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Commentary on “Where Is the Reasonable?”

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I remember hearing at an early OSSA a discussion of Barth & Krabbe’s *From Axiom to Dialogue*, perhaps by Professor Krabbe himself. The point, as I understand it, is that every stretch of reasoning that can be presented as a monological proof can instead be re-presented as a dialogue. To which someone—I think it was Tony Blair—replied: But why? That is, why bother? If the proof is the same, what is gained by extra effort of translation?

Lewiński is asking the same question, but without the tinge of scepticism. People reason practically—they make justified decisions about what to do. They can in fact do this better or worse. So as Aristotle would agree (*Rhet.* 1.1), we argumentation theorists should be able to say why, and furthermore to propose a “path” or *design* for practical reasoning that can improve the process. Should people adopt a monological model of solo reasoning? Or if a dialogue, what kind of dialogue?—cooperative inquiry, or adversarial advocacy?

The question of what process for practical reasoning we should adopt is itself a practical question. Lewiński is encouraging us to engage in practical reasoning about practical reasoning, to determine which of the available approaches is *better than* the others and thus the one that is reasonable to adopt, at least within some given circumstances.

I am of course happy to see Lewiński’s defense of an advocacy process. As I have argued elsewhere (Goodwin 2013), advocacy has long been central to argumentation theory in the tradition developed within communication departments in the U.S., in part because it is central to that tradition’s main practice: forensic debate. In this paper, Lewiński is doing the invaluable work of integrating advocacy into the dialogical tradition.

But instead of focusing this commentary on further praise of Lewiński, I want instead to make explicit a question his work is raising. We need to make practical decisions about the regulation of our reasoning processes. What kinds of considerations are relevant when doing this? What values, goals and circumstances are appropriate in choosing a reasoning process? In short, I think Lewiński’s work drives us to examine the meta-reasons which should play a role in our second-order practical reasoning about our practical reasoning.

One obvious goal of practical reasoning is to make good decisions. It could be that in designing an approach to practical reasoning, we should simply try to maximize such epistemic value. But Lewiński’s essay hints at two other clusters of meta-reasons that should play a role.

Meta-reasons in the first cluster arise from the constraints given in the circumstances of practical reasoning. To be feasible, a reasoning process has to be implementable by humans as currently constituted. For example, my decision about light bulbs must be made before I die; in fact, it should probably be made before I leave the store to go about other business. If when standing in front of the light bulb store display I engage in solo reasoning because I don’t have the time to assemble a team of collaborators or advocates, am I settling for something sub-par, or am I achieving a legitimate ideal under the circumstances? Lewiński brings up another example when

suggesting that timid arguers should choose collaborative inquiry. As work at this conference well documents, our cognitive processes are subject to systematic biases; to these can be added phenomena like groupthink—systematic social biases within small group interactions. If an epistemically ideal reasoning process is likely to be impossible because of these biases, should we feel that we're not reasoning well when we adopt an alternative approach. Or as a final example: Although many actual situations have multiple competing positions, it may be cognitively impossible for humans to keep track of arguments exchanged among five interacting positions in a polylogue. Lewiński himself breaks down the choices of practical reasoning process to a series of binaries (solo v. collective; within collective, inquiry v. advocacy). If a polylogic process is epistemically more accurate, are we justified—or merely excused—in selecting a more restricted process because we can't do better?

The first cluster of meta-reasons focuses on potential conflicts between the ideal of making the most epistemically sound practical decision and the constraints of ordinary circumstances. A second cluster of potential meta-reasons poses an even more significant threat to epistemic values, since they are based on alternative values that we may want to achieve in a situation. The presence of such alternative values seems most pressing when reasoning is carried out between people (i.e., not solo). Lewiński rightly cites to Craig and Tracy's work on situated ideals. In their view, communication is always dilemmatic; there are always multiple, irreconcilable values in play. In particular, they found in the reasoning-based discourse of academic discussion an enduring tension between pursuing ideas and respecting persons (Craig & Tracy 1995). Something like this tension turns up in practical reasoning situations as well.

At the micro-level, Michael Hoppmann reports elsewhere in this volume on possible conflicts between norms of politeness and norms of argumentation. Advocacy allows for open expression of disagreement, which can be perceived as an affront. Should a practical reasoning process be designed to maximize advocacy, or should advocacy be tempered with civility?

At the macro-level, norms of argumentation may run at cross-purposes with principles of justice. To run an epistemically good inquiry process, for example, it may be necessary to exclude all those so invested in their own positions as to be unable to contribute to the collective co-construction of practical reasoning. At the same time, it seems fundamentally unfair to exclude from the process the very people who are most concerned about it. As Lewiński mentions, feminist deliberation theorists have trenchantly argued that norms of objectivity and detachment systematically disprivilege outsider views perceived as “partisan” or “shrill.” Do epistemic values trump fairness in designing a practical reasoning process? Or should considerations of the legitimacy of a decision balance against considerations of a decision's epistemic soundness?

Lewiński mentions *Robert's Rules of Order*, another interesting case. Indeed, under one reading, *Robert's Rules* is a design for practical reasoning that aims to balance two competing demands for fairness—but pays almost no attention to epistemic values at all. On the one hand, the deliberative process instantiated in it respects the right of the majority to make a decision efficiently and move on to the more important business of actually carrying it out. On the other hand, that deliberative process also respects the right of the minority to have their views heard. But on no hand is there any mention of epistemic principles like the need to offer good evidence for a view. So should deliberating groups chuck *Robert's*, and adopt the rules of a critical discussion? Or does the durability of *Robert's* have something to teach us about the real values we aim to achieve through practical reasoning?

Are considerations of respect for persons relevant in designing a practical reasoning process? If so, then what we are saying is that fairness is intrinsic to practical reasoning: it is in

part constitutive of what practical reasoning *is*. Fairness is not just something added afterwards, to adapt the reasoning to some particular circumstances; a good reasoning process is good only because it is (among other things) fair.

In sum, I see Lewiński's work as implicitly opening the question: what do we need to consider in designing practical reasoning processes? What counts as a good meta-reason? And opening this question, I believe, faces us with a dilemma: If we exclude considerations of real-world constraints and potentially competing values, we can end up with an ideal model that has unattractive consequences and is not feasible to put into practice. Alternatively, in designing a practical reasoning process we can allow constraints and diverse values to play a role, but then we may find ourselves very far from the reasonableness we wanted to instantiate or actualize. Something's got to give. What?

References

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