Reply to my Commentator - Cohen

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Reply to my Commentator

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Derek Allen identifies three ways the presentation of my position can be improved. I hope this reply is worthy of his helpful comments.

First, Allen notes that sincerity is a virtue of arguers, not premises, so it’s misleading to bill my proposal as applying Virtue Argumentation Theory to the question of premise adequacy. VAT, in a mini-Copernican revolution, reverses that question. Instead of asking about the premises (Are they true?) or how they relate to their users (Are the premises justified for those arguers?), VAT asks instead how arguers relate to their premises (Are the arguers justified in using those premises?). This difference matters to the “thick” concept of good arguments.

Allen’s second comment also concerns my presentation more than my position. He calls me out (rightly!) when hyperbole gets the better of me. The claim that insincerity entails utter indifference to truth cannot survive his counterexample: parents who feel guilty when resorting to Santa Claus arguments. They are not completely indifferent to the truth of what they say. Rather, like anyone too polite to criticize unwanted gifts, other factors override their commitment to honesty. The key point, rephrased, remains: their commitment to truth-telling is compromised. Since speech acts, not belief states, comprise arguments, that de-values the argument. And, of course, criticizing arguments qua arguments does not entail unqualified disapproval: the original scenario may be good parenting, but it’s not good arguing.

Allen’s main comment strikes the heart: sincerity is not a necessary condition for good arguments. Allen makes the point using Alvin Goldman’s analysis of the conditions under which “an argument is an epistemologically good argument relative to a person N.” Goldman’s analysis and Allen’s objection are cogent, as far as they go, but they don’t go far enough—in two ways. First, Goldman’s concern is narrowly epistemological: he focuses exclusively on acquiring true justified beliefs neatly packaged in propositional form. He ignores non-propositional and non-epistemic cognitive gains, like understanding and appreciation, which can also come from argumentation. To be fair, other cognitive gains were not discussed here, but they matter. The robust concept of argument goodness includes more than just rhetorical, logical, dialectical, and even epistemological considerations.

Second, Goldman and Allen address only benefits to single individuals: “an argument is an epistemologically good argument relative to a person N.” I argue that the best arguments have value for all their participants—proponents, opponents and...
audiences alike. Opponents can be convinced of something new, of course, but proponents may refine their own standpoints through arguing, and audiences may come to a better appreciation of what is at stake. More controversially, I claim arguments can be Moorean “organic unities” in which the value of a whole may be more than the sum of the values of its parts. At the very least, to say an argument is epistemologically good for one party is not the whole story. It needed saying that sincerity is unnecessary for that kind of goodness, but that is consistent with everything I have said.

Link to commentary

Link to paper