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Commentary on Siegel

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"Argument Quality and Cultural Difference" is Harvey Siegel's latest sally in his longstanding campaign against epistemic relativism (see Siegel 1987). This time Siegel is intent to guard against inroads by relativism from the direction of multi-culturalism and various kinds of postmodern critique of communal or objective norms of argumentation. Specifically, he argues that the epistemic goodness of arguments is independent of cultural differences among arguers. I will call this position Siegel's "Independence Thesis." He formulates the Independence Thesis—that is, he expresses his position about the independence of argument normativity—in various ways, which I draw together as follows:

Independence Thesis (IT)

What makes an argument a good argument epistemically—good in the sense that its premises "provide reasons for embracing its conclusion," "justify the conclusion," or "render[...] it worthy of belief"—is a "quality that is a feature of the argument itself, rather than of the person(s) assessing its quality," a feature that is "independent of the cultural locations and perspectives of its evaluators" and in that sense [epistemic] argument normativity is "impersonal" and "transcultural."

Siegel adds: "The premises of the argument provide whatever support for its conclusion they do . . . whoever is conducting the evaluation, in whatever cultural context."

(By the way, although he writes that "[a]rgument normativity is a variety of epistemic normativity," thus apparently denying that there are other modalities of argument normativity, such as the rhetorical or the pragmatic, my guess is that's a slip, and what Siegel would want to say is that, of the kinds of argument normativity there are, he is here interested in epistemic normativity. His thesis does not rely on denying non-epistemic argument normativity, nor does he deny it elsewhere, for all the centrality—the primacy?—he assigns to epistemic normativity in his other writings on argumentation. See, for instance, Biro and Siegel 1992, Siegel and Biro 1995.)

In defending the Independence Thesis, Siegel considers four lines of attack on it that do or might come from the recent emphasis on multi-culturalism, from attacks on the hegemony of Western culture, and from the broader attacks on objectivism originating in some recent critiques of modernism. He argues, in general, that while there is some truth to the multi-cultural viewpoint, it does not support the cultural relativity of argument quality. So I take his strategy to be to strengthen the case for the Independence Thesis, not by defending it directly, but by removing these four objections to it. I will briefly review Siegel's four arguments.
Argument A (the argument about transcendence). While it is true that no completely transcendent perspective is possible, it does not follow that individuals cannot transcend one or another of their particular perspectives. Hence what truth there is in the no-transcendence thesis does not show that argument quality must be relative to an individual’s particular cultural perspective.

Argument B (the argument about the universal vs. the particular). While it is true that principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are particular in the respect that they are articulated and endorsed in particular historical/cultural circumstances, it does not follow that such principles and criteria apply only to arguments formulated in that context. Hence what truth there is about the contrast between a universal perspective and a particular perspective does not show that argument quality must be relative to an individual’s historical/cultural circumstances.

Argument C (the argument about transcultural normative reach). The proponent of the position that norms of argument quality are culturally relative faces two unappetizing implications. First, it is not possible for its proponent consistently to defend cultural relativism, since to do so must presuppose some transcultural normative perspective. Any pro-cultural relativism argument is thus self-defeating. Second, it is not possible for the proponent of cultural relativism consistently to criticize any particular perspective (such as slavery, sexism or patriarchy), since to do so must again presuppose some transcultural normative perspective, which cultural relativism precludes.

Argument D (against the position that argument is a rhetorical device masking the exercise of power). Here Siegel offers three converging lines of argument. First, the position applies as much to arguments used within any culture or perspective as to those venturing beyond its borders. Second, the position cannot coherently be supported, since doing so on its own terms entails merely using rhetorical devices to mask the exercise of power. Third, if the position is maintained without support, that "renders the issue itself incapable of being coherently posed." (I don’t understand the third point, but Siegel refers the reader to other works where presumably it is explained.)

There are at least the following ways to subject Siegel’s paper to critical scrutiny.

(1) Question the precise meaning of the Independence Thesis. (What precisely is his position?)

(2) Question whether Siegel’s representations of the positions he argues against are accurate. (Does he attack straw men?)

(3) Examine Siegel’s four negative arguments for flaws. (Are his arguments sound?)

(4) Question whether the Independence Thesis faces objections from the
general direction Siegel considers that his critiques of these four arguments do not refute. That is, question whether Siegel has missed other criticisms of the Independence Thesis from the direction of multi-culturalism or cultural relativism. (Is his defence complete?)

The following comments assume the accuracy of Siegel’s representations of the views he criticizes (2), and find no fault with Siegel’s four arguments (3). They focus, instead, on the meaning of the Independence Thesis (1), and the completeness of Siegel’s critique of multi-cultural relativism (4).

What precisely is the Independence Thesis? What does it mean to say that what makes an argument epistemically good is that its premises provide reasons for accepting its conclusion independently of the cultural locations and perspectives of the person evaluating the argument? There seem to be different possibilities, one of which is the following:

IT1 There are general normative epistemic criteria and principles of argument evaluation for arguments—such as "True premises and valid form" or "Premises that are worthy of acceptance and jointly sufficient," and so on—and whatever the correct criteria and principles are (even if we do not know yet what they are), they hold for all arguments, anywhere and anytime.

There is textual evidence that Siegel has at least IT1 in mind. The "transcendence" position, as he expresses it, is the denial that "transcendent principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality" are possible, which is a direct contradiction of IT1. So, in opposing the "transcendence" position, Siegel does seem to be committed to IT1.

If Siegel’s characterization of the views he opposes is fair, and if those views consist of arguments against IT1, then I think Siegel’s defence against cultural relativism succeeds. The four claims or arguments he attributes to the cultural relativists are clearly subject to the standard anti-relativist tag of being self-defeating: any argument to support the view must rely on the very criteria for good argument that it denies.

However, it is possible to endorse IT1 without thereby conceding that it is possible to assess any and every particular argument’s quality independently of who is conducting the evaluation and the cultural context of the argument. It is consistent with IT1 that "the cultural locations and perspectives of the evaluators" can make a difference to the assessment of the quality of particular arguments.

For example, perhaps I consider an argument weak because I do not assign much weight to one of its key premises, since that premise refers to difficulties certain poor, uneducated, powerless, Canadian aboriginal women experience on Indian Reserves, and I, being a prosperous educated middle-aged white heterosexual anglo-saxon urban Canadian male, do not, and arguably cannot, adequately understand the gravity of those difficulties. In the kind of case
imagined here, what is in intractable dispute are not the facts claimed, but their probative weight. Let this one kind of example suffice to make the point; I assume plenty of others could be found.

To be sure, Siegel can contend that the premise in question has a given weight, and it should be assigned that weight, whether or not I or anyone else can appreciate it: "[t]he premises of the argument provide whatever support for its conclusion they do . . . whoever is conducting the evaluation, in whatever cultural context." (Perhaps, while I underestimate the premise’s importance, its proponents assign it too much weight.) But there is a problem. The determination of that "correct" weight requires precisely the God’s-eye-view that Siegel concedes is not available, because such questions about the significance of factors tend to be contentious precisely among argument assessors who have different perspectives on the issue, and in such cases no disinterested perspective is possible. Lacking such a "neutral" perspective, the assessors of this particular argument must somehow or other assign the contentious premise some weight. The judgement could determine the outcome of the overall assessment of the argument, and important matters, such as social policy decisions, could well depend upon how the argument is assessed. Moreover, quite often the perspective of those in positions of power (for example, the members of the parliamentary committee hearing public submissions) ends up being decisive in assigning weight to the contentious premise.

None of these points is incompatible with IT₁. However, they are incompatible with other possible interpretations of IT. Consider IT₂:

IT₂ IT₁ and: For any particular argument, the degree to which it satisfies the normative epistemic criteria for arguments can, in principle, be determined by anyone, regardless of the person’s cultural or other historical particulars.

Does Siegel’s Independence Thesis embrace IT₂? As stated, IT₂ is perhaps too strong, since it implies, for instance, that someone with brain damage should be as able to assess any argument as well as anyone else. But then, does one replace "anyone" with "any normal person" or with "an ideal observer"? That is a direction fraught with well-known difficulties. (A principal difficulty is the dilemma: how a "normal" person or an "ideal" observer is specified will either render the Independence Thesis analytic and vacuous, or render it false.) So if we attribute IT₂ to Siegel, we do him no favour.

Another way to formulate the Independence Thesis so that it precludes cultural relativism with respect to particular arguments is IT₃:

IT₃ IT₁ and: For any particular argument, the degree to which it satisfies the normative epistemic criteria for arguments is accessible to inter-subjective agreement, independently of the cultural or historical circumstances of the assessors. Otherwise put: the inter-subjective rating of the normative epistemic quality of any argument will be highly reliable, and the cultural or historical
circumstances of the assessors will not be an independent variable.

The trouble with \( \text{IT}_3 \) is that it makes the truth of the Independence Thesis an empirical matter. It thus may represent a more extreme naturalization of the Independence Thesis than Siegel would tolerate. But what is worse, if \( \text{IT}_3 \) is what the Independence Thesis means, then the Independence Thesis is probably false. While there is likely to be very high inter-rater reliability for a great many arguments, there will be exceptions, especially when it comes to just those arguments invoking premises and probative weightings that are subject to the vagaries of inter-cultural and other (race, class or gender) differences of perspectives.

Does Siegel’s position include \( \text{IT}_2 \) or \( \text{IT}_3 \), or some variant of them? It is unclear: he does not express IT precisely enough to permit a decision. His comment that the premises provide whatever support for their conclusion they do, regardless of who is conducting the evaluation or what its cultural context, does seem to commit him to some such position. But if so, and if the cultural relativism that is Siegel’s target is willing to grant \( \text{IT}_1 \), but takes issue with \( \text{IT}_2 \) or \( \text{IT}_3 \), then it is not refuted by Siegel’s arguments. Consider each of his arguments in turn.

In Argument A, Siegel rightly points out that no completely transcendent perspective is possible does not imply no transcendence of perspective is possible. However, transcendence of perspective is possible is ambiguous between "sometimes possible" and "always possible." From the fact that there are circumstances and perspectives such that in some circumstances, some perspectives can be transcended, it does not follow that in any circumstances, any perspective can be transcended. Siegel does not establish the latter claim, but needs to do so in order to show that cultural differences are never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments.

In Argument B, Siegel rightly argues that from the fact that principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are articulated and endorsed in particular historical/cultural circumstances it does not follow that such principles and criteria apply only to arguments formulated in that context. However, it is consistent with the generality of principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality that their application in particular circumstances is subject to intractable disagreements due to cultural differences. Siegel does not show the latter proposition to be false, but he needs to, in order to show that cultural differences are never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments.

In Argument C, Siegel correctly points out that anyone who holds that all norms of argument quality are culturally relative cannot consistently claim to have a transculturally good argument for that position, and moreover is prohibited by the position from arguing against practices in other cultures. However, it does not follow that agreement about the assessment of a particular argument’s quality never founders on the reef of cultural difference. Yet Siegel needs to
deny this possibility in order to show that cultural differences are never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments.

In Argument D, Siegel correctly points out that the position that argument is always a rhetorical device masking the exercise of power both takes argument out of play even within a cultural perspective and also cannot coherently be supported by argument. However, he does not thereby show that argument is never a rhetorical device masking the exercise of power, nor that the exercise of power never plays a role in the epistemic assessment of arguments. Yet he would need to make these points to show that such cultural differences as differences in power are never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments.

In sum, while Siegel shows that the multi-culturalism, et al., arguments fail to preclude general epistemic criteria of good arguments, he does not show that cultural and other differences are never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments. It may be impossible to determine whether the general epistemic criteria are satisfied for a given argument independently of the cultural location and perspective of the person evaluating the argument. The latter is a theoretically important point, because it seems to put a limit on the role of argument for settling disagreements and establishing the truth at crucial junctures. At the least, it leads to important and difficult questions about just when such perspectives are pertinent and, when they are, just how they should be accommodated.

Certainly it would be a mistake to generalize from the fact (if I am right) that the epistemic merits of some arguments cannot be determined independently of such factors as cultural, racial, class, or gender perspective, to the conclusion that no arguments can be assessed independently of such factors. Such an inference would be an egregious secundum quid. I would guess that the occurrence of the perspectively problematic arguments that the cultural relativists draw attention to is actually quite rare, and if that’s so, then argument still has enormous value in settling disagreements and establishing the truth.

To sum up: If, by the independence of epistemic norms, Siegel means the independence of general criteria and principles of epistemic goodness of arguments, and if the cultural relativists Siegel criticizes think that their position implies that this general criterial independence is impossible, then Siegel’s arguments show them to be mistaken. It seems—especially in hindsight, with Siegel’s arguments in hand—to be a singularly implausible position. But one can concede Siegel’s claim without conceding that cultural perspective is never relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments. In fact, all that Siegel’s targets need to do in order to avoid checkmate by his arguments is move to a slightly qualified version of their position. I don’t say that those Siegel criticizes hold this more modest thesis (that cultural perspective can be relevant to the epistemic assessment of particular arguments). Nor is it entirely clear where Siegel stands on this point. What does seem clear is that his arguments do not refute it. I have claimed that a case can be made that it is a
plausible thesis and that it is one that has considerable significance for the practice of argumentation.

References

