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Commentary on Lucy Alsip Vollbrecht's "Epistemic Success and Skeptical Norms in Argumentation"

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I am in the rather awkward position of being neither particularly skeptical nor even modestly adversarial regarding Lucy Vollbrecht's nuanced discussion of how the adversariality and skepticism with which we routinely approach argumentation interact. I am, however, still subject to the norms of argumentation conferences, if not argumentation itself, so let me enter the argument not as an opponent or proponent but in the role of a *critic*. I take the critic's role to be evaluative and in some sense a bit removed from the argument, rather than involved and partisan. Critics cannot completely be on the sidelines, however, because they do need to engage with the argument. They are in a privileged position that allows them to critique an argument both positively and negatively without thereby becoming advocates for or adversaries of any of the other parties. They may adopt the default skeptical stance but they are also free to eschew the hermeneutics of suspicion as an obstacle to understanding or appreciating an argument. They are in a better position to critique an argument than the opponent or target audience precisely because their evaluative critiques do not have to be negative criticisms. They can also offer positive constructive praise. For example, they can offer suggestions for improving an argument in a way that is off-limits to opponents because of strategic considerations.

Consider this example:

Mathematician 1: I have at long last found a proof for Merfat's Lost Theorem! Here it is.
Take a look.

Mathematician 2: Hmm. On the second page, was your reference to Wanda Riley's lemma her first or second one?

Mathematician 1: The first, obviously.

Mathematician 2: I thought so, but just checking. In that case the assumptions are all in order and the logic checks out, so congratulations – well done! I'm convinced, but now that I see your path to the conclusion, I see an even better line of reasoning that would make it less complex and more elegant, as well as more general. What do you think?

Mathematician 1: Yes, I can see that you're right. That does make it better.

One can imagine backstories for this exchange in which the second mathematician has been a regular sounding board for the first one, or perhaps more of a sparring partner who has vetted earlier versions of the theorem, or a rival mathematician who would relish finding a flaw in the reasoning. Each of those cases would involve its own kind of skepticism and adversariality, but let us suppose that this is a once-off encounter and focus on just this exchange to ask four questions: (i) Is there an actual *argument*, or is this just about logical inferences? (ii) Is there a

critical exchange? (iii) Does either party take a skeptical stance during the argument? and (iv) Is there any adversariality between them?

I think it would be hard to deny that this is an argument. In addition to the formal logic connecting premises to the conclusion, reasons were *given* with the intent to convince someone else, who was indeed persuaded. The perspective from rhetoric dovetails the logical one: there was an argument – in fact, a *successful* argument. The next question gets the same answer: the second mathematician evaluated the argument, raised a question, offered an evaluation, and made a recommendation; her comments were cogent and immediately adopted, with the result that the original argument was strengthened – so there was a second persuasive argument as part of a very successful critique! Put another way, we have, in sum, an illative core, a rhetorical performance, and a dialectical tier.

In contrast, it is not at all obvious that we have either adversariality or skepticism, so the third and fourth questions are harder to plumb. However, we do have very good resources at hand, beginning with Govier's initial discussion of minimal adversariality, Rooney's distinction between adversariality and its manifestation in argument as a default skeptical stance, and Vollbrecht's own discussion disentangling their effects.

As a start, we should note that while neither mathematician counts as a skeptic, and they need not be adversaries in any sense, actual skepticism is not necessary for the default skeptical stance, just as real adversaries are not necessary for minimal adversariality. In Katharina Stevens' terms, what is needed are participants in an argument who can fill an adversarial *role*. This is distinct from having an adversarial attitude, from taking an adversarial stance, and, perforce, from *being* an adversary. The problem with adversariality is that even in its minimal form, it has the potential – and tendency – to spiral out of control into an adversarial attitude, turning opponents into enemies. In contrast, sparring partners manage to provide the needed minimal adversariality from an adversarial stance but without the adversarial attitude. Better still, sounding boards serve the same function but without even adopting the stance.¹ In the example at hand, the second mathematician might already agree with the thesis and be quite positively pre-disposed to the proof because she hopes that it works and she has faith in the mathematical abilities of her fellow mathematician. No skepticism there. Still, we are tempted to say that insofar as she serves in the critic's role, something like a skeptical distance must be in effect. I think that temptation arises, at least in part, from a feature of Govier's model. In the move from steps (3) and (4), "I think not-X is incorrect and those who hold it are wrong," to step (5), "Should I need to argue for X, I will thereby be arguing against not-X," we seem to have lost sight of the possibility of arguing for X with people who simply do not hold X, rather than who do hold not-X. The former may be skeptical while the latter are the ones who provide the resistance that looks more adversarial. But we have left out an important group of potential arguers: people who agree with the proponent and *do* hold X. They, too, can be participants in argument. You might ask whether it really counts as an argument when you argue with others about something with which they already agree. Isn't that just a discussion? Not necessarily because they might subscribe to the thesis in question only weakly, too passively, for different reasons, or even hold the target belief for no reasons at all. Consider the argument when the second mathematician critically responds to the first. At that point, both mathematicians accepted the conclusion, but they did so for different reasons. Even so, there was still room for giving and

¹ Stevens and Cohen, 2020

hearing reasons, there was an invitation for questions and objections, and in the end, there was rational persuasion.

With this example in mind, then, let us return to Vollbrecht's analysis of the Penaluna-Leiter train-wreck of an argument. She focuses on Leiter's failure to represent Penluna's position fairly. For this discussion, I am not interested in whether that failure was due to an egregious Straw Man by willful distortion, an excessively uncharitable interpretation, or epistemic blind-spots and an utter inability to understand adequately. What I am interested in is Vollbrecht's take on the skeptical stance. She writes,

[S]trawmanning is not an instance of the skeptical stance, but, an abuse of it... The proper skeptical method relies on taking up the with the best version of an interlocutor's argument, such as to provide the best critique thereof. (p. 5-6)

This is both surprising and insightful. It is surprising to conclude that a skeptical stance implies great charity. Isn't skepticism supposed to provide pushback on knowledge claims, the resistance that puts a brake on runaway speculation? The skeptical stance in argumentation is the insistent demand for reasons, backing, and warrants; it should not have to provide them for the proponent. The skeptical stance is a heuristic for finding flaws and weaknesses in an argument, areas that need strengthening, but fixing those flaws and strengthening those weak points are not up to the skeptic; that's the job of the proponent. And yet directing the skeptical interlocutor to address "the best version of the interlocutor's argument" apparently requires her to take on some of that load. After all, how often does the argument you actually present turn out to be its *very best version*? The "proper" skeptical opponent Vollbrecht describes turns out to be something of an ideal interlocutor – viz., an interlocutor who is ideal *for the proponent*. Without implying that we would ever need one, I feel comfortable saying that Vollbrecht's proper skeptic is definitely NOT someone that any of us would want as our defense attorney.

The insight here is that whether we call it the adversarial role or the default skeptical stance, it can be instrumental in enhancing the quality of argumentation, and that is something for which everyone in the argument shares some of the responsibility. Put another way, we can say that the problem with the dominant adversarial model, the "DAM" account,² is that it deters that kind of cooperation at every step of the way: it makes it harder even just to recognize or acknowledge that responsibility, it disincentivizes cooperation, and both disadvantages and devalues arguers who do.³ On the DAM account, not only is it ill-advised from a strategic point of view to point out better lines of thought, provide new, helpful data, or fix flawed arguments, it would be aiding and abetting the enemy. And more than argumentative injustice, it would be argumentative treason!

So, like Ms. Vollbrecht, I think it is adversariality, in many of its incarnations, rather than skepticism as a default that bears more of the culpability for the Penaluna-Leiter snafu (with an emphasis, frustrated and resigned though it may be, on the normality of this sort of snafu in philosophy).

How can there be any room in an argument for an arguer to offer the kind of helpful-to-her-proponent critique that enhances the argumentation even though it may undermine her own position? While that might be an acceptable expectation for arguers in, say, inquiry or discovery

² See Cohen 2015, Bailin and Battersby 2017, and Stevens and Cohen 2018.

³ This does not apply to the fallacious kinds of iron-manning identified in Aikin and Casey 2015 which, despite being fallacious, can be strategically and rhetorically effective.

dialogues, it would not be for arguers in persuasion, eristic, or deliberation dialogues. For such arguers, it would be *supererogatory*. So then, is it something available only to neutral critics who stand outside the argument? We could go either way on this. We could restrict it to critics *but count critics among the arguers participants*. Alternatively, we could find room for it in argument *but at the expense of adversariality*, so that any arguer making such a move would be stepping outside her arguer's role to adopt the critic's role. The difference is largely terminological since we routinely move in and out of different roles in arguments anyway: sometimes we act as proponents by offering reasons, other times we respond to criticism and go on defense, etc. It seems arbitrary to say that arguers can act as critics while insisting that critics making exact the same moves are not really arguers in the argument. It is merely a terminological difference, akin to the difference between the default skeptical stance and the adversarial stance. When I am asked, then, whether I am an adversarialist or non-adversarialist, the suitably skeptical answer is, *Yes, I suppose I might be*.

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