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The incompleteness problem for a virtue-based theory of argumentation

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ABSTRACT: The incompleteness problem for virtue ethics is inherited by a virtue-based theory of argumentation as developed by Daniel Cohen (2007). A complete normative theory of argumentation should be able to provide reasons for why argumentative virtues such as open-mindedness are worthwhile, along with being able to resolve conflicts of such virtues. Adumbrating virtue-based argumentation theory with a pragmatic utilitarian approach constitutes a more complete theory that can account for why argumentative virtues are worthwhile.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, argumentative virtues, dialectical, incompleteness, pragmatic-utilitarian

1. INTRODUCTION

If we derive a theory of argumentation from virtue ethics along the lines of Cohen (2007), then such a theory inherits what Rachels & Rachels (2010) have called the incompleteness problem from virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, and hence a virtue-based theory of argumentation, is not a complete theory for two reasons. First, a virtue-based theory of argumentation does not provide us with a mechanism for resolving conflicts of argumentative virtues that does not refer to extra-virtue theoretic considerations (Rachels & Rachels, 2010). For example, open-mindedness to other views may conflict with tenacity of one’s own position. Second, a virtue-based theory of argumentation does not provide us with a reason for why it is good to be a virtuous arguer that does not appeal to considerations outside of virtue ethics such as pragmatic-utilitarian concerns (Rachels & Rachels, 2010).

The first problem may not be as serious as it appears given that many conflicts of virtues are really not conflicts of virtue at all, since in many argumentative contexts, one of the so-called virtues is, along Aristotelian lines, taken to a vicious extreme. For example, if one is too open-minded, then it would be difficult to remain tenacious with respect to one’s own view. Or if one is too tenacious, then there is little openness to alternative points of view. Cohen (2007) mentions that a “sense of proportion” is required to maintain a proper balance between the virtues, which is certainly consistent with an Aristotelian concept of virtue as a mean between two extremes:
And yet, tenacity, cleverness, and passionate engagement are all argumentative virtues right alongside open-mindedness and attentiveness. Perhaps what is really needed is a sense of proportion, as something of a meta-virtue, to keep them all in balance. (Cohen, 2007, p. 8)

However, as will be shown, there are many kinds of cases where a balance between virtues is already present, and yet there is still a conflict where no resolution is forthcoming without appeal to another stance such as a pragmatic-utilitarian point of view or an appeal to dialectical obligations (Johnson & Blair, 1987).

Even if a virtue-based theory of argumentation is incomplete in this first sense, perhaps it at least provides us with a motive for why one should be a virtuous arguer. However, this is not the case. There is no component of virtue ethics that involves the claim that one should be virtuous, as being virtuous is not itself a virtue on pain of circularity. Granted, Aristotle attempted to link being virtuous with pleasure, so that a motive for being virtuous is that it will give rise to the right kinds of pleasures. But an appeal to pleasure is strictly speaking a hedonistic-consequentialist approach. Or, one might adopt the stance that being a virtuous arguer is conducive to gaining insight into the nature of the world, and that the pursuit of knowledge is itself a virtue. However, the question that arises is why should we pursue knowledge. To avoid an infinite regress of virtues, we are forced to appeal to a pragmatic reason such as we fare better in life if we have knowledge, or perhaps to a deontological reason such as one ought to pursue knowledge.

The overall thesis that will be defended in this paper is that although a virtue-based theory of argumentation is worthwhile, it is not able to stand alone in either of the two senses mentioned above. A virtue-based theory of argumentation that is adumbrated with a pragmatic-utilitarian component will be developed that is able to overcome the incompleteness problem. Although an appeal to dialectical obligations is another promising approach, in the final analysis, it does not work given that it falls prey to the incompleteness problem with a deontological approach to ethics given that conflicts of duties are not resolvable without appeal to an external theory.

2. APPARENT CONFLICTS OF ARGUMENTATIVE VIRTUES THAT ARE NOT REALLY CONFLICTS

As alluded to above, there will be alleged clashes of virtues in argumentative contexts that are not really clashes owing to one of or more of the virtues being taken to a vicious extreme. In this type of situation, there is not a conflict of virtues, but rather a conflict of a virtue with a vice or a conflict between several vices. Such cases do not illustrate an aspect of the incompleteness problem for a virtue-based theory of argumentation. An example of such a clash will help drive this point home.

Suppose two evolutionary biologists are deeply divided on the issue of whether evolution is a result of mutation, natural selection, migration, and genetic drift (traditional theory) or whether evolution is explainable simply in terms of genetic drift (the “neutral” theory). The one scientist, call her Deborah, is deeply committed to the natural selection view of evolution, arguing for this view with
great tenacity, to the point where the other scientist, Ibrahim, regards Deborah as being somewhat dogmatic. Cohen (2007) lists tenacity as an argumentative virtue that presumably results in the cognitive achievement of “entitlement to one’s position” (Cohen, 2007, p. 6) Further, suppose the scientist, Deborah, defending this traditional view of evolution values keeping an open mind, even though her open-mindedness is being hampered by her extreme tenacity..

On the surface, there appears to be a clash with respect to Deborah between two argumentative virtues, viz., tenacity and open-mindedness. However, Deborah has taken her tenacity to such an extreme that it hampers her ability to keep an open mind, which in turn diminishes the cognitive achievement of “a deepened appreciation of the opponent’s position” (Cohen, 2007, p. 8). Further, Deborah’s dogmatism will preclude her from cognitively achieving the ability to abandon her standpoint for a potentially better one (Cohen, 2007, p. 8). Taken in proper proportions, what is normally an argumentative virtue, viz., tenacity, has become an argumentative vice if we accept an Aristotelian characterization of virtue as being a mean between two vicious extremes.

The above example illustrates that apparent clashes between two argumentative virtues are on deeper analysis sometimes a clash between a virtue and a vice, or a clash between two vices. A virtue-based theory of argumentation is able to resolve such a conflict by labelling at least one of the alleged virtues a vice.

3. REAL CONFLICTS OF ARGUMENTATIVE VIRTUES THAT REQUIRE EXTRA-VIRTUE THEORETIC RESOLUTIONS

However, situations can arise that involve a genuine clash between two virtues, as will be illustrated in the following example. In this type of situation, a virtue-based account of argumentation does not provide a mechanism for resolving the clash without appealing to an external theory such as a pragmatic-utilitarian or a dialectical obligation approach to argumentation.

Expanding on the example developed above, suppose that Ibrahim like Deborah values both tenacity with respect to one’s position along with keeping an open mind. Ibrahim is committed to the neutral theory of evolution on the grounds that it can offer new insights into the evolution of sexual reproduction in eukaryotic organisms, which remains somewhat of a mystery in the context of a more traditional account of evolution. However, because he also values being open-minded, he does not carry his tenacity to a vicious extreme. He is willing to concede to Deborah’s arguments for the traditional view, provided that they are cogent and closer to the truth than the neutral theory. He is even willing to completely abandon his own account of evolution if it does not stand up to the traditional account of evolution, but not to the point of simply abandoning his position without putting up a serious defence of his own views.

Ibrahim finds himself in a quandary. He feels an entitlement to his own position given increasing evidence in the scientific literature supporting the neutral theory, and yet at the same time, he values keeping an open mind and deferring to solid arguments that may refute his position. His tenacity with respect to his own position clashes with his desire to keep an open mind, which could situate him in a
kind of stalemate since there is no mechanism in virtue ethics that classifies one virtue as being more important than another virtue. If Ibrahim does attempt to resolve his stalemate by placing greater weight on one virtue over the other, his reasons for doing so will appeal to considerations outside of virtue ethics.

For example, Ibrahim may decide that it is more important to keep an open mind than to be tenacious on the grounds that this is more likely to lead to scientific progress. But this is a pragmatic-utilitarian consideration. Or, he may decide that it is more important to stick to one’s guns and defend a given position for the purpose of seeing what it may lead to and what its beneficial effects might be on scientific progress. Then once again, he is deferring to pragmatic-utilitarian reasons for placing greater weight on tenacity. Or, he may feel that it is his duty, his dialectical obligation, to defend the neutral theory with respect to other researchers working in that field. In that case, he is appealing to a kind of deontological reason for placing more weight on tenacity.

It could be argued that as soon as Ibrahim decides to place more weight on one virtue rather than another, he is carrying that virtue to its vicious extreme. Then, Ibrahim’s case reduces to Deborah’s case where there is now a clash between an argumentative virtue and an argumentative vice, so that there is no problem for a virtue-based account of argumentation after all. Nonetheless, the initial clash for Ibrahim was a clash between two of his argumentative virtues neither of which he had carried to a vicious extreme. Further, in deciding to place more weight on tenacity rather than open-mindedness, there is no reason why he needs to become tenacious to a vicious extreme such that it entirely precludes his open-mindedness. Presumably, there is a range along the continuum between two vices where a state of character still counts as a virtue even if it deviates slightly from the exact mean. What is noteworthy here is that Ibrahim’s resolution was achieved by appealing to considerations outside of virtue ethics.

4. SPHERES OF EXPERIENCE, COGNITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS, AND WHY WE SHOULD BE VIRTUOUS ARGUERS

Although a virtue-based theory of argumentation requires external points of view to resolve conflicts of argumentative virtues, perhaps it at least provides us with a motivation for why we should be virtuous arguers. However, as will be argued, even the motivation for being a virtuous arguer depends on considerations external to virtue ethics.

Taking her lead from Aristotle, Martha Nussbaum attempted to ground moral virtues in so-called spheres of experience that relate to any human life (Nussbaum, 1988). For example, the virtue of courage is grounded in the universal experience of fear of death (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 497). The virtue of moderation is grounded in the universal sphere of experience relating to bodily appetites and pleasures, justice in the sphere of experience relating to distribution of limited resources, and so forth (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 497). Given that moral virtues are grounded in spheres of experience relating to the human condition, then there is a clear answer to the question of why we should be virtuous: We should be morally virtuous, because
virtues are grounded in universal spheres of experience relating to the human condition.

Perhaps a similar tact can be taken with respect to grounding argumentative virtues. Cohen (2007) outlines a number of so-called cognitive achievements that can be obtained from virtuous argumentation, such as a better appreciation and understanding of one’s own position, an appreciation of other points of view, an improvement of one’s own position, entitlement to one’s own position, and so forth (Cohen, 2007). Cohen then defines an argumentative virtue as “acquired habits of mind that are conducive to one of argumentation’s characteristic cognitive achievements” (Cohen, 2007, p. 8). Thus, open-mindedness is an argumentative virtue grounded in the cognitive achievement of more deeply appreciating other points of view. On the other hand, tenacity is an argumentative virtue grounded in the cognitive achievement of entitlement to one’s own position. The grounding of argumentative virtues in cognitive achievements seems to pave the way for an understanding of why we should be virtuous arguers: We should be virtuous arguers because this is conducive to achieving important cognitive ends that are universal and regarded as important by all human beings.

However, there is an important difference between spheres of experience and cognitive achievements. The former are arguably universal, and they emerge from the human condition, whereas the latter are not necessarily universal nor regarded as important by all human beings. Different individuals may well have opposing views as to what the cognitive achievements of argumentation are, or what they should be. It certainly makes more sense to ask “why should I strive for a deepened appreciation of another’s position?” than to ask, “why should I be afraid of death?” Further, the various cognitive achievements mentioned in Cohen, 2007 may come into conflict with one another, which brings us full circle to the charge that a virtue-based theory of argumentation cannot resolve conflicts of virtue. A deeper appreciation of another’s position may compromise one’s sense of entitlement to one’s own position, and so the virtue of open-mindedness grounded in the former may come into conflict with the virtue of tenacity grounded in the latter.

If argumentative virtues cannot be grounded in cognitive achievements, perhaps we need to revisit the Aristotelian spheres of experience. As outlined by Nussbaum, 1988, an additional sphere of experience is “intellectual life” (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 497). Thus the intellectual virtues, including argumentative virtues, could be grounded in the sphere of intellectual life. Therefore, we should be virtuous arguers because it is conducive to the intellectual life. However, not everyone pursues or even desires the intellectual life, whereas everyone fears death and is concerned with bodily appetites. Someone who does not strive for the intellectual life will not be persuaded to be a virtuous arguer simply because it is conducive to the life of the mind.

So there appears to be no good reason, within a virtue-based theory of argumentation, for why we should be virtuous arguers. As with the case of resolving conflicts of virtues, there is cause to look outside of virtue ethics for moral motivation. It is not hard to find a justification for why we should be virtuous arguers outside of virtue ethics. For example, we should be virtuous arguers because it is our moral and dialectical obligation to do so. Johnson and Blair (1987)
argue that persons engaged in argumentation have certain dialectical obligations such as putting forward premises that are adequate, as well as premises that are relevant to the conclusion and which jointly provide sufficient support for the conclusion (Johnson & Blair, 1987, pp. 48 - 55). We could extend Johnson and Blair's concept of dialectical obligations to include keeping an open mind, being tenacious, being attentive to the other's position, and so forth. Why should one be open-minded, tenacious, attentive, etc. as arguers? Well, because all of these are our dialectical obligations. However, just as a virtue-based theory of argumentation inherits the incompleteness problem from virtue ethics, a deontology-based theory of argumentation inherits the problem that there is no obvious way to resolve conflicts of duties without appealing to an external theory. Our duty to be open-minded may sometimes conflict with our duty to be tenacious. As Rachels & Rachels, 2010 point out, the inability to resolve conflicts of duties is a sore spot for any deontologically based theory of ethics (Rachels & Rachels, 2010, pp. 129 – 135). And so, we are back to the drawing board with respect to trying to find a grounding for argumentative virtues.

A much more promising external theory to ground argumentative virtues is a pragmatic-utilitarian approach: We should be virtuous arguers because overall, virtuous arguers fare better in life in terms of achieving their ends and the ends of their community than non-virtuous arguers. Whether or not this is really true can only be established empirically, although it is a promising lead. A virtue-based theory of argumentation adumbrated by a pragmatic-utilitarian approach will be sketched in the next section.

5. A VIRTUE-PRAGMATIC-UTILITARIAN-BASED THEORY OF ARGUMENTATION

A virtue-pragmatic-utilitarian-based theory of argumentation espouses argumentative virtues based on pragmatic-utilitarian grounds. Such an approach provides a motive for being a virtuous arguer, provided that it can be shown empirically that virtuous arguers generally fare better in terms of achieving their goals than non-virtuous arguers, and that a community of virtuous arguers is somehow better off (happier overall, achieves more of its goals) than a community of non-virtuous arguers. On this approach, an argumentative virtue can be defined as a moderate (between two extremes) state of character conducive to realizing cognitive ends that are beneficial for the arguer and the community of which they are a member. Further, a virtue-pragmatic-utilitarian-based approach to argumentation can be applied to resolving conflicts of virtues in argumentative contexts. One virtue may be more pragmatic to pursue than a conflicting virtue depending on what the arguer's goals and preferences are, and depending on what the goals and preferences are of their community (scientific, philosophical, society at large). Thus, any such resolution to a conflict of virtues will be sensitive to the goals and preferences of the arguer as well as to overall utilitarian considerations such as what is best for the community of which one is a member. For example, if one is trying to secure a research grant that could advance knowledge, tenacity may pay off better than open-mindedness. Or, in that situation, it may turn out that being open-minded pays off better than tenacity. To see in more detail how the
adumbrated theory works in this regard, let us reconsider the example of Ibrahim and Deborah, the biologists on opposite sides of the fence regarding the theory of evolution.

In the example outlined above, Ibrahim is in a quandary given that he equally values the virtues of tenacity and open-mindedness, nor does he carry either to a vicious extreme. Suppose Ibrahim finds out that his research proposal for NSERC defending the neutral theory of evolution has a good chance of being short-listed since there is increased interest in the scientific community regarding the neutral theory. Then it may be in his best interest to pursue tenacity with respect to his own theory and to focus less on being open-minded with respect to defences of traditional evolutionary theory. If Ibrahim’s project is funded, he can employ graduate students to help out with the research along with bringing prestige to his institution, and it may advance significantly the field of evolutionary theory. As noted above, it could be argued that Ibrahim is deciding to carry tenacity to a vicious excess like Deborah, and open-mindedness to a vicious deficiency also like Deborah, and so the resolution to his conflict is achieved at the cost of no longer being a virtuous arguer. However, deciding to be tenacious with regards to one’s own theory does not entail that that one must carry tenacity to a vicious excess nor that one must carry open-mindedness to a vicious deficiency. Ibrahim, even though he defends his theory more seriously may still be willing to abandon his position in the face of serious counter-evidence if he has reason to believe that developing this theory may harm scientific advancement. In such a case, even though he is pursuing tenacity with respect to his theory, he is not carrying it to a vicious extreme, and he is also remaining open-minded.

The theory of argumentation developed in this section provides a possibility for resolving conflicts of virtue with respect to the same arguer. However, can the theory resolve conflicts of virtue between arguers? Suppose that both Deborah and Ibrahim are virtuous arguers, but Deborah chooses to pursue open-mindedness and Ibrahim decides to pursue tenacity but not to the point of vicious extremes in either case. A virtue-pragmatic-utilitarian approach to argumentation could at least in principle resolve the conflict by determining which is most beneficial to their community’s goals and to their own goals – Ibrahim’s pursuing tenacity or Deborah’s pursuing open-mindedness.

6. CONCLUSION

A workable virtue-based approach to argumentation is not a stand-alone theory since it cannot resolve conflicts of virtues nor does it provide a motive for being a virtuous arguer. However, if we add to a virtue-based theory a pragmatic-utilitarian decision-procedure for determining which virtues to employ in a given argumentative context keeping in mind the goals and purposes of the arguers, the problem of incompleteness is solved.
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