Argumentative Ethics

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Argument is widely taken to be the resolution of disagreements by way of the exchange of reasons. This is a good start, but it seems that sometimes we argue when there is no disagreement, and sometimes there is no actual exchange of reasons when arguments are given in monologue. Regardless, argument requires reasons, and those reasons when marshaled are supposed to yield some change in what is accepted or the degree to which it is accepted. Additionally, arguments are products of our rational sociability, for with argument we share evidence, address questions, resolve our differences, and create solidarity. Given that argument is a social activity, it stands to reason that there are ethical norms that bear on the practice. This entry will survey three debates regarding the ethics of argument. The first bears on whether argument is intrinsically adversarial and what norms obtain regarding how arguments must be managed in light of the adversariality question. Call this the *adversariality debate*. Second, given that, structurally, arguments are composed of premises and conclusions, there is a question of what ethical norms bear on the management and presentation of those core structural elements. Call this the *dialecticality debate*. Third, and finally, there is the question of what is worth arguing over and who is welcome in those arguments. The question is how open should inquiry and public argument be. Call this the *argument liberalism debate*. This entry will provide overviews of these three sites of controversy.

The Adversariality Debate

It is common to call heated exchanges, shouting matches, and overt expressions of contempt "arguments." When one has an argument with a neighbor or co-worker, the overriding likelihood is that hers is a negative experience – voices are raised, accusations made, feelings hurt. Though these exchanges are widely called "arguments," these do not exemplify the primary sense of the term for argumentation theory. The more restricted sense of argument is about the social process of working out reasons bearing on some question: whether something is the case, why we should take a particular path, what is the right solution to a problem. The first question of argument ethics is what the connection between the first and more popular conception of argument as heated exchange is with the social-rational process conception of argument. One way to look at this issue is to see that the vocabulary of argument is generally replete with metaphors of war – positions are *defensible*, an objection is an *attack,* some arguments are *big guns*, we may *wrestle* with a topic, and some problems may be so overwhelming for a view that it may yield a *rout*. In short, the question is whether the argument-as-war metaphor is a confused and distorting metaphor for argument or whether it speaks to a deeper truth about the intrinsic adversariality of argument as public reasoning.

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The adversariality debate consists of two interconnected questions: Is argument intrinsically adversarial? And, what norms obtain regarding how arguments must be managed in light of the adversariality question?

While two sides exist regarding the adversariality thesis, scholars on both share (a) a *formal* concern that argument is theorized correctly, whether that be as inherently adversarial or not, such that it produces the best epistemic results, and (b) a *pragmatic* concern that all persons receive equal consideration in argumentation as a practice of knowledge production.

Non-adversarialists hold that adversariality is not intrinsic to argument. Their primary critique is focused on undermining metaphors of war and aggression, which are widespread in discussions of argument. Observing the role of language in argumentation, Phyllis Rooney writes that "combative wording" is "misdescribing the argument situation" (2010: 222). Adversariality is optional and inaccurate: we add it ourselves by applying aggressive language to debate.

Non-adversarialists hold that, further, adversariality is bad for both the debate's formal and pragmatic concerns. Formally, adversariality impedes epistemic results. For, as Janice Moulton enumerates (1983: 159), it limits debate to topics with clearly defined opponents. It produces extremist positions. It avoids framing questions, and so fails to connect with broader inquiry. And it promotes bad reasoning by focusing on ~~building~~ examples, which attend only to specific elements of the opponent's argument.

Pragmatically, non-adversarialists argue that if success in argument is achieved by wbiee885 aggression, it blocks social inclusion (*see* EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE). While it is socially acceptable for men to behave aggressively, women are expected to behave non-aggressively, or politely. When entrance into philosophic argumentation requires participants to behave aggressively, women find themselves in a double bind (Moulton 1983; Frye 1983; Rooney 2012). In remaining polite, women are silenced; yet, if they do engage aggressively, they are dismissed as "uppity" and "bitchy."

To move beyond the adversariality paradigm, non-adversarialists have suggested a range of alternative metaphors. Ayim suggests "nurturant metaphors" to replace metaphors of war (1988: 185). Cohen develops the following list of alternative metaphors: reciprocal reading, diplomatic negotiation, growth and adaptation of thought, manifest rationality, metamorphosis of ideas, cross-pollination, leading to hybridization, brainstorming, and barn-raising (1995: 177–88). Rooney and Hundleby have suggested, respectively, that argument be interpreted as "cooperative" and "collaborative" (Rooney 2010: 220–21; Hundleby 2013: 254).

Adversarialists hold that adversariality is an intrinsic part of argument. For formal epistemic success, argument must be adversarial. Adversarialists hold that undue aggression and social exclusion in argumentative practice are not the result of battle metaphor, but of secondary external conditions.

Trudy Govier provides the first defense of the adversarialist position, from which the rest of the debate follows, via her model for minimal adversariality:

1. I hold that X.
2. I think that X is correct. [Follows from (1)]

3. I think that not-X is not correct. [Follows from (2)]
4. I think that those who hold not-X are wrong, or are making a mistake. [Follows from (3)]
5. Should I need to argue for X, I will thereby be arguing against not-X. [?]
6. Those who hold not-X, are, with regard to the correctness of X and my argument for X, my opponents. [?] (1999: 244)

"Because there is this conflict of belief," she concludes, "this hypothetical person may be regarded as the opponent of the arguer. Thus it would appear, argument is at its very roots adversarial" (1999: 243). Pragmatically, Govier holds, adversariality is good for arguers, too. Adversariality supports, rather than suppresses, difference. And, insofar as it is the giving of reasons, argumentation appeals to others' intellect and autonomy, and so entails respect (1999: 45, 50). The problematic aggression non-adversarialists note comes from what Govier has termed "ancillary hostility," such as rudeness and misinterpretation, which is external to argumentation itself (1999: 245).

Further development of the adversarialist position occurs via debate regarding Govier's model. Rooney, maintaining the non-adversarialist stance, criticizes steps 4–6. The adversarial language therein, she argues, adds an "extra and unnecessary step" (2010: 221). Because *a belief* is wrong does not mean *the person* is wrong. Likewise, non-adversarialist Catherine Hundleby criticizes steps 1–3. While Govier's model claims to deal with beliefs, the logical entailments she draws from them are proper of commitments. If we're really talking about beliefs, she argues, they don't work this way (2013: 252).

Adversarialists have responded to both critiques. Scott Aikin responds to the initial non-adversarialist argument-as-war concern, and defends against Rooney's criticism. Aikin argues that war can be waged justly and unjustly, and war itself does not entail this injustice. Rather: "War metaphors for argument allow us to describe what has gone wrong in cases of misconduct; they do not promote that misconduct" wbiee358 (2011: 257) (*see* JUST WAR THEORY, HISTORY OF). Furthering this point and responding to Rooney, Aikin amends Govier's model to a dialectically minimal model, wherein he draws a critical means–end distinction. Argument has cooperative *ends*, as non-adversarialists point out, yet argument requires logical opposition as its *means* (2017: 15). Further, as argument need not be given against a particular party or person, the dialectical model of adversariality allows one to address arguments to hypothetical critics. Adversarialist John Casey responds to Hundleby. Agreeing with her critique, he says that Govier's model is defunct, if it is based on ~~belief~~. However, if argument deals in belief, because of doxastic involuntarism, adversariality is nonetheless fundamental to argumentation (2019: 161).

Additional areas of ethical inquiry follow from the adversariality debate. Foremost among these are the inequity of politeness, fallacy theory, and argumentative injustice. Politeness, as an alternative argumentative norm, initially appeared as a feminist suggestion. With the progression of the debate, it has become clear that politeness is both a gendered concept, which restricts women's mobility in argument, *and* a racialized

concept, which exclusively reflects the position of white women (Burrow 2010; Hundleby 2013; Henning 2018). Fallacy theory, and its employment of the default skeptical stance, is a targeted area within philosophic practice and pedagogy, where the debate comes to a head. Non-adversarialists point to fallacy theory as an example of how aggression in argument generates poor epistemic results (Hundleby 2010). Adversarialists counter, suggesting means of balancing the default skeptical stance in pedagogy with other foci, such as argument repair (Aikin 2017).

The Dialecticality Debate

The second domain of debate in the ethics of argument bears on the question *What in argument do we owe to our interlocutors?* Assuming that the primary objective of argument is to rationally resolve disagreement, it is clear that reasons are supposed to play a role, but *what kind of reasons* are appropriate? On this matter, there are two broad camps. First, the *dialecticalists* hold that one owes one's interlocutors reasons they can appreciate as good reasons. Second, there are the *non-dialecticalists*, who hold that one owes one's audience reasons that would give them knowledge, which may not be reasons they can, at the time of the argument, appreciate. For the non-dialecticalist, indexing argument quality to audience capacity is too relativistic for argument's ultimate trajectory of pointing toward truths.

There are two motives for dialecticalism: the pragmatist and the reciprocity arguments. The pragmatist argument for dialecticality is the simple rhetorical observation that one must know and reach one's audience if they are to be convinced of anything. Giving your audience reasons they appreciate is the most effective means to your end (Johnson 2000). The reciprocity argument is posited on the thought that, in argumentative exchanges, we must regularly switch roles between being the arguer and being the audience. In light of this thought, if we are to make rules for arguers, we should make those rules not from the perspective of the arguers, but from the perspective of their audience. What kind of considerations would you, as a receiver of arguments, prefer that arguers have at the front of their minds? Michael Gilbert (2014) has termed this "the golden rule of argumentation" (*see* RECIPROCITY; GOLDEN RULE).

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Non-dialecticalism is the view that arguers are not required to meet their audiences where they are. One reason for this view is simply that audience indexing makes argument quality relative and undercuts the point of logical evaluation. Surely, if one's audience is moved by fallacious reasoning, it does not follow that arguments that meet them where they are pass the test of good argument (Feldman 1994). Arguments must have a non-relative standard, otherwise argument is not reasoning at all, but high-minded manipulation. A second reason for non-dialecticalism is that it places too heavy a burden on arguers for the quality of their case (Govier 1999). Consider debates between biologists and creationists about evolution: does the fact that the creationist does not understand the scientific reasoning in the exchange defeat the quality of the reasons? The non-dialecticalist answers "no." In these cases, non-dialecticalists hold, it may be better for the argumentative exchange to be suspended and to switch to an educational arrangement.

To these non-dialecticalist critiques, dialecticalists distinguish between the *illative-inferential* requirements (for example, proper form for deductive arguments, cogency for non-deductive arguments) and the *dialectical* requirements (audience accessibility, clarity) for good arguments. So, there are still non-relative standards that arguments must satisfy to be good, but dialecticality adds to those requirements (Johnson 2000; Aikin and Talisse 2019). Further, dialecticality is a requirement of justice, since being bound by a decision one does not recognize the reasons for seems a clear form of oppression. Non-dialecticalists reply that, given the depth of disagreements between many sides, the dialecticality requirement makes argument impossible in the face of those with whom one shares little to nothing of substance in common. Dialecticality, by the non-dialecticalists' lights, paralyzes argument in the most urgent of cases.

The Argument Liberalism Debate

The third domain of controversy in the ethics of argument regards open inquiry norms. A simple way to understand the issue is to frame it with the questions *What is worth debating? Is argument always the best policy*? The two camps on the issue are the *liberals*, who hold that open inquiry norms require that disagreements demand debate, and the *restrictivists*, who hold that there are instances where argument is either not required, or required not to be pursued.

There are three motivations behind argument liberalism. The first is that open inquiry norms are the best path to high-quality epistemic results. If we are not open to critical evaluation of our most sacred commitments, we leave unexamined theses at the core of our belief systems. The second is that open rules for argument increase our understanding of the issues. Even if we are initially right, our comprehension is deepened by engagement with competing views. As J. S. Mill explains in *On Liberty*, "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that" (1978 [1859]). The third and final reason for argument liberalism is a social justice and pragmatic argument – namely, that closing critical discussion on a matter that nevertheless is a site of disagreement forecloses opportunities for rational persuasion and silences voices that are not powerful enough to determine what is properly discussed and what isn't. The liberal view has been integrated into the first two commandments of van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (2004) pragma-dialectical theory of reasonable discussion, the *freedom rule* and the *obligation to defend rule*:

1. Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or calling standpoints into question.
2. Discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so.

In short, argument liberalism requires that those who hold and share beliefs must shoulder the burden of proof in the critical examination of those beliefs.

Argument restrictivism may come in two strengths. A *weak* version of restrictivism is that *one does not need to argue* over some range of issues. The *strong* version of restrictivism is that *one needs to not argue* over some range of issues. So, the weak restrictivist holds that one is *not blameworthy for not arguing*, and the strong restrictivist holds that one would in fact be *blameworthy for arguing* over some range of issues.

Arguments for weak restrictivism come generally in the form of judiciously managing epistemic resources. Given the likelihood of epistemic improvement on an issue or given the restricted scope of a discussion, it is sometimes not the case that one must take every objection seriously (Rescher 2015). For example, one may be perfectly reasonable in not addressing the objection that one may be living in a vast computer simulation when one is deliberating over where a new well must be dug. Or one needn't address the interlocutor who holds that all taxation is state-sanctioned theft when debating the tiers of a settled progressive tax code. The challenge for restrictivists, by liberal lights, is with distinguishing between *giving* these arguments and *having the arguments* that would justify one to move on in these cases. How does one know that it is reasonable to move on unless at some point one has actually given the arguments and come out the best in the debate?

Strong restrictivism is the view that sometimes it is *wrong to argue*. Arguments for strong restrictivism come in three forms. The first is roughly the same epistemic argument given by weak restrictivists, but that one ought not to waste intellectual and practical resources. So, there are some debates that are not worth having, as engaging in them has opportunity costs of not having other debates or not taking actions one ought. If one wastes one's time arguing with flat-earthers on the Internet, one may not have time to argue to support a public transportation measure with one's neighbor or one may not take decisive action to promote some other good. There are, then, by the restrictive view, pragmatically blameworthy choices to argue (Paglieri and Castelfranchi 2010).

The second argument for strong restrictivism is based on the likelihood of *intellectual backfire* with the choice of arguing. Backfire happens when one takes up with an opposing view, but, in the exchange, one actually makes the opposing view more plausible (Cohen 2005). This can happen in instances where an argument may depend on a technical detail that is difficult to put exactly right and is easy to misunderstand, and so decisive evidence can be misinterpreted as being equivocal. Or there are particularly weak arguments among the strong arguments against the opposing view that may by themselves make the opposing view seem more plausible than it really is. Finally, there may be backfire just from the simple fact that, even if the evidence against the opposing view is overwhelming for those who pay attention, the audience will still find the opposing view plausible simply because it is being debated. Under these backfire conditions, strong restrictivists hold that it can be blameworthy to choose to argue.

The third argument for strong restrictivism is from social justice. The motivating thought for the social justice case is that there are instances where arguing about wbiee858 some group harms that group (*see* RESPONSIBILITY FOR STRUCTURAL JUSTICE).

Take, for example, a debate over the connection between race and intelligence. The strong restrictivist holds that not only the practical consequences of holding scientific racist views, but the very statements of those views, are harmful. One version of this thought is that there are instances wherein argumentative backfire is a possibility (Kitcher 2001), but others hold that the harm is purely in the statements themselves. Speech-based harm occurs purely as a matter of establishing a precedent of saying disparaging things about a group (McGowan 2019). Even if the statements are refuted, that gesture of contempt cannot be undone.

Conclusion

In philosophy, argument is king. Thus, how and over what we argue is an issue of critical ethical importance. Three ethical debates – the adversariality, dialecticality, and argument liberalism debates – exist in argumentation. Each debate arises from the negotiation of argument's distinct pragmatic and epistemic goals. Argument aims for agreement *and* truth. Each debate manages one aspect of the question *How does the pragmatic aim of argumentation effect its epistemic results?* And, how do our epistemic practices affect concerns of social justice? The former two debates interrogate the form of argument, or *how* we ought to argue, while the latter questions argument's content, or over *what* we should argue. On either side of these debates, scholars critique argument to ensure its practical and epistemic integrity.

***See also*:** EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE; GOLDEN RULE; JUST WAR THEORY, HISTORY OF; RECIPROCITY; RESPONSIBILITY FOR STRUCTURAL JUSTICE

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