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Commentary on: Mark Young's "Virtuous agency as the ground for argument norms"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mark Young argues that intellectual virtues can serve as a foundation for argument norms. This locates argument norms in intellectually virtuous agents who have a desire for epistemically valuable ends and the right intellectual motivations and dispositions. To show how intellectually virtuous motivations and dispositions develop and help us to act virtuously, Young makes use of Martha Nussbaum's notion of 'grounding experiences'. Argument norms develop on the basis of empirical information gained through grounding experiences about the kinds of intellectual motivations and dispositions most likely to lead to true belief. A key advantage of Young's position over accounts that use pretheoretical intuition to ground argument norms is that it can avoid problems such as relativism. Because I basically agree with Young's position and find it very promising, in the following I focus on four respects in which his account might be further expanded.

2. POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

First, it would help to develop the discussion about mapping spheres of human belief beyond Nussbaum's account using work in reliabilist and responsibilist virtue epistemologies. Reliabilist virtue epistemologies focus on the reliability of belief-forming processes, faculties, dispositions, or epistemic agents in relation to epistemic values such as truth or justification. (Goldman, 1993; Sosa, 1980; Greco, 1999) Responsibilist virtue epistemologies focus more attention on the obligations of epistemic agents in different contexts. Epistemic responsibility (Code, 1984) or epistemic conscientiousness (Montmarquet, 1993) are central virtues orienting us towards epistemically valuable ends such as truth or justification. Both are relevant to Young's argument insofar as these epistemologies ground epistemological concepts and values in the intellectually virtuous agent. Empirical facts about the agent and the agent's intellectual environment are important in each subtype of virtue epistemology and each can support causal accounts of rational norms. In my view, reliabilist and responsibilist approaches are both needed to ground rational norms: we develop our cognitive characters in biological, psychological, emotional, social, epistemic, and moral ways. So, while Nussbaum's grounding experiences are

clearly a part of this epistemological literature, it would help to situate explicitly the question of argument norms in a broader virtue epistemic context.

My second point stems from a concern about intellectual vice and ‘dysfunctional’ intellectual environments. You may have encountered individuals who excel in part because they overvalue their own thinking and undervalue the thinking of others in contexts that reward such behavior. Or perhaps you have encountered academics who routinely silence their own critical voices because of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), but who acquire knowledge successfully nonetheless. Robert Roberts and Jay Wood consider the problem of dysfunctional intellectual contexts in their examination of the value of intellectual humility. They say:

If it did turn out that intellectual vanity and arrogance delivered, on average, more of the epistemic goods than intellectual humility, we would try to explain this disturbing result by reference to some other fault in the individual or some corruption in the epistemic environment. Perhaps individuals need vanity as a motivation, because their upbringing does not instill in them enthusiasm for knowledge as such. Or we might locate the pathology socially—say, in the fact that the whole intellectual community is warped by vanity and arrogance, hyper-autonomy and unhealthy competitiveness, so that in that fallen community some vices actually become more “functional” than their counterpart virtues. (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 252)

You can acquire truths with intellectual vice in dysfunctional intellectual environments and intellectual vice may be the best way to do so in such environments. Underscoring this concern, perhaps, is Feyerabend’s (1975) view that the successful acquisition of knowledge might result from the amount of time you spend working on a problem rather than the particular methodologies (or, I would add, virtues) you employ. So really, how important are intellectual virtues for guiding inquiry or argument towards epistemically valuable ends? Important enough to serve as the foundation for argument norms? I am inclined to think they are important enough, just as I am inclined to think that knowledge acquisition is ultimately hampered by intellectual vice. But more work is needed to show that intellectual virtue ultimately outperforms intellectual vice, particularly if we wish to use virtue for argument norms.

A third issue involves the relationship between intellectual virtues and ethotic arguments. (Brinton, 1986; Leff, 2009; Walton, 1999) If intellectual virtues function as argument norms—that is, if argument norms arise from intellectually virtuous agents—then we could technically classify all informal arguments as ethotic. Given that epistemic trust is vital to the development and sharing of knowledge, this idea might have some merit. But because many still think of ethotic arguments as weaker than other kinds of inductive argument, grounding argument norms in *ethos* could be a hard sell. It might be worthwhile, then, to work out some of the relationships between Young’s position and ethotic argumentation.

My last point concerns the role of community in the development and exercise of intellectual virtue. Young says that in his account “the norms of reason, or argument, would not rest in language but instead in the intellectually virtuous

agent.” I do not dispute the location of norms in intellectually virtuous agents but we should also emphasize the role of intellectual communities in the development, exercise, and protection of these norms. The idea of the ‘intellectually virtuous agent’ invites association with ideals of autonomy, impartiality, and independence. But these characteristics may undermine the development of intellectually virtuous cognitive selves as well as the exercise of intellectual virtue in shared inquiry. Causal pathways and perspicuous maps engage what intellectual communities do and how cognitive characters develop in different and often overlapping intellectual communities, including those involving peers, families, schools, universities, workplaces, libraries, labs, online media sites, and so on. Learning about intellectual virtues involves learning about people in communities, perhaps especially those with whom one is closest. Christine McKinnon says that

When it is knowledge of other persons that is in question, we have seen that there are good reasons *not* to insist on the impartiality of the knower. Indeed, in these kinds of quest, the identity and many of the interests of the investigating cognitive agent will be relevant ... But neither the cognitive agent’s undertaking—which is informed along the many dimensions of her character—nor the criteria for the success of her undertaking—which can be provided only against the background of the relevant communal practices—can be understood unless the role of her subjective perspective and her relation to those others is taken into account. A parent’s impartial attitude towards his children will impede his getting to know them. It may also inhibit his children from getting to know themselves. (McKinnon, 2003, p. 236)

It may be more productive, then, to think in terms of intellectually virtuous communities rather than individual agents. Such an approach would align with insights from the area of rhetorical argumentation about the audience’s role in establishing argument norms. (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Tindale, 2004) The idea of a ‘shared cognitive environment’—that is, the overlap between groups of people in terms of what they know and assume (Tindale 2004, p. 22)—can be extended to the case of intellectual virtue. How an agent expresses, regulates, and develops intellectual virtues in the course of learning, arguing, or experimenting is a function of a shared cognitive environment. So, shared cognitive environments should have a central role in virtue epistemic accounts of argument norms.

3. CONCLUSION

Young argues—successfully in my view—that we need not rely on unreflective intuitions to ground argument norms and that intellectual virtues can ground them instead. His suggestion is engaging, provocative, and has interesting implications for a variety of issues in argumentation. In response, I have suggested a few options for further exploration including relevant work in reliabilist and responsibilist virtue epistemologies, the problem of achieving epistemic value through intellectual vice, the relation of virtuous argument norms to ethotic argument, and the role of intellectual community in the development of virtue epistemic argument norms.

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