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Commentary on Khameiel Al Tamimi's "Evaluating Narrative Arguments"

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Khameiel Al Tamimi's paper addresses and tries to connect two topics that have recently become rather significant within contemporary argumentation studies: namely the exploration of the potential argumentative qualities of narrative discourse and the so called virtue theory of (or virtue approach to) argumentation.

Virtue theory of argumentation has been advocated by Daniel Cohen and Andrew Aberdein, and, more recently, by my Spanish colleague José Gascón. Al Tamimi claims that this kind of approach, especially if extended and supplemented by means of her own suggestion to take into account not only arguer's virtues but also her audience's, could provide a theoretical framework enabling us to address the evaluation of narrative arguments. A substantial part of her paper is therefore dedicated to the definition and characterization of the "virtuous audience" which, with an interactive spirit, is said to "essentially include both the arguer and interlocutor" – perhaps, we could talk about "virtuous argumentative agents" in general.

Al Tamimi's discussion of the "virtuous audience" assumes some basic and well-known ideas, typical of the rhetorical perspective in argumentation studies:

- the process of joint construction (or co-authorship) of the produce of argumentation by arguer and audience (or, in general, by the interlocutors), theorized and advocated by Christopher Tindale,
- the long-standing tradition of the expected adaptation of argumentative discourse to its concrete audience,
- and the evaluative role assumed by that same audience in terms of the efficacy of argumentation to achieve the arguer's persuasive goal.

But Al Tamimi is not very confident in the adequate outcome of such a court's judgment. As we all know, real life audiences may be persuaded by (what some consider) not particularly good arguments and Al Tamimi is particularly worried that they be persuaded by "dangerous stories such as racist or misogynistic stories." Her suggestion, which she somehow connects with Perelman's concept of a "universal audience", is the requirement that audiences should have (and cultivate) certain virtues in order to be better judges of argument (let aside for the moment their narrative nature).

I have a comment to make here, because, complex as it is, Perelman's conception of a "universal audience" is not referred to any really existing audience, it does not characterize any empirical object. The "universal audience" is allegedly a pre-construction of the arguer who ideally (when trying to reach a certain level of excellence and rationality) will mold her

discourse *as if it were* addressed to a highly demanding audience of extremely rational, wise and educated people (call them virtuous or more specifically argumentatively virtuous, if you want).

Al Tamimi's concept of a "virtuous audience", I suggest, could work in the same way, encouraging an exploration (similar to those undertaken by Cohen and Aberdein) into the virtues that the arguer should assume her audience to have in order to help her construe a discourse fit and expectedly persuasive for the virtuous. But the paper does not suggest such a role in the arguer's "invention". It seems, instead, to be talking about *real* audiences and Al Tamimi's fear that they would accept bad (or vicious) modes of arguing leads her to advocate the explicit "cultivation of virtues", I understand by *real* people. But how is this done? Apparently, by engaging in "good argumentative practices". However, it is not clear, now, where that "good" comes from: is it a *virtuous* good or does it correspond to any other standard?

I suspect there could be some amount of circularity in the whole approach. The cases that Al Tamimi repeatedly tries to avoid being deemed acceptable by real audiences (explicitly cases where racism or misogyny pervade the arguer's discourse) are cases in which she has a strong conviction to have already chosen "the right side". Our societies have come to certain agreements regarding these issues after long struggles and controversies; after engaging (among other things) in argumentative practices where a judgment against racism or misogyny, delivered by certain audiences with decisive (and influential) capacities, has been the final outcome. Those who do not accept such verdicts are already "social outcasts" in many fora and it is easy to classify their followers (somehow automatically) as non-virtuous.

But if we think about more controversial issues; issues in which we have not yet come to so wide an agreement (e.g. legalized prostitution or drugs, or certain biotechnological policies), we will have to trust in the due course of our struggles and argumentative practices. We will have to trust in the (always amendable) judgment of real arguers and multiple audiences and in the complex social process of opinion forming in various rhetorical settings. I'm not sure we can control that, *somehow beforehand*, by identifying a small set of virtues allegedly required of any agent taking part in any argumentative practice.

And coming now to the question of narrative argument, Khameiel Al Tamimi defines narrative argument "as a story told in the context of dissensus or disagreement." She also adds that she is referring to oral, communicative and interactive practices, with several interlocutors involved. In such settings, I agree, there might be a strong presumption that the story (or narrative) in particular is being used as an argument, or part of an argument, or line of argumentation and is, therefore, pointing to an either implicit or explicit claim (or is somehow the claim itself).

I'm particularly interested in exploring how this happens in real dialogues, which are the conventional mechanisms to let the audience (or interlocutor) know about our intentions in telling a story and which are the most typical structures in which narratives appear with an argumentative role. I have elsewhere advanced the following preliminary classification of modes of narrative argument:

1. Narrative-based explicit arguments
   a. Arguments based on parallel stories not directly related to and causally and historically independent from the circumstances referred to in the thesis or claim, which are, nevertheless, presented as reasons for its acceptance.
   b. Arguments in which the data, or part of the data, are presented in narrative form.

      c. Arguments *about* narratives with (partly) narrative claims or conclusions.
2. Credible (pure) narration as argumentative
      a. Arguing for its own veracity by means of its "manifest credibility".
      b. Arguing for the credible characterization of an object (in general terms) or several objects of discourse (i.e. *framing* them, as the term is used in discourse analysis).

Such argumentative resources – which are, moreover, extensively widespread in all kinds of argumentative settings and practices, undertaken by all kinds and ranks of people – deserve a place in argumentation theory, and I agree with Al Tamimi that some dominant accounts in our field have overlooked them. However, my own theoretical strategy is precisely to see them as not-so-different from other more currently assumed as argumentatively explicit and recognized resources. In that sense, narratives as arguments or part of arguments may call for distinct evaluative tools just as may any other particular argumentative means: from the whole category of visual arguments to any concrete argument scheme, i.e. any particular and peculiar kind of "reason" supporting a claim.

If Al Tamimi's idea of exploring the virtues of audiences in order to build an evaluative framework works, it will work, in my opinion, for any mode of arguing. If a rhetorical approach is needed in this case, it is because a rhetorical approach is needed (or at least adequate) in every argumentative case. Narratives, says Al Tamimi, cannot be "reduced to premises and conclusion." I agree that the classical monological ideas about arguments reconstructed as abstract structures of premises (understood as independent and independently assessable statements) jointly and sufficiently supporting (and ideally implying) a conclusion, with all the traditional worries about finding "missing premises", is not a very promising framework to account for what really happens in dialogical, interactive settings… whether these involve narratives or not.

But this does not mean that we can dispense with studying the concrete way narratives become (or not) argumentative stuff: i.e. are being offered as reasons for something else (or eventually for their own credibility) or are being supported as justifiable claims by other kinds of reasons. All this happens in interactive argumentative practices where, I agree, the cooperation (or co-authorship) of the agents in building, understanding and improving or defeating the arguments (either by acquiescence or by objections, requests, counter or meta-arguments) and the micro and macro-processes of persuasion, definitely call for a rhetorical framework.

In this sense, the relevant phenomenon is not exactly that the audience is the ultimate evaluator of argument just by being or not being persuaded (as this could still be understood in a too traditional, *passive* way). What really happens is that "argument evaluation" (narrative or not) is an argumentative practice in itself that already takes place in a continuum of argumentative exchanges between engaged interlocutors. Studying and understanding how this happens is one of our goals. If anyone wants to improve how it happens, let her join such ongoing practice.