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Commentary on Christoph Lumer, “A Theory of Philosophical Arguments”

In this paper, Lumer offers a comprehensive theory of philosophical argument types. His main target is a theory of philosophical arguments rather than philosophical theories,¹ but he also rightly notes that philosophical theories and philosophical arguments cannot be neatly pulled apart. After all, philosophers offer arguments for their theories, and without the arguments, the theories are hardly philosophical.

I won't summarize the paper here, nor will I describe the many parts of the paper that I found useful and instructive. Instead I will jump into four points about the view Lumer develops that I thought bear further discussion. The first has to do with ontic-practical arguments; the second is about the problem of the criterion; the third is about the role of intuitions in philosophy; and the fourth is about the status of bad philosophical arguments, or philosophical arguments that don't fit into the ideal argument types that Lumer articulates.

1. Pascalian arguments

The first point I want to make is about Pascalian ontic-practical arguments. Lumer writes:

“More promising transcendental justifications are *practical* justifications in the style of Pascal's wager, which try to show: Despite the absence of any empirical proof of the existence of these hypothetical parts or structures of reality, it is better to behave as if they existed.” (p.9)

And,

“The best known [example of an ontic-practical, transcendental argument] is Kant's analytical-synthetic approach, about which I already said above that it cannot be successful. Pascal's wager – i.e. the justification of the thesis that it is practically better to behave as if the transcendental thesis were true – on the other hand introduces a type of argumentation that could well be successful and represents a compromise: On the one hand, it leaves the actual transcendental question – 'does this (structure of) reality exist?' – unanswered; there is simply no empirical basis for answering it. ... On the other hand, it shows that our behaviour of simply assuming that these questions are answered in a certain sense is quite rational: it is *practically* rational; and this is shown with practical arguments.” (p.13)

Pascal's own argument, however, did not only aim to show that it is better to act as if the relevant structure of reality exists (that is, to act as if God exists and there is an immortal soul and so on). Pascal aimed to show that it is better to *believe* that God exists.² Pascal's goal

¹ Though sometimes Lumer seems to have in mind philosophical theories in general, e.g. p.6.

² See Pascal, *Pensées*. Much of the passage is ambiguous on the question of whether Pascal is recommending *belief* in God or merely *behaving* as if God exists. But p.68 clarifies that it is belief that is recommended, for in response to the complaint that we can't just bring ourselves to believe in response to the wager, Pascal responds that if we engage

was to give what are nowadays sometimes called “state-given” reasons for belief. He argued that the expected value of believing in God’s existence is infinitely better than the expected value of not believing in God’s existence.³

Pascal was also, however, not a doxastic voluntarist: he did not think that belief is subject to the will, in the sense of responding to practical or state-given reasons for belief. So recognizing that it’s practically better to believe than not to believe in God’s existence isn’t the kind of thing that can bring a person to form the target belief. This is where the “behaving as if the relevant thesis were true” comes in: Pascal claims that it’s better to believe that God exists, and the way to cultivate that belief is to listen to religious sermons, cultivate relationships with people who believe it, and generally to behave as though God exists. Eventually, one would feel it easier to come to believe that God exists. That’s the point of Pascal’s argument: we shouldn’t just behave as if God exists; we need to cultivate the belief itself.

Further on, Lumer writes:

“Pascal arguments (Lumer 1997) are practical arguments for theoretical theses. They are arguments for a value judgment of the kind that it is optimal to behave as if a certain thesis p were true. They presuppose that no theoretical information about p is available, so that no probability can be established.”

Above I have suggested that some Pascal arguments, including Pascal’s own argument, are not only arguments for behaving as if a certain thesis p were true; they are arguments for having the belief that p .

But a further point about such arguments is that I’m not sure that they presuppose that no theoretical information about p is available. Here’s an example:

Sam’s daughter, Wendy, has been selected for an important but dangerous mission to the bottom of the sea. A deep-sea craft has been built for the purpose, and it has been constructed as well as humanly possible. The experts expect that Wendy’s mission has a good chance of success, but the crushing pressure of the deep sea being what it is, there is only a 40% chance that the craft will survive. So, Sam has information available that supports an assignment of .4 probability to the proposition that Wendy will survive the mission.

After Wendy sets out on the mission, Sam finds the possibility of Wendy’s dying extremely distressing. In order to avoid that emotional distress, Sam holds firm to his belief that Wendy is alive and will return safe and sound.

In this example, Sam’s thinking can be viewed in Pascalian terms. The proposition in question is that Wendy is alive and will return safe and sound. Sam counts belief in that proposition as extremely (though not infinitely) valuable, and he counts it extremely

in certain behaviours to appease our feelings / passions, we will find it gradually easier to come to believe. Having the target belief is the ultimate goal.

³ The argument is that the state of belief in the existence of God is better than the state of not believing in the existence of God. That’s why this is a state-given reason: it has to do with the value of the state itself. State-given reasons contrast with object-given reasons, which are provided by the properties of the object that the belief is about. The object of belief is a proposition, and an object-given reason for belief would be that one possesses good evidence indicating that the proposition is true.

disvaluable to disbelieve or to withhold judgment on that proposition. He therefore goes ahead and continues believing it. Moreover, we can view this as an ontic-practical argument, because Sam is holding a belief about the existence of an entity or structure in reality (namely, Wendy's remaining alive), and the argument is based on the value of having the target belief.

Now, one might doubt that Sam's decision to believe something which his evidence only supports with a .4 probability is really rational. But that's beside the point here. What matters is that (1) Sam doesn't hold his belief in the absence of theoretical information, and (2) his belief and reason for holding it is relevantly like Pascal's argument. It's not based on the possible gain or loss of infinite happiness, but it is based on the value associated with the states of believing or disbelieving / suspending judgment regarding the target proposition.

Perhaps Lumer's formulation of Pascalian arguments in terms of behaviour rather than belief, and in terms of a lack of theoretical information bearing on the proposition, is the result of a judgment about the quality of Pascalian arguments. That is, perhaps Lumer's view is that only Pascalian arguments formulated in these terms can ever rationally support their conclusions, and so, in line with the idealizing-hermeneutic project here, he excludes other Pascalian arguments from the idealized category of philosophical argument. But I still wonder whether Pascalian arguments formulated in terms of belief, and formulated in the presence of some theoretical information bearing on the target proposition, might ever be good arguments.

2. The problem of the criterion

A basic methodological problem we face any time we want to give a general characterization of a category or concept is the problem of the criterion (POC). The POC rears its head when it comes to defining fundamental concepts such as knowledge, and importantly for the purpose of this paper, such as philosophy itself. In this paper, Lumer gives us a definition of philosophical argument, which is close to a definition of philosophy itself.

The problem of the criterion is the problem of determining in a non-question-begging way the basis on which we will give our definition. In the case of the definition of knowledge, Chisholm puts the point this way. What we want is an answer to two sets of questions:

A) "*What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?*"

B) "*How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?*"
(1982, pp.65-6, italics in original)

We want to know how to define the concept of knowledge, and we can do so either (i) by identifying cases of knowledge and cases of non-knowledge, then identifying the distinctive features of each kind of case, and extrapolating a definition, or (ii) by providing a criterion that will help us decide what counts as knowledge in the first place, and then using that criterion to identify that various genuine items of knowledge. However, if we proceed as in (i), and identify the cases of knowledge first, then we appear to be presupposing some criteria that allow us to correctly distinguish the cases of knowledge and non-knowledge. (Lumer also offers further criticisms of the bottom-up approach in defining philosophical argument on p.4) But we also cannot proceed as in (ii) without presupposing an answer to the question of which of the particular cases are cases of knowledge. (Chisholm calls method (i) "particularism" and method (ii) "methodism". These are analogous to what Lumer calls "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches in giving an account of philosophy / philosophical

argument.) If these are the only options, then it's hard to see how there might be a non-question-begging way to define concepts like these.

Note that the POC is a problem only at the meta-level. The POC doesn't threaten our *knowledge* by and large; it only threatens to make it impossible to do meta-epistemology—to *gain knowledge of what knowledge itself is*. Similarly, the POC doesn't threaten our capacity to engage in *philosophical inquiry and argument*; it only threatens to make it impossible to do meta-philosophy—to *gain knowledge of what philosophical argument is*.

I bring all of this up because Lumer offers us a response to the POC that aims to avoid both the particularist (bottom-up) and the methodist (top-down) approach. Lumer's approach is idealizing-hermeneutic. Briefly, Lumer proceeds to define philosophy (/ philosophical argument) by identifying a broad range of arguments that have been called philosophical, and then, in light of the types of premises used, the argumentative structures employed, the types of conclusions argued for, and the goals philosophers have in mind when they give these arguments, Lumer brings together these various arguments into several categories, and he offers recommendations about which arguments are capable of achieving philosophers' reasonable goals when they use such arguments. So Lumer's approach is not merely descriptive; it is also prescriptive. It describes various arguments that have been traditionally called philosophical, but it also makes judgments about which of these arguments can constitute *good* philosophical argument, arguments that are appropriate for achieving the reasonable purposes for which the arguments are given.

Bondy and Olson (2015) also offered a strategy for avoiding the POC in the context of the definition of knowledge. They proposed that we begin defining knowledge, not by identifying the various things that we know to be knowledge, and not by providing a criterion for determining what really is knowledge, but instead by identifying which cases people are intuitively inclined to *call* knowledge. Then the proposal was to identify features common to, and distinctive of, those cases. The idea is that this way, we can get at the content of the concept of knowledge, without presupposing that there are any particular cases of it, and without first offering a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.

What Bondy and Olson's proposal did not include was a reference to the goals in light of which attributions of knowledge are made, or the purpose for which people would have a concept of knowledge. That practical twist in the approach to analyzing knowledge—and philosophy—strikes me as both potentially useful, and (perhaps) potentially problematic.

The practical, goal-oriented twist seems useful, because the goals that people have, and the function that a concept of knowledge might serve, seem like they might help us to identify what are the salient and what are the uninteresting or accidental features common to the cases of knowledge. And they might help us to cull the mistaken or degenerate cases of knowledge-attribution from our pool of cases of knowledge.

It seems potentially problematic, however, insofar as I'm unsure that an analysis of knowledge must really end up serving the goals that philosophers, and people generally, have when they use the concept of "knowledge." For instance, some epistemologists nowadays think that knowledge isn't really all that important; instead, what we really care about is understanding (e.g., Kvanvig 2003). We've just historically failed to untangle knowledge and understanding, and we've historically thought that knowledge would be easy to define and identify, and so we've failed to recognize that knowledge isn't all that important.

Similarly, in the context of a theory of philosophical argument, if we're going to use the goals that philosophers have when they argue, or at least the goals that seem reasonable for philosophers to have when they argue, to help us organize our account of philosophical argument, and to help us in deciding which argument types to count as philosophical, I'm unsure about whether we're excluding some argument types that should count as philosophical. I'll come back to this in section 4.

3. The status of intuitions in philosophy

Another remark I want to make is about the status of intuitions in philosophy. Lumer argues that intuitions do not have a place in a good theory of philosophical argument.

Perhaps this is where the distinction between a theory of philosophical *theory* and a theory of philosophical *argument* turns out to be particularly important. For arguably, intuitions have a crucial place in philosophical theory: intuitions are the starting-points for all of our theorizing. But intuitions might have a comparatively smaller role to play in (interpersonal) philosophical argument.

When I say "intuition" I don't quite mean any of the three things that Lumer includes under that heading, but it is closest to his sense (2), "Intuitions as unfounded opinions of the respective author." As I understand them, intuitions, or "seemings," have a certain phenomenal character that is hard to describe but that everyone is presumably familiar with. (Stephen Colbert has coined the term "truthy" to name this feeling.) Intuitions come in experiential and intellectual varieties: I have the experiential intuition that I have a fresh scratch on my hand as I look down at my hand; I have the intellectual intuition that subjects in Gettier cases lack knowledge. These intuitions / seemings are not always supported by explicitly formulated discursive reasons, so in that sense they are or at least can be unsupported. But intuitions are susceptible to being supported by further reasoning, without losing their status as intuitions. For example: it intuitively seems to me that Modus Tollens is a good inference form, and I'm sure it seemed that way to me even before I ever took a course in formal logic and learned to prove Modus Tollens from other even more obvious rules. Now I know how to prove the classical validity of Modus Tollens on the basis of Modus Ponens and Reductio ad Absurdum. But independently of that, it still also just seems to me that Modus Tollens is a good argument form. So that looks like an example of an intuition that is also independently supported. So I would say instead of *unfounded opinions*, intuitions are "truthy" feelings toward propositions. And one can at the same time have an intuition that p , and believe p , and possess good reasons in support of p .⁴

My point here is not to try to press a particular account of the nature of intuitions. (I don't know that I'd be up to that task even if there were space here to do it.) My point is just to give an idea of what I mean by the term, and to suggest that intuitions in this sense have a crucial role to play in some central philosophical views. For example, foundationalist epistemological theories often make use of them, as the ground level upon which all the rest of the structure of a person's justified beliefs is built up. Phenomenal appearances generate intuitions about the world around us; intellectual intuitions generate basic principles about

⁴ Intuitions needn't even be always opinions; we can have feelings of truth toward propositions we know to be false, in which case we won't believe a proposition that still has a strong intuitive pull for us. See Pust's entry "Intuitions" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, especially sections 1 and 2, for useful discussion of various accounts of intuition.

genuine support-relations. And many paradigmatic philosophical theories are based on intuitive verdicts regarding thought experiments (as Lumer notes). Gettier cases, for example, generate the widespread and typically firmly held intuition that subjects lack knowledge in those cases. That intuition is a datum that has generated a very large literature that aims to accommodate it.⁵

One important point about intuitions in (moderate) foundationalist epistemological theories is that intuitions are typically viewed as at least to some extent justified. Intuitions are not *always* justified; their justification is defeasible. Someone who has grown up in a racist household, for example, might have the intuition that she is racially superior to other people. Although intuitions typically are justified, the intuitive justification of this belief will normally be defeated by other evidence she possesses. And so I don't think we really need to worry about intuitions being unsupported, or unrevisable, or non-cognitive.

On the other hand, Lumer's worry about the variability of intuitions across different subjects, and within subjects but across different ways of framing the same information, strike me as particularly important for philosophers to address. Still, in constructing philosophical theories, intuitions often play a very central role, and in the end I don't see how we can do without them. But perhaps that's because I have in mind a slightly different conception of intuitions than those that Lumer has in mind.

4. The status of bad philosophical arguments / other philosophical arguments

A final question I have, which each of the previous sections has led up to, is about the status of arguments that we would normally call philosophical arguments, but that do not fit well into any of Lumer's four types of philosophical argument. For example, Kant's transcendental arguments have an ontic purpose – they aim to show that certain cognitive⁶ and worldly⁷ structures must be real, as a necessary condition for the possibility of the kind of experience that we have. But they are not empirical arguments, so they do not fit into the “descriptive-nomological” theories. And they are not practical, so they do not fit into the “ontic-practical” theories. Similarly, we might ask about Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. I don't see how it could fit into any of the four argument types discussed in the paper, for the same reasons as in the case of Kant's transcendental arguments. Or again, think of Pascal's argument for belief in God's existence, as I've suggested it's formulated (in terms of belief rather than behaviour). That almost fits, but doesn't quite fit, the “ontic-practical” category of arguments set out here.

So I wanted to ask about the status of arguments like these. There are several options. (i) We could count them straightforwardly as philosophical arguments, but bad ones (assuming they are bad). Or (ii) we could count them as degenerate cases of philosophical arguments, on the assumption that they cannot satisfy the conditions for good philosophical arguments of the four ideal types identified here. Or (iii) we could count them as not philosophical arguments at all.

⁵ Another example, which Lumer discusses, is Rawlsian reflective-equilibrium: this strategy takes all of our intuitive judgments about particular matters of fact (or particular moral judgments) and our intuitive judgments about correct general principles, and aims to revise our intuitive judgments in ways designed to achieve coherence among our intuitive judgments.

⁶ i.e., the spatial and temporal aspects of intuition, and the categories of the understanding.

⁷ i.e., the phenomenal external world, which for Kant is constituted by intuition; and the noumenal world, about which we can know nothing, except that it must exist as a condition of our having intuitions.

Option (iii) strikes me as excessively revisionary. Option (i) seems the most plausible, but I'm not sure that it is in line with Lumer's idealizing-hermeneutic project in this paper. Option (ii), of counting these other arguments as degenerate cases of philosophical argument, seems the most likely. Then we would model these arguments as aiming at the ideal of philosophical argument, but for one reason or another we would hold them to be constitutively unable to achieve that ideal.

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