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

Commentary on Paul L. Simard Smith's "Pluralism as a Bias Mitigation Strategy"

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Commentary on "Pluralism as a Bias Mitigation Strategy": Agnostic Pluralism and Agonistic Pluralism

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1. Introduction

Paul Simard Smith's paper is a neatly argued conceptual analysis of how two different approaches to inquiry—monism and agnostic pluralism—might be prone to a special type of bias, dialectical bias, in the course of argumentative discussion. The end result is what seems to be an empirically verifiable hypothesis: "an inquirer that possesses an agnostic pluralist stance towards a phenomenon X is less prone to dialectical bias than an inquirer that adopts a monist stance towards X" (p. 9). Is this hypothesis clear, well-justified, indeed important? This is what my comments will focus on.

A note: In my comments I will clearly be dialectically biased and thus direct more cognitive effort towards unclear or weak points of Paul's paper—without, I hope, undermining its merits.

2. Pluralism about bias

I will begin by presenting the simplest possible framework for analysing bias in (dialectical) argumentation (see *Figure 1*). There are three elements to it: 1) the *performance* of individual arguers, itself a combination of effort, attitude and skill (both acquired and inherited). The right management of cognitive effort, cultivation of critical attitudes and acquisition of relevant skills are the key domains of the critical thinking movement; 2) the *process* or *procedure* for argumentation; this is what the performance is employed *in*. Dialectically-oriented theories design and test procedures, while rhetorical approaches focus on processes; 3) the final *product* of argumentation; this is what the performance is employed *for*. Various logical approaches look carefully into that.

Clearly, like in any input-output system, everybody is right to care about the final output, the product. But how do we get there? Well, we need to perform some piece of reasoning; and, apart from the much-favoured but probably rare cases of purely individual reasoning, we do this reasoning with others through some kind of a process or procedure; that is, we perform argumentation. The product thus is a resultant of our performance within a procedure. Then, what is our focus? The former or the latter?

Well, we do not need to be monist about it. There are clearly individual biases, such as when someone knew all along it was going to happen (the hindsight bias). There are also procedural or even systemic biases, such as when a decision-procedure starts with an authoritative statement of an all-powerful boss, followed by his: "Any objections? Well, then, on to the next point." Both types of biases can be mitigated by either individual or procedural techniques—so we get four basic scenarios:

a) *individual bias – individual mitigation*: a racist committee member is advised to take a course on the terrors of White colonialism and the value of multi-culturalism;

b) *individual bias – procedural mitigation*: a racist committee member is part of an anonymous assessment of candidates' merits;

c) *procedural bias – individual mitigation*: the boss promises himself not to be so bossy in his opening statements, even if the rules require him to always give them. He works on it.

d) *procedural bias – procedural mitigation*: the company changes the procedure—the boss's statement only presents a problem without suggesting solutions; these are then anonymously collected and discussed freely without any member claiming authorship of the solution.

Figure 1: The simplest possible framework for analysing bias in (dialectical) argumentation

performance   process/procedure   product
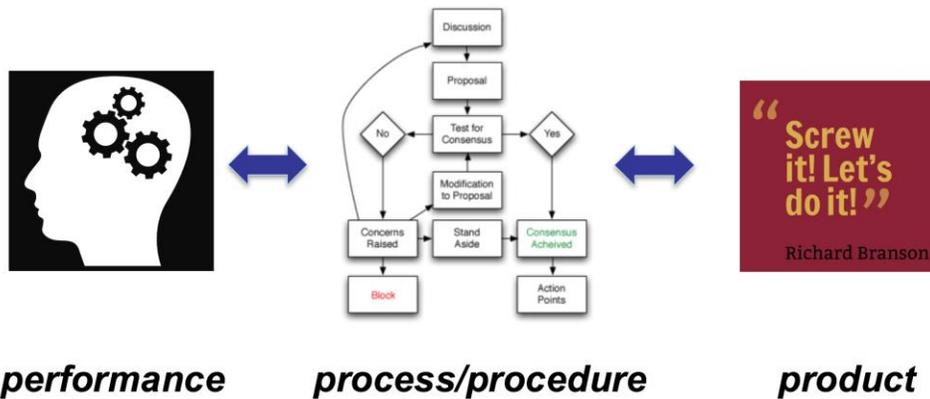
I think Paul's work falls squarely into the scenario c: the procedural, dialectical bias can be mitigated by a pluralist stance adopted by individual reasoners. I take it not to be a case of an undue limitation, but rather his deliberate focus. His starting point is the problem of a dialectical bias in the course of argumentative discussions, so obviously only scenarios c and d are relevant here. How about the solution? Paul is well aware—due to the work of Kenyon and Beaulac (2014), at least—that various levels of bias-mitigation can be employed, from the most individualistic (Kenyon & Beaulac's *level 1*) to most systemic or procedural (*level 4*). Since Kenyon and Beaulac (2014) are highly suspicious of the actual efficiency of level 1 de-biasing, they tend to orient "towards debiasing decisions, actions, and outcomes—including group outcomes—without specific reference to the dispositional properties of any particular agent" (p. 353). Accordingly, they focus on what they repeatedly call "bias-reducing infrastructure," "environment," "policies and organizational structures" or shortly "institutions." That is clearly our scenario d. To what extent is this form of mitigation compatible with Paul's scenario c mitigation? And how are they connected? Is the pluralist stance exclusively an attitudinal characteristic of an individual, or can it be enshrined in our procedures for argument-based inquiry?

These questions require some insight into "contextual engineering that effectively debiases" (Kenyon & Beaulac, 2014, p. 355). In the schema presented in *Figure 1*, it requires a

shift from arguers' performance to processes/procedures of argumentation or, in Paul's words, into "the context of an argumentative discussion."

3. Pluralism about argumentative discussion

I think the weakest point of Paul's paper is precisely the under-definition of the term *argumentative discussion*. And also a surprising point, given the precise definitions of the notions of *dialectical bias*, *dialectical obligation*, or *dialectical pressure*. But these terms are clearly related. Shortly, different types of argumentative discussion generate very different types of obligations, pressures and possibly biases. Examples are too many to even run through them in this short commentary. For instance: Is the arguer obliged to abandon her claim once strong counter-arguments are given, or can she revise it and still defend? Are commitments to given theoretical or empirical claims fixed, or can they be modified or retracted? Is contradiction a game over, or is it a stimulus for dissociation, more precision and further arguments? Walton and Krabbe (1995) formally define two "systems of dialogue rules"—*Rigorous Persuasion Dialogue* and *Permissive Persuasion Dialogue*—along the lines hinted above (Ch. 4). The strict obligations belong to the rules of the RPD, while the somewhat looser to the PPD. Both types of dialogue are perfectly legitimate members of the set of argumentative discussions, but they would generate very different pressures and obligations.

Indeed, some dialogue types seem to be conducive to cultivate the pluralist stance by design, so to speak. Blair (2016), for one, distinguishes open *inquiry*, where proposals are freely advanced and collaboratively discussed, from adversarial *advocacy*, where arguers are bound to defend their positions. Inquiry seems pluralistic, since arguers are not committed to the best option all along, but instead thoroughly explore the pros and cons of all of them in an open-minded spirit. By contrast, advocacy seems monistic, in that one arguer accepts from the beginning only one position and is committed to defend it, while attempting to rebut contrary or contradictory positions. I myself distinguished between *issue-based* and *role-based* dialectics (Lewiński, 2012). In the former, pro and con arguments are connected to the issues discussed, so that arguers do not own a given line of argumentation or a position, and thus do not incur obligations to defend and attack a consistent position. In the latter, arguers need to fulfil their roles of proponents or opponents by standing behind their positions and defending them through an adversarial, yet rule-governed, procedure.

In either approach, putting Paul's "inquirers" in the framework of adversarial argumentative discussion (see the very first sentence of his paper) is a category mistake.

Two upshots of this are: First, there is massive attention in argumentation theory to what procedures for argumentation do to arguments, including how they mitigate or aggravate biases. This work stretches from formal models (e.g., Walton & Krabbe, 1995, argumentation protocols in Artificial Intelligence), to general, "informal" theorising about argumentation designs. Sally Jackson (2015) has perspicuously analysed scientific method in terms of such designs. Here, again, the focus is not on the arguers' attitudes or predispositions, but rather on how the procedure disciplines argumentation to make the attitudes and predispositions less relevant than we might think they are.

> Scientific argumentation, for example, is not defined by vernacular argument forms with scientific statements as their premises, but by use of scientific designs for reasoning that may depend on instrumentation, experimentation, computation,

and other invented techniques that are really only intelligible to a community of similarly trained experts. (Jackson, 2015, p. 249)

The problem of bias and its mitigation is then shifted to the designs of discussions, not the designs of the discussants. Next to monists and pluralists there exist monist and pluralist procedures.

Second, Paul might be talking about a specific sub-class of argumentative discussions – exactly those which have an ingrained monist bias in themselves (basically, a strict excluded middle design). When faced with a contradiction in her argument, or some other knock-down argument of an opponent, as Paul rightly infers, an arguer needs to abandon or at least revise her position (and possibly accept the opponent's position), refute the criticism, or claim that she doesn't like the (monist) game. The problem is that this covers only part of the notion of what argumentative discussion is. Another problem is that it might even not be a problem at all.

4. Pluralism about monism

Paul states that the "[d]ialectical bias is primarily a problem in circumstances in which the bias is not warranted" (p. 2). The bias—a predisposition to give more consideration to and defend a statement, likely driven by the conviction it is true or correct—can be unproblematic in many typical cases. I have a very strong bias towards the claim that 2 x 2 = 4, a strong bias towards the claim that Windsor, ON, is about 370 km away from Toronto, and a solid bias towards the claim that the climate change is anthropogenic. I am surely ready to stand to defend any of these with what I—and millions others—find cogent arguments. So how do we know the bias is warranted or not? Only an answer to this question creates the boundary conditions for Paul's inquiry.

The standard distinction between the context of discovery and context of justification can take us some way.[1] (Both Lewiński (2012) and Blair (2016) mention it as possible analogons of their distinctions.) During the discovery phase, one indeed would need to "give […] equal consideration to theories vying for our endorsement" (p. 2). And let us be agnostic over whether this is an "epistemic virtue" as Paul wants is, or a somewhat cynical "hedging of bets about which approach will lead to the complete and comprehensive account that supposedly awaits discovery" (Kellert, Longino, & Waters, 2006, p. xii). Here, the agnostic pluralist stance is almost a definitional must. Then, the question arises: what happens *after* the discovery is satisfactorily advanced, even compete (given whatever disciplinary standards) and inquirers move to the context of justification? Their agnostic pluralism can turn into a warranted monism or direct pluralism. In both cases arguers are fully justified, indeed required!, to be dialectically biased towards the best corroborated theory. That's what they should be committed to and are paid for. In another scenario, the agnostic pluralism persists in the context of justification as some kind of a normative requirement on how to progress. And this seems to be only scenario Paul's arguments really apply to.

Further, in this last scenario, two variants can be distinguished: there are complex cases that simply evade any monistic closure, such as quantum mechanics (Kellert et al., 2006). And there are cases where some failure of scientific method during discovery occurred. A scientific group is so much invested into their theory (prestige, grants, nice tenure positions), that they

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[1] Of course, in Kuhnian philosophy of science this distinction is abandoned, for the well-known reasons of the paradigm-dependence of empirical inquiries. But so is the idea that epistemic virtues of pluralistic impartiality and open-mindedness are ever attainable, or even desirable.

dismiss some contradictory evidence and pigheadedly defend their turf. Here, their justification in the context of dialectical advocacy—contest among competing theories—would always be flawed in the ways Paul described. But is it really a problem? And for whom?

Consider here Grasso's (2016) response to Blair's distinction between conditions for (good) open-minded inquiry and (possibly bad) dialectically-biased advocacy. She claims that properly, "systematically" designed argumentative models of inquiry (discovery) and advocacy would yield "almost indistinguishable results": both "would require a comprehensive and exhaustive exploration of all possibilities: all options are considered in the discovery process, all voices are heard in the advocacy process" (Grasso, 2016, p. 71). Pluralism can thus be seen as a local feature of each arguer—or else a global feature of an argumentative situation. One virtuous pluralist can help us see the light—but so can a collection of warring monists. A pig-headed and arrogant monist is so at her own peril. An onlooker can in fact pluralistically benefit from a fight of monists. If so, this is a problem for the monist arguer, but likely not for the scientific enterprise; a negative result is a result!

Shortly, all things considered, agnostic pluralism may be co-extensive with agonistic pluralism.

5. Conclusion

Admittedly, it is next to impossible to make sweeping generalising claims here. (I tend to be agnostically pluralist about my conclusions on pluralism too.) Some forms of monist bias are simply unproductive, if not obnoxious:

> […] monism on the part of researchers, especially when motivated by commitment to their chosen theory or approach, fuels sterile and unproductive debates. Adopting a pluralist attitude encourages scientists to pursue interesting research without having to settle questions that cannot, in the end, be settled. (Kellert et al., 2006, p. xx)

By bringing up this issue, Paul very astutely points to the problem of what we do in argumentation theory, how we design techniques of individual bias-mitigation and models of argumentative debate which are not sterile and unproductive. I feel pretty monist about this being a crucial concern for all of us—not only because it interests me so much, but simply because it lets us better consider *how* we do argumentation theory.

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