) and compromise involves both those notions. With respect to “a sense of proportion,” compromise implies an ability to recognize what we might loosely describe as the ‘practical limit’ of an impasse (at least in a temporary, historical sense) as a first step in the process of working out a compromise. Thus, understood in this sense, compromise can be seen as standing between two extremes (or vices) that Cohen also addresses, namely, 1) being uncompromising in the sense of being “obstinate and inflexible” (Day, 1989, p. 471, p. 473), an unwillingness to listen that Cohen identifies as the “Deaf Dogmatist”, and 2) being overly compromising in the sense of being a “trimmer and a time server” (Day, 1989, p. 471) or what Cohen calls the “Concessionaire, who undermines his own arguments with unnecessary concessions.” (Aberdein, 2013, p. 7) Viewed in this respect, a willingness to compromise does indeed seem to qualify as a virtue in the traditional sense.

Importantly, while the term ‘compromise’ is sometimes taken to have an ambivalent sense, as Day clearly shows, such ambivalence resides not in the notion of compromise as such (properly understood), but results instead from confusion regarding the different ways in which the term ‘compromise’ is used. More specifically, the apparent ambiguity associated with compromise results when compromise as a virtue is conflated with a very different use of the same term as in being compromised or being compromising. As day notes, to compromise in the virtuous sense is a very different kind of thing than being compromised in the sense of compromising one’s integrity, one’s morals, and so on, and the ambiguity sometimes associated with the term is the result of confusion regarding the transitive and intransitive senses of the term. More precisely, the negative sense of compromise comes from its use as a transitive verb, e.g. *A* compromised *B*, while the

positive sense comes from its use as an intransitive verb, e.g. to compromise *with* or to compromise *between*. Day argues that it is only when compromise is used in a transitive sense that it has negative connotations, whereas in its other intransitive uses compromise is a good thing. (Day, 1989, pp. 472-475, pp. 478-479) I want to agree with Day in this and to claim that in the intransitive sense outlined here, compromise is a virtue.

4.1 *Compromise as a deep virtue*

By a deep virtue I mean a virtue whose evolutionary history is both old and extensive. It is old in the sense that its function has a long and stable evolutionary history, and it is extensive in the sense that the same function can be found within a wide range of peoples and places. I want to suggest that compromise is a deep virtue that may well be coextensive with the conditions for the possibility of argumentation in general.

As already noted one of the primary preconditions of our nature as logical animals is that people and things are reasonable in two senses: 1) They are intelligible, and 2) They are determinable by conditions that are taken to be rational or intelligible in some general sense (e.g. laws of nature, reasons, etc.).¹ It follows, I would venture, that argumentation also presupposes that people (or agents) are reasonable in this dual sense: 1) Argumentation presupposes that the parties of an argument-relation (e.g. two persons, a person and a text, or any other argument-relation) are intelligible, and 2) Argumentation also presupposes that the *agents* of the argument relation are determinable by reasons in the broad sense that they are capable of being influenced, persuaded, moved, or altered in some way by the play of reasons present within the argument process (e.g. two persons involved in an exchange of arguments, or a person interpreting a text). Thus, *the principle of reasonableness* can be taken to be a deep principle, a principle that stands as transcendental condition for the possibility of argumentation in the pragmatist sense outlined above.

It would follow here that certain virtues relating to the principle of reasonableness might also be said to run deep within the human conditions, ethical virtues such as temperance, prudence, wisdom, and so on, epistemic virtues such as a willingness to learn, open-mindedness, fairness, and so on, and argumentative virtues such as a willingness to listen, a sense of proportion, and so on once again. So why the current emphasis on compromise, what is it about compromise that would lead one to include it among the deep virtues of argumentation? To properly answer this requires that we properly situate ourselves within an evolutionary perspective.

¹ Thus, things can be said to be rationally determinable by agents insofar as they are open to being ordered, transformed, produced, and so on using rational methods for rational purposes (the most obvious example of this being the production of technologies), and agents are rationally determinable by things insofar as we are open to being influenced by the nature of things (the most obvious example being the a posteriori processes of learning from experience, e.g. observation, experimentation, and so on).

Impasses and conflicts of various kinds are common features of life. As Day points out, the question of how to resolve such impasses and conflicts “is obviously a subject of great practical importance.” (Day, 1989, p. 471) It should also be a subject of great evolutionary importance, for it would be most beneficial to have methods of conflict resolution that served to minimize disadvantageous outcomes, especially those involving existential risks. Now there are multiple ways of resolving impasses and conflicts, but the advantages of compromise include: 1) Since compromise is mutually agreed upon rather than enforced it is less likely to be interpreted in a strongly negative sense, 2) Since gains and concessions apply to each party reciprocally there is a reasonable expectation that the resolution will be equitable, 3) Because compromise implies the recognition of the value and rights of each party (as an important political and moral act) it may help enable cooperative relations between parties in the future, and 4) It follows that compromise is likely to result in a more enduring resolution, thereby minimizing existential and other forms of risk to both parties. I would add here that a willingness to compromise might itself be shaped and reinforced by the long term work of experience, for such experience would help disclose or bring to light a greater awareness of the finitude and partiality of perspectives as well as the dynamic, fluid, continuously evolving character of ourselves and the world in which we are embedded.

On this account, a willingness to compromise is itself a form of reasonableness that may well stand not only as a deep virtue, but as a vitally important virtue that should be nourished as a central virtue of argumentation in general. For a willingness to compromise in the sense outlined here expresses a deep sense of reasonableness that includes everything from the reasonableness of the agents involved in the argument-relation to the reasonableness of the social, political, and material conditions within which such agents are embedded. A willingness to compromise expresses not only a recognition of the value and rights of the parties involved, it also expresses a deep seated hope in the possibility of a future, emergent state of increasingly inclusive cooperation.

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