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Reply to Macpherson’s Commentary on Santibanez’s “Strategically Wrong: Bias and Argumentation”

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First of all, I would like to thank Professor Macpherson for his lucid and motivating remarks. In what follows, I will limit myself to four critical observations raised by my commentator.

Macpherson highlights that: “Santibanez does not take the further step of saying this explicitly. At the same time, the language used by the author throughout the paper suggests that he may assent to the claim that such lies are morally wrong: For example, even when discussing more benign forms of deception such as deceiving oneself into believing that they are a very good professor or a soccer player’s deceiving their opponents about their intent, there is reference to ‘damage’ and to the ‘victim’ of the deception. The concepts of damage and victimization tend to be seen in a negative moral light.” My clarification of this would be: Technically, every time a deception reaches its goal, then there is damage. Certainly, there are many contexts where those damages are constitutive rules. This happens in any sport played with balls (tennis, soccer, basketball, etc.), this is to say, in order to proceed properly within the game, one is expected to behave deceptively. Not only is it accepted behaviour, but rather a behaviour needed to reach a high level of performance. Another context is when an agent deceives in order to defend himself from an aggressive environment or agents. This is also the case for animals, where deceptive behaviour is constitutive to their lives, and in violent contexts and situations among humans (the Nazi’s being the most extreme case). In the latter parameters, aggressiveness from both sides – one to attack, the other to defend – is part of deceptive behaviours which are not only accepted, but also expected (for sure, the Nazi’s army and intelligence forces took for granted that they would be misled by the people and countries they occupied who tried to avoid their actions). The communicative system in those contexts is so corrupted that any kind of behaviour of the family of generalized deception can be performed (lies, deceptions, self-deceptions, manipulations). The same goes for lying: in some games lies are constitutive rules (card games, board games in general); but also in interpersonal relationships where one of the agents is being abused, thus the only way to cope with it is by lying in many specific situations or contingencies.

My commentator also states: “A further implication of the model that Santibanez appears to reject but that Kurzban (2012) accepts is that agents use whatever module is most advantageous in the context and that this is simply the way we are set up by nature via the mechanism of evolution.” I do not reject Kurzban’s proposal, if this was the impression, I would like to add here that I accept Kurzban’s angle with conditions or specifications. There are many automatic behaviours that are commanded by System 1 of the mind, whose results are not only correct but necessary in daily life. The difficult problem is when the agent confronts scenarios that demand further reflexive effort. In these latter cases, the modularity model should not
prevail straightforwardly in the analysis, because social and cultural parameters must also be incorporated to understand why some behaviours or beliefs are automatically accepted to be correct.

The third critical remark of Professor Macpherson is the following: “As noted above, Santibanez cites manipulative lying as being a potentially undesirable type of lying given that the recipients can suffer ongoing harm. I do not disagree with this claim, putting aside the issue of modularity, although what I disagree with is Santibanez’s further claim that the aim of argumentation theory with respect to manipulative lying “would be to have the liar justify himself and, for this reason, make a fool of himself.” (Santibanez, 2016, p. 23). My point here is that advancing constant critical doubts towards the manipulative behaviour of an agent will increase the chances of observing the hidden intentions of the agent, making his justifications more complex and unrealistic, such as the two examples given in my paper show clearly.

Professor Macpherson goes into conclude that: “… I have argued that there is reason to believe that the modularity thesis, or some version of it, is true. This is based on empirical studies. Then the whole notion of self-deceit, deceit of others and lying has to be either dropped or re-worked to cohere with the modularity thesis.” Certainly, the whole family of deceptive behaviours must be carefully studied, but modularity theory is not the only theory to be considered to achieve good results, but rather a broader theory in which the effects of all kinds of deception are taken into account. Manipulations, for example, are not to be explained only from the point of view of the producer, but on the contrary, mainly from the point of view of the receiver. Otherwise, if its effects are not considered, we will have an incomplete theory of generalized deception, such as my schema of manipulation tried to show.

I would like to thank Professor Macpherson for his detailed extended bibliography used to criticise my paper, which gives me the opportunity to improve my ideas and learn more about a real problem that argumentation theory should confront in order to be closer to daily argumentative practices.