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Commentary on Danblon

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In Response To: Emmanuelle Danblon's *Justification, commonplaces and evidence*

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Someone might argue that non-demonstrative forms of reasoning face a dilemma of justification. Unlike Hume's problem of induction, this is a true dilemma. The dilemma arises from a fairly standard characterization of non-demonstrative reasoning, which goes like this:

Following Aristotle, we can say for any non-demonstrative argument, since the conclusion outstrips the evidence offered for its truth in the premises, that what warrants the acceptability of the conclusion is an unstated or implicit principle, commonplace, undisputed claim or topos. Ex hypothesi, topoi are not analytically or universally true propositions (i.e., if they were, then the reasoning they justify would be demonstrative). And though topoi are conventionally undisputable, they (must) remain falsifiable, at least in principle. Yet, taken together, these epistemological characteristics of topoi require arguers to perform a nuanced, and fragile balancing act: perhaps no sensible person would doubt a topos (we might think she was mad to do so, or merely a philosopher trying to make a point); but nonetheless, a rational person must be able to entertain the possibility that the topos was dead wrong, and conventional wisdom misleads us horribly.

Like many recent writings on argumentation, Danblon addresses this feature of non-demonstrative reasoning by moving into the realm of rhetoric. As a speech act, we might say, the illocutionary force of all argumentation is to persuade or convince an audience. Thus the level of persuasiveness of non-demonstrative reasoning is, in part, a function of the acceptability of the topoi that are elicited.

Now, Danblon notes that in many instances the topoi of a non-demonstrative argument is an ethical value, one for which, following Aristotle, it is safe to presume the community of which one's audience is a part accepts without dispute. Hence, "we may think that the consensual adherence of a community to its most important values plays the role of the transcendental (universal and natural) grounding of those values."

So far so good. But herein lies a danger. The more obvious and unquestioned the statement of value, the more formal, and vacuous, the claim. As Danblon perceptively remarks, "the last shade of meaning that will remain stable...will be some kind of positive connotation", as one finds in the grand notions of 'freedom', 'equality' and 'dignity' as these occur in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But possessing merely a vague but positive connotation, these notions lack the necessary moral content to do the work of providing warrant for our arguments.

Danblon's response to this worry is to insist that it is vital to ensure that our conventional values do not slip into vacuity in this way, and offers the

Perelmanian technique of 'dissociation of notions', applied to arguments made by Peter Singer, to show one way in which this can be prevented. In effect, the technique works to disambiguate terms – in this instance, 'human person' – which are vulnerable to over-determined meaning and vacuity.

I have no qualms about the Perelmanian technique, nor Danblon's use of it, nor even Danblon's characterization of how the rooting out of ambiguities in topoi do not falsify them, but rather make them more useful and applicable by more precisely identifying the context in which they are relevant. My concern lies elsewhere, namely with the dilemma that I promised at the outset to describe. The problem is that Danblon considers only one horn of the dilemma and there are, as is usual for dilemmas, two horns.

The dilemma is this. To be sure, the more obvious and unquestioned the statement of value, the more formal and vacuous, the topos that embodies that value becomes. But, on the other hand, the more precise and unambiguous the statement of value becomes, the less obvious it is and the more it will be open to question. Herein lies the dilemma for non-demonstrative reasoning: this kind of reasoning is more easily justifiable when its implicit justifying principle is vacuous; but when that principle is not vacuous, and so is more contentious, then the argument is less justifiable. Let me be a bit more concrete.

Some statements of value are readily accepted because, being so general and vacuous, there is almost nothing to disagree with. Joel Feinberg has called these 'manifesto value statements', statements such as 'Justice is good'; 'Humans should be treated with dignity", "Health is a good thing". These statements are so multiply ambiguous and vague that conventional acceptance may well be a matter of agreement by misunderstanding: people may be assenting to wildly different interpretations of the same claim, not realizing that that their agreement is created by ambiguity rather than consensus. For example, any statement of political value involving the notion of 'equality' can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on whether one views political equality as a matter of equal status, equal respect, equal access to opportunities, equal access to resources, or equal division of resources. Danblon's example of 'human person' is, though far less ambiguous, another example.

Yet, if one was to carefully disambiguate what one means by 'equality', then conventional agreement would be far less likely. Imagine an argument with the implicit value statement "All people should be equal in the sense of having exactly the same yearly income'. An argument based on this statement of value would likely be far less persuasive and justifiable.

This suggests that, however helpful the argumentative technique of dissociation of notions may be – and there is no doubt that it has its salient argumentative uses – its application need not resolve the full dilemma facing non-demonstrative reasoning. For the less ambiguous our topoi become, the less likely they will be conventionally acceptable or beyond dispute. Could there be other techniques that move in the other direction, that seek out a

higher level of conventional agreement by generalizing and, indeed, making more ambiguous, the statement of value that lies behind an argument?

For my part, I feel that the dilemma of non-demonstrative reasoning is not so much a problem as a shorthand way of describing the strength, versatility and useability of non-demonstrative forms of reasoning. Being context-dependent, non-demonstrative reasoning has a more direct application to the situations in which most of us carry on our rational lives most of the time. As it happens, I also believe that a parallel dilemma is applicable to deductive reasoning as well, and that demonstrability is not such a virtue after all.

But, in any event, Danblon has done argumentative theory a service by showing how it is possible to deal with, at least one half, of the dilemma for non-demonstrative reasoning.