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Commentary on Andrew Aberdein’s “Virtue Argumentation and Bias”

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When I read Professor Aberdein’s paper, my reaction was, “What a lovely piece of scholarship.” I cannot think of anything about it to take issue with, so I will have to leave criticisms to other readers. Instead I just offer three observations that the paper brings to mind.

First point. I notice that some of the discussion centres around the question whether virtue theory of argumentation should be taken to supplant traditional accounts of argument cogency, or just to supplement them. However, I take away from virtue theory that we should think of argument goodness in a richer way than we did before. Forty years ago Johnson and I focused on just the logic of arguments and tried to expand the reach of logic beyond deductive validity. To us a good argument was still a logically cogent argument, even if in a broader sense of logic than was then current. Today, though, partly influence by virtue theory, I would answer the question, “What is good argument?” differently.

Arguments can have different kinds of merit and flaw, and so be good in some respects but not good in others. An over-all good argument will, at least, (1) befit the circumstances, (2) be inferentially sound, (3) be suitably responsive to objection and criticism, and (4) be persuasive. Befitting the circumstances means being appropriate in qualities such as, inter alia, length, technical detail, and tone to the situation of its use—in other words, suitability for the occasion and situation. Inferential soundness means the argument’s reasons support the claims based on them to the degree asserted. Responsiveness to criticism means acknowledging common or likely objections and criticisms and responding to them with appropriate concessions, qualifications, or counter-arguments. Persuasiveness means having selected arguments of such a kind, and having presented them in such a manner, that the intended audience finds them convincing. To use arguments one’s audience finds convincing requires a capacity for sympathetic understanding, for empathy, and for imagination. To be responsive to criticisms and objections requires a capacity to recognize that, and how, a reasonable person might disagree, plus a familiarity with alternative points of view. To use inferentially sound arguments requires reflective self-awareness, for it entails checking the inferences of one’s own arguments as they occur to one. To befit the circumstances requires a sensitivity to the demands, and limits, of context. In other words, a more expansive conception of a good argument makes argumentation virtues relevant; and the demonstration of the relevance of argument virtues entails a more expansive conception of a good argument.

Second point. I find it helpful, in trying to understand the role of virtues of intellect and character in argumentation, to keep in mind why virtue theory re-emerged in philosophical ethics in the last century, since that was the original impetus for virtue epistemology, which has in turn given us virtue theories of argumentation.

One thing that motivated virtue ethics is that neither of the types of competing theories of morally right action then current—teleological and deontological theories—was satisfactory as an action-guiding morality. Utilitarianism and Kantianism are criterialogical theories. They propose criteria for identifying what the morally right thing to do is, not guides as to how to do it. Virtue ethical theories, on the other hand, are action-guiding and imbed manner and motivation. They provide guidance about how to do the morally right thing in the morally right way. Acquire the habits and dispositions of morally right action and the judgement to exercise them appropriately and you will tend to behave in the manner that is morally called for. Virtue ethics also introduces different criteria of morally right actions: behaving morally virtuously is not the same as simply following moral rules or principles.

Similarly, knowing the criteria of good arguments helps one to judge arguments but it is not sufficient to turn one into a good arguer: that is, one who makes good arguments and one who is adept at identifying the merits in good arguments and the flaws in bad ones. It is necessary also to possess the virtues that enable one to satisfy these criteria in one’s argumentative practices. And virtue theory of argumentation also introduces some different criteria. Inferential soundness might not be open to a virtue-theoretic analysis, but being responsive to competing points of view and being sensitive to one’s audience’s beliefs and attitudes look like the exercise of argumentation virtues.

Accordingly, I am drawn to Activity virtue theory, and am inclined to think that knowing the criteria of a good argument is not sufficient for being able to make good arguments or to judge argument goodness, even if it is necessary. So I must be a Modest Moderate.

How does a Modest Moderate Activity theory advocate fare against the cognitive bias findings and the general critique from the situationist challenge? One of the difficulties facing the situationist’s critique of virtue theories of argument is that the challenge is an extrapolation from studies that are not examinations of argumentation, but of inference-drawing outside of any argumentative context. Relatedly, the test problems used required an understanding of technically advanced concepts and their application. This is the applicability problem that Professor Aberdein discusses.

Third point. In this connection I would draw your attention to a series of studies carried out under the direction of David Perkins. Perkins’s findings appear to constitute a kind of answer to the skepticism about virtue theory that the empirical bias studies encourage, but I’m not sure where it fits in Professor Aberdein’s list of responses.

Perkins’s experiments had their subjects reasoning about everyday problems of some importance but easily within the range of general knowledge. They were not under any time pres-

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1 Facing daily opportunities to behave morally or immorally, even to hesitate for a moment to perform a utilitarian or categorical imperative calculation can be to lose the opportunity for right action. For instance, beneficence requires spontaneous, whole-hearted and effective response to others’ needs. Mill’s rules of thumb look like an attempt to turn the principle of utility into an action guide. Similarly, Kant’s moral absolutism—for example that lying is always immoral—serves to cut out the time needed for moral reflection. But these moves entail treating morality like a legal code. The manner and motive of conduct don’t matter for obedience to the law. Kant’s requirement that a moral agent be motivated to do what is morally right because it is the morally right thing to do brings motive into play, but in so doing makes Kant’s ethics a quasi-virtue theory of morality. Also, the manner and motivation of conduct affect its moral character.

2 —over a ten-year period and summarized in a report published 1991 as a chapter in book titled, Informal Reasoning and Education.
The subjects were asked to take and support a position on everyday political and social issues that were then current, and vexed, with a variety of arguments on both sides of the issue.\(^3\) Perkins’s findings are distressing. The subjects’ everyday reasoning was weak. One-sided and underdeveloped arguments were commonplace. The way the subjects modeled the situations tended to be incomplete and biased, and consistently one-sided. High school students generated 1.8 lines of argument for their preferred side and .6 lines of argument for the other side. College students fared little better: 2.8 arguments for their side and 1.1 objections. Graduate students produced 3.3 arguments and 1.3 objections. Pilot studies revealed at least 6 lines of argument on each side of the issue within easy access of these students. When the subjects’ arguments were examined for their quality, three quarters of the errors diagnosed by naturalistic critiques had to do with bias and incompleteness. Maturity and advancement in education did not significantly enhance performance, as measured by comparisons between 1\(^{st}\) and 4\(^{th}\) year high school performance and 1\(^{st}\) and 4\(^{th}\) year college performance. To test whether maturation and life experience resulted in improved reasoning performance, people who had been out of school for several years were tested. The differences were negligible. Perkins concluded, “In summary, the overall pattern of result from several studies argues that everyday reasoning is neither very good nor likely to improve much with maturation, education or experience of life, at least not beyond the first year of high school” (Perkins 1991, p. 91).

Perkins tested possible explanations of the poor “situation modeling” his results exposed. Situation modeling is the building of a model of the situation being reasoned about as it is and as it might be and the articulation of the dimensions and factors involved in the issue. He found no significant correlation between the quality of situation modeling and prior familiarity with the issues (pp. 93-94). He found that IQ makes a contribution to well-elaborated situation models (p. 95), but that people tend to “invest their IQ in supporting their own case rather than in exploring the entire issue more fully and evenhandedly” (p. 95). However he did find that situation modeling can be improved by direct and even semi-direct instruction.

The explanation Perkins offered as to why people don’t bother to reason better when they evidently can do so is that we tend to stop thinking once having told ourselves a story about the situation that weaves together the facts in one way, from one point of view, and that is congruent with our prior beliefs (p. 99). He calls this a “makes-sense” epistemology, and contrasts it with a “critical” epistemology, which has higher standards for good situation models, such as: considering alternative situation models, checking for more knowledge, knowing how to think of reasons and to construct counterexamples, and valuing objectivity, fair play and the importance of taking multiple perspectives. Developing and operating from a critical epistemology is hard work and unnecessary for reasoning about the common issues of everyday life. But, Perkins contends,

The results argue that metacognitive know-how about the demands, opportunities, and pitfalls of situation modeling has a very substantial influence. Attitudes of objectivity, fair play, and so on, together with this know-how comprise a critical epistemology that fosters good situation modeling. Moreover, such know-how can be taught, and such attitudes fostered. (p. 103)

\(^3\) Typical questions were: Would providing more money for public schools significantly improve the quality of teaching and learning? Would a nuclear freeze agreement signed between the United States and the Soviet Union significantly reduce the possibility of world war?
Perkins’s research provides evidence of the kinds of bias that other empirical studies find to infect argumentation, and that motivate skepticism about the existence of argumentation virtues. But rather than conclude that these virtues do not exist or are unattainable ideals, he offers an explanation of the data that is consistent with the possibility of overcoming these shortfalls in reasoning performance and conducts studies that suggests that argumentation virtues can be taught and learned.

It strikes me that Perkins’s findings complement the rejoinders that Professor Aberdein offers to the bias research objections to virtue theory of argumentation.

Professor Aberdein suggests that promise of a successful strategy for dealing with the problem of bias in argumentation lies in the acquisition of the deep-seated, higher order or regulatory virtue of intellectual humility, understood as an appreciation of our fallibility with respect to our beliefs in general, which is exercised on an ongoing basis, in interactions with others, and recognized as itself fallible. The acquisition of this virtue, he contends, seems more likely to be effective than a negative, debiasing programme. How to teach such intellectual humility is the thousand-dollar question. Whether Perkins’s meta-cognitive know-how is equivalent to intellectual humility, or is an alternative to it, or needs it to be reliably operational are questions beyond my ability to answer here.

One way to reinforce intellectual humility is to submit one’s intellectual efforts to the critical judgement of one’s peers, and to engage in critical conversations with them—such as is required by the format of this conference. But intellectual humility is not a comforting virtue. I am only too aware that my own limitations might be exposed by my failure to find grounds for anything but admiration for Professor Aberdein’s paper.

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