May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

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Michael D. Kurak

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Commentary on “Walton’s Argumentation Schemes”

M. KURAK
mdkurak@gmail.com

I begin this commentary with a confession. Although I have long history with the philosophy department at the University of Windsor and first encountered references to Douglas Walton over twenty years ago, while serving as interim manager of the Journal of Informal Logic, my familiarization with Walton’s work was largely the result of volunteering to write this commentary.

My own research in philosophy is largely in the area of metaphysics and epistemology and I have strong Kantian leanings. Perhaps this background accounts, in part, for the fact that, in reading over Prof. Lumer’s paper, I was very quickly struck by similarities between Walton’s approach to the analysis of argumentation and David Hume’s approach to the analysis of moral judgment. In what follows, I briefly explore these similarities with an eye to highlighting the nature of Prof. Lumer’s criticisms, as well as to isolating potential weaknesses with his line of attack.

David Hume takes an empirical approach to uncovering the foundations of moral judgment. His general strategy involves dividing human attributes into two categories; those of which we approve and those of which we do not approve. This he does on the basis of our intuitions regarding these matters. As support for his methodology Hume observes that human beings have little difficulty making such determinations. “This quick sensibility,” he remarks, “which, on its head, is so universal among mankind, gives the philosopher sufficient assurance, that he can never be considerably mistaken in framing the catalogue, or incur any danger of misplacing the objects of his contemplation” (1751/1983, p. 16). Having defended the existence of universal intuitions, Hume then applies to formulating his catalogue with an eye to uncovering their criterial basis. As is well known, Hume grounds our intuitions in public utility.

While Walton’s philosophical project is not entirely analogous to Hume’s, they share some key features, which makes the comparison profitable. First, both projects rely upon the idea that common intuitions, which are either universal in the species, as is the case with Hume, or are perhaps socially constructed, form the basis of judgment in their respective domains. Lumer, as we have seen, is not satisfied with such intuitionist presuppositions, at least not in Walton’s case. Second, both Hume and Walton appeal to utility as the ultimate ground of our intuitions. Indeed, Walton seems prepared even to ground the value of truth in utility.

Although Lumer appreciates the accessibility and thoroughness of Walton’s approach, he views Walton’s intuitionism as being largely responsible for the sprawling scope of his compendium of argumentation schemes, for its arbitrariness, and for its incompleteness. Lumer longs for Walton to provide what he refers to as a “real-theory.” Only a formal or functional theory, he declares, will permit for the specification of criteria by means of which these problems can be addressed and greater order brought to the compendium, and so to argumentation theory.

Such demands, I submit, beg a critical question that perhaps belies differences in the fundamental metaphysical commitments of our authors. The concepts of essential and inessential, as well as those of complete and incomplete, as Lumer employs them in his criticism of Walton, presuppose that a formal approach to framing the compendium is appropriate. But if the members of the compendium are in any way contingent, then it is not clear that we can
meaningfully speak of which members are essential or inessential or about whether the compendium is complete or incomplete. If the members of the compendium are contingent then the compendium is a kind of aggregate, which is itself in flux; and so, consequently, is the common intuitive basis by means of membership in the compendium is determined. If the compendium is to be the kind of whole that admits of essential and inessential parts, then neither it nor the system that determines membership in it can be contingent.

Personally, I am sympathetic to such ideas. But such a view runs afoul of that influential line of thought in philosophy that runs back through David Hume to Francis Bacon. As Hume remarks, methods of investigation “where a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions, may be more perfect in itself, but suits less the imperfection of human nature, and is a common source of illusion and mistake in this as well as in other subjects” (1751/1983, p.16). What is needed to fully support Lumer’s line of criticism, therefore, is a look at his promissory theory.

Of course, Hume provides a functional theory of moral foundations. He specifies the function of human attributes as that of furthering public ends. This specification, in turn, provides him with straightforward criteria for evaluating human attributes. An analogous theory, it would seem, could be generated for the domain of argumentation. In this case good or “valid” argumentations schemes would be those that further public utility. But, as Hume points out, if the intuitive basis of determination is common, then the specification of such criteria is superfluous to the task. If all one wishes to do is frame the catalogue of human attributes and determine the worth of individual actions then one need only consult their intuitions or feelings. Perhaps a similar logic applies to argumentation schemes.

References