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Reply to Commentary on “Transsubjectivity”

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1. Wohlrapp’s further exposition of his theory

Harald Wohlrapp’s elaborations on the design of his theory, the role it postulates for subjectivity in argument and the nature of the principle of transsubjectivity should help the reader to understand better his significant reflection on our theorizing about the practice of argumentative discussion.

Readers may find difficult his use of the term ‘orientation’. Wohlrapp defines argumentative validity as a conclusion’s quality of being “suitable as a new orientation for action” (Wohlrapp 2014/2008, p. 270) in a domain in question. Thus, since the goal of argumentative discussion is in Wohlrapp’s view to determine if a thesis is valid, that goal amounts to determining if a thesis is suitable as a new orientation for action. In an earlier version of my paper, I glossed this goal as that of determining whether a thesis is suitable as a “guide” or “basis” for action. In correspondence, Wohlrapp expressed concern that an unprepared reader might understand this terminology in a narrow instrumentalist way.

I had it, however, that a “valid” thesis is not only suitable “for action” but as well for further consideration, deliberation etc. in short: that it is (provisionally) included into our “orientation system”. (e-mail communication, 2016 05 29)

Indeed, in two other places where the concept of the validity of a thesis is defined (Wohlrapp 2014/2008, pp. lix, 132), the qualifier “for action” is omitted and validity is defined simply as suitability as a new orientation. In response to Wohlrapp’s concern, I replaced the phrases ‘guide for action’ and ‘basis for action’ with his term ‘orientation’ and quoted his (to me rather opaque) description of an orientation as a “theory that symbolically represents practically relevant distinctions, relationships, and regularities” (Wohlrapp 2014/2008, p. 108).

In correspondence, Wohlrapp said that he was aware that, although ‘Orientierung’ is commonly used in German-language argumentation theory, ‘orientation’ is not common in English-language argumentation theory. But William James, he discovered, uses it with Wohlrapp’s intended meaning, in an article which Wohlrapp cites (2014/2008, p. 5, n. 12) as a help to the English-speaking reader. James wrote:

... the immediate self-transcendency affirmed as something existing independently of experiential mediation or termination .. could only result in our orientation, in the turning of our expectations and practical tendencies into the right path; and the right path here, so long as we and the object are not yet face to face (or can never get face to face, as in the case of ejects [sic]), would be the path that led us into the object’s nearest neighborhood. (James 1904, p. 563; italics added)
In further correspondence, Wohlrapp wrote that

"... turning our expectations and practical tendencies into the right path is a good characterization of it [orientation–DH] (where the “expectations” may concern anything about the issue and the “practical tendencies” may also refer to the practice of using words and building further theories). (e-mail communication, 2016 05 30)"

For a full exposition of his concept of orientation, the reader should consult section 3.3 of Wohlrapp’s book, "The theoretical level: Orientation system."

2. Is reasonable argumentation (quasi-)religious?

There is much to be said for Wohlrapp’s understanding of both religion and the practice of argumentation as forms of cultivating deep trust. To participate seriously in argumentative discussion directed at reaching a conclusion that is suitable as a new orientation is indeed to manifest a faith in the power of human reason. But human reason is a slender reed on which to rely for our well-being. It is much less trustworthy than the care of an all-powerful and loving God (if there is one). If there is no such god, then we human beings have less reason to trust that things are good and right.

The practice of reasonable argumentation, I claimed, contains neither a promise of personal salvation nor rituals marking the significant transitions in one’s life. Wohlrapp finds, at the suggestion of Katharina Stevens, a kind of analogue of personal salvation in my discharge from personal responsibility if I strive for theses that are free from open objections. He concedes the present lack of rituals, but supposes that there might be rituals if there was more respect for the practice of argumentation. Any such rituals, however, would not be rituals celebrating the crucial events in the life of an individual person. And the mentioned analogue of personal salvation is hardly the supreme bliss promised by traditional religions. The common feature of the two disanalogies between religion and argumentation is that the trust in human reason that reasonable argumentation reflects is not a trust that things are good and right for me, but a trust that things are good and right in general, i.e. for us human beings who participate in the practice. Secular human beings can still believe in “humanity’s spiritual and ethical potential” (Wohlrapp 2014, p. 394), but may not be able to actualize this potential to the same extent as adherents to traditional religions think they can.

Further, as Wohlrapp may well agree, it is not only in reasonable argumentation that secular humanity can realize its spiritual and ethical potential. It can do so as well, and perhaps to a greater extent, in the care that one human being has for others, whether they are near and dear to one or they are strangers whose plight moves one to helpful action.

References
