

THREE OBJECTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC THEORY OF ARGUMENT REBUTTED

Scott F. Aikin

Abstract: Three objections to epistemic theories of argument are briefly presented and rebutted. In light of this reply, a case for argumentative epistemic eclecticism is made. **Key words:** argument, epistemics

EPISTEMIC THEORIES OF ARGUMENT: AN OVERVIEW

The epistemic theory of argument is the view that arguments are to be evaluated in terms of their comprising epistemic reasons. This is to say, good arguments are those that are conducive of or pursuant of knowledge. Epistemic theories of argument vary according to how *knowledge* and *epistemic reasons* are delineated—from, for example, the veritistic and social in Goldman's analysis (1999, 2003) to the evidentialist and individual in Feldman's (1994, 2005). What makes these widespread forms of a family is the central role that the concepts of knowledge and epistemic justification play in the analysis of what constitutes good arguments. What follows in this section is a rough map of the dialectical terrain around epistemic theories of argument. My overall objective is to provide defenses for epistemic theories of argument as a family from objections arising from the rhetorical tradition.

The appeal of epistemic theories can be captured by the *axiological* and the *constitutive norm arguments*. The axiological argument is that since arguments are to be normatively evaluated, a theory of argument must provide criteria for those evaluations. Epistemic theories provide normative criteria for good arguments and may be deployed to explain why fallacies are fallacious: they fail in some way or other to provide epistemic support. The alternatives, as the argument goes, fail to provide such explanations. Rhetorical theories provide criteria for evaluation (that of eliciting assent), but then cannot address the problem of fallacies (they convince, but *shouldn't*). This, again, is a rough challenge for the rhetorical theories of argument, one that stretches all the way back to Socrates' concerns about rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (465 a–d). Pragma-dialectical strategies evaluate arguments on their procedural correctness in rationally reducing conflict, but they leave open the question of why the procedures should be *rational* and what the nature of that rationality is. On the axiological argument, epistemic theories are the last standing (cf. Biro & Siegel, 1992, 1997; Feldman, 1999; Freeman, 2006).

The constitutive norm argument is that so long as arguments are supposed to achieve *any* change in view from audiences, as the competing theories hold, they must do so on (or on what passes for) good epistemic grounds. Listeners don't knowingly change their minds about things unless they think that adopting the new view puts them in a better cognitive position with regard to the truth of what is believed. Epistemic reasons provide that connection between belief and truth, so arguments, by their bearing on the truth of their conclusions, must be epistemically bounded (cf. Aikin 2006, 2008a; Cherwitz, 1977; Cherwitz & Darwin, 1995; Cherwitz & Hikins, 1986; Heysse, 1998; Scott, 1967, 1976; Stark, 2000; Zaner, 1968). This is to say that so long as one changes one's mind about a matter only under the conditions that one takes the new view as more likely true than its competitors, the

reasons for this comparative judgment must bear on and be productive of knowledge of the truth of those theses. Those reasons are, by definition, epistemic reasons. As a consequence, epistemic theories are of a broader family with logical theories of argument—that one constitutive objective of arguments is arriving in a manner that confers the committed subject with a warrant for her conclusion. Epistemic theories assess the connection between premises and conclusions as argumentative products in a similar, but broader, fashion compared to logical theories. But these theories, again, broadly take *arguments* as the primary object of evaluation, and are posited on the assessment of the connection between reasons proposed or presumed and the conclusion according to general rules of good reasoning.

There has been a measure of resistance to epistemic theories. A number of lines of argument have come out, and here I will respond to three I take as connected and widespread. I will term them the *contestability*, *practicability*, and *dignity* objections. What connects these objections, as I take them, is that they proffer a critique of epistemic goals and criteria from a rhetorical perspective, from that of the *process* elements of argumentation. In what follows, I will present these three arguments (section II), briefly defend the epistemic theory (section III), and survey the case for what I will call epistemic argumentative eclecticism that arises from the defenses.

Three objections

The contestability objection runs that, given the variety of views and debates in epistemology, there will be a variety of competing accounts of the epistemic norms bearing on arguments. If we are to evaluate an argument by the appropriate epistemic norms, we must determine the norms first. Epistemologists have been working full-bore on that for quite a while, and it looks like no one view is winning out. As a consequence, when we evaluate an argument, we are likely to introduce a contestable criterion for judgment, and in so doing, we risk gerrymandering the axiology for one side of the case or another. First-order natural theological arguments like the design argument inexorably drive the discussion to second-order arguments about the epistemic principles driving them—how acceptable are presuppositions about God's likely designs, how strong are analogies between designed machines and solar systems, is faith a legitimate source of data for these arguments, who has the burden of proof in natural theology? These second-order discussions hardly shed any more light than generate greater heat, and this is a consequence of the contestedness of the epistemic principles behind the first-order theological discussions. One might go further and, on the analogy with the cynical induction, take the current state of dialectical play in epistemology generally to be evidence that we don't know what epistemic principles are true (Kaplan, 2000, p. 283; Neilson, 2007, p. 142; Rorty, 1967, pp. 1–2, Rorty, 1991, p. 23; Rosenbaum, 2002, p.69). Consequently, we have no criteria for argument evaluation. Hoffman captures the difficulty of the situation with regard to our argumentative criteria as follows:

It might be possible that the evaluation standards I am using in my particular situation happen to be "universal" standards, but how do I know that? And how could it be possible for anyone to *justify* the claim that his or her standards *are* in fact "the" universal standards? (2005, p. 248)

In similar fashion, Tindale rejects any non-relativist account of truth and reasonability in argument, and notes:

People from different perspectives can dispute the reasonableness of their judgments. The rhetorical perspective on argumentation facilitates this. As long as any position is assumed to hold the truth . . . the exercise of reasonable disputation is undermined. (1999, p. 98)

As a consequence, Tindale reasons, criteria beyond those recognized by the audience are useless. In its place he proposes that the rhetorical notion of audience-acceptability is all there is to epistemic assessment:

[W]e must evaluate the acceptability of a premise according to whether it would be accepted without further support by the audience that is to consider it, the immediate or intended audience. Let us call this an *epistemic* condition for audience acceptability. (1991, p. 243)

In a similar rhetorical vein, Levi argues that the search for criteria, even independent of their contestability, yields a structural problem for logical theories generally:

That there must be criteria for argument correctness is logic's article of faith, and explains why it does not see that the assumption that something must make an argument correct is unwarranted. If criteria were needed, then why not criteria for the criteria? A vicious regress seems inevitable. . . . The real problem is with the assumption that criteria are needed. (1975, p. 266-7)

The obvious self-defeat of this commitment should not be lost on us here, as Levi is *criticizing* a theory of argument for having as an article of faith that there must be criteria for good argument. Surely if he's right, then there are no grounds to *criticize* the theory that there are grounds. However, the point here is not to bring the charge a self-defeat problem for rhetorical theories, but to provide a defense of their competitors in the epistemic theory (cf. Aikin 2008b, in press; Rowland, 1995, for pressing this line of self-defeat reasoning). What is crucial from Levi's argument is that given the structural problem for determining criteria, we have grounds for presuming that there are not any.

The contestability objection, then, comes in two strengths. Weakly, the view is that given the contestability of epistemic principles, we have no justification for introducing them to evaluate arguments. Strongly, the view is that there are no such principles or standards beyond those that arguers hold (cf. Ede, 1981, p. 125; Harpine, 2004, p. 335; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 66).

The practicability objection follows hard on the heels of the contestability objection. A desideratum of a theory is not only that it get what we are theorizing about *right*, but in proceeding, it should provide *good advice* as to how to manage ourselves in relation to it. Brunnett notes rightly that theories of argument and rhetoric must "apply or die" (1990, p. 71). Theories of argumentation, then, should have practical payoff, but epistemological theories are in a bad place to provide those goods. If the contestability argument goes through, epistemic theorists aren't in *any position at all* to provide any criteria for arguments, so they have no *advice* beyond empty slogans like: construct arguments that provide good epistemic reasons.

This said, the practicability objection need not depend on the contestability objection. Huss (2005) presents the following version of the practicability problem for epistemic theories independently of the problem of contestation. Let us grant that there are some principles that are not contestable, say, the basic principles of probabilistic reasoning that jointly explain why the gambler's fallacy is a fallacy. So far, the epistemic theory's advice is to avoid the gambler's fallacy. Huss then considers a group of gamblers who have been told not to make use of the argument form. But what if they fail to see why the fallacy is a fallacy? If they don't see, then the advice on offer will fail to motivate them, and if they aren't motivated by the advice, they will continue to use the gambler's fallacy (2005, p. 267). As it is taken, an epistemic theory's advice is only the introduction of criteria for judgment, not the introduction of the means to motivate or clarify those criteria for those who deploy the

arguments. As a consequence, epistemic theories provide advice, but it is not what Huss calls 'followable advice.' Alternately, Huss proposes, on a consensus theory, we seek such motivation. As a consequence, the gamblers, when given the right motivations, "come together as truth-seeking rational agents and *agree* that the inference is likely to yield epistemically justified beliefs. It is this agreement . . . that motivates them to both avoid the gambler's fallacy *and* continue with the discussion" (p. 267). What's needed, Huss contends, is not just a theory that provides *criteria*, but one that gives us a *means* to achieve the necessary results. Consensus theories, because they are focused on those sorts of means and results, are better designed to provide this sort of advice (cf. Burke, 1984, p. 23; Govier, 1987, p. 46; Grootendorst, 1991, p. 113; Sillince & Minors, 1991, p. 282).

The critical edge of the practicability objection is that epistemic theories are devoted to looking at *arguments*, but they ignore *arguers*, *listeners*, and the various other aspects of the *acts of arguing*. One feature that seems to drop out prominently with epistemic theories is consideration for the autonomy of those involved within a dispute. Why, one may ask, from an *epistemic* perspective, should we be open to challenge from all quarters, instead of from only those recognized as the competent? Don't all deserve consideration? Don't all deserve a response? Don't all who don't agree deserve arguments addressed to them? Johnstone notes there that "the issue is really moral; it is only apparently epistemic" (1968, p. 166). Commenting on the demands of universality in argument, Crosswhite argues that, in light of a *rhetorical* conception of argument (and universality), there are special requirements in place:

[W]hen an argument is known to project its claims to a universal audience, critics can raise objections that certain groups of people or certain features of their identities have been left out—that the reasoning does not have the scope imagined. (1996, p. 159)

Later, noting the claims of logic in arguments, Crosswhite notes that his students often have "philosophical difficulties": they "are not clear just what the claim of logic is, or who is making the claim. More specifically, they are not clear about why they should take the logical point of view" (1996, p. 161). In a similar vein, commenting on Perelman's emphasis on argument being addressed to listening audiences, Tindale argues:

First-hand recognition of something is likely more compelling than a second-hand relating of it, because the person "sees" the point and invests in the idea. Self-persuasion, insofar as it is explicitly encouraged here, indicates further the non-exploitative sense of rhetoric that governs the proceedings (2006, p. 344).

Rhetorical theories, because they require the appeal to the perspectives of those addressed by the argument and arguer, embody the aspiration of respecting the dignity of one's listeners. Tindale calls it "cooperation in a shared community of mutual regard" (2006, p. 344). Perelman himself calls this requirement "the rule of justice" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 464). Epistemic theories have no obvious requirement for audience-acceptability. Audience-acceptability is not forbidden, but it is not a criterion for argumentative success. However, with rhetorical theories, it is required. As a consequence, with rhetoric, we respect the dignity of our audience, whereas in epistemic contexts, those with the wrong beliefs or with the wrong epistemic principles do not need to be addressed. On the epistemic theory, you only need correct epistemic commitments, not corrections of wrong ones. Epistemic theories, then, leave too many behind in critical discussions, and that's not right.

A rebuttal and the case for eclecticism

The epistemic theory of argument can accommodate these objections. This is achieved by having the *exclusivity* of evaluation by epistemic justification weakened to the *primacy* of evaluation by epistemic justification, consequently, a form of eclecticism. What follows is a sketch of a path through the brambles.

The contestability objection runs that since epistemic theories are contested, we have no unproblematic criteria for adjudging arguments. What follows is skepticism of some degree regarding argumentative validity. The first thing to distinguish is the *concept* of correct epistemic principles (whatever they may be) and our *conceptions* of them. The epistemic theory is only that arguments should be adjudged in terms of the correct epistemic principles. Of course, it follows that if we do not know what principles are correct, we are not in a position to judge the validity of an argument. But this looks more like a reason why epistemology is important than a reason why we should not care about the epistemic principles at work in the argument. The first lesson of the contestability argument is that we should get to work in epistemology, not yet turn to rhetoric.

Moreover, the contestability of epistemic principles is overstated. It is not that epistemologists disagree on the justification yielded by, say, experience. There is plenty of disagreement about the *nature* of that justification. But epistemologists do not disagree on whether experiences are sources of epistemically reasonable beliefs. They may not yet count as knowledge, they are defeasible, and so on. However, the core epistemic principle, that if a subject (S) has some experience (e.g., a visual experience) that has some representational content (e.g., that of having one's hand in front of one's face), then S has a reason to believe that she has her hand in front of her face. Epistemological theories here are devoted to explaining *why so*, or *how widely* to construe the representational content, how easily S's reasons can be *defeated*, whether S need *further reasons* in addition to the representational content, and so on. *That's* where the disagreement resides, not about the core principle. The same goes for a majority of the epistemic principles first-order arguments work on—the importance of reliable sources of information, good track records for truthfulness, the default justification for what we see and remember, and the transmission of justification over truth-preserving inference.

The practicability objection runs that epistemic theories are either too thin to answer the needs of offering advice or offer useless advice, because epistemic theories risk ignoring the attitudes of those who need correction. In effect, then, the practicability objection amounts to the same complaint that the dignity objection keys on—that the epistemic theory leaves out, or does not give sufficient emphasis to the thoughts and inclinations of audiences. Practically, it is the writing teacher's refrain: remember your audience. Morally, it is the requirement of being considerate.

The first thing to be said to the practicability objection is that the epistemic theory has plenty of advice to contribute to argumentation. The most obvious place to start is with Huss's own employment of the practicability objection—he notes that if we were to motivate the gamblers in his example to avoid the gambler's fallacy, it would be on the basis of bringing them to see that the inference form “is not likely to yield epistemically justified beliefs” (2005, p. 267). If epistemically justified beliefs were not the goal for such reasoning, but instead bare agreement, assent, or reduced conflict, this point would not make any difference. Feldman makes precisely this point in his reply to Huss, by pointing out that his own textbook, *Reason and Argument* (1993) was written from such a perspective (2005, p. 280).

But we do not have to go beyond Huss's own example, as it is on Huss's story, epistemic justification is the ultimate end here.

A further point to be made here is that the epistemic theory has plenty of other sources for advice—consider the argumentative options that the epistemic regress problem poses with its various answers. The epistemic regress problem can be captured by the tension between three apparently correct, but mutually inconsistent epistemic principles:

- (1) **The Principle of Inferential Justification:** If some subject (S) is justified in believing that something (p) is true, then S must have some further reason (q) for believing p.
- (2) **The Principle of Justified Justifiers:** If S is justified in believing that p on the basis of q, then S must be justified in believing q.
- (3) **The Impossibility of a Justifying Regress:** No infinite chain of reasons provides justification. (Cf. Cling 2008)

The problem is that 1 and 2 require that any justified belief will require an infinite chain of reasons, which is inconsistent with 3. Foundationalist strategies with the inconsistent set are posited on revising 2, so that there is a special class of reasons, basic beliefs, that do not require further inferential justification. Contemporary defenses of foundationalism can be found in Audi (2001a), BonJour (2002a), Fumerton (1999) and McGrew (1995). Take, for example, beliefs such as: *I have a headache*, $2 + 2 = 4$, and *All things are identical to themselves*—all you have to do is understand those sentences, and you're in a position to adjudge their justificatory status. Coherentist strategies revise 1, so that justification need not derive from serial chains of inference, but rather may supervene on coherent systems of truths. Contemporary defenses of coherentism can be found in BonJour (1985), Haack (1993), Rosenberg (2002), Sellars (1997), and Thagard (2002). For example, consider the way explanations fit large sets of data—in order to assess the justification we have to believe, say, that it was the cat that knocked over the vase, you have to have that belief fit coherently with a large body of other knowledge (e.g., where the vase was, the cat's usual activities around it, that nobody else had access to it, etc.). Infnitist epistemic theories revise 3, so that only infinite series of serial inferences yield justification. The case for infinitism has been made by Aikin (2005), Fantl (2003), and Klein (1999). Knowledge may require that we be able to answer *all* the questions, and there may be no end to them. Consequently, inquiry and critical discussion have no in principle stopping points. Reliabilist theories of justification reject 1 with certain classes of belief—ones that are produced by reliable sources under the right circumstances (Goldman, 1986). For example, take beliefs yielded by visual perception in good lighting—they are reliably produced, so those who believe them are justified in so doing. Importantly, on this rubric, even rhetorical theories of argument may be classified as forms of epistemic theories, as they can be taken to be a revision of 2 such that one need not offer further justification for commitments not challenged in a context—namely, that audience acceptance confers justification. Again, the point here is not to show that rhetorical theories cannot avoid epistemic work, but that epistemic structures come part and parcel with our views about good reasoning.

Turning to how these alternative epistemic theories yield advice, one need only trace each theory's take on the structure of justification as a blueprint for how to make an argumentatively legitimate case. Foundationalism provides the argumentative strategy of proffering basic premises from which to erect arguments. Basicity, surely, may be something at issue with some starting points, but many are broadly acceptable (truths of logic and mathematics, present and accessible empirical truths, truths of self-awareness). Coherentism offers the

strategy of setting issues in relevant and explanatory connection with broader truths—you know how things hang together. The infinitist suggests that one be ready to answer challenges until there simply are none. It takes only a little imagination to turn meta-epistemological theories into bits of argumentative advice.

The second thing to be said is that internalist (or subjective) epistemic theories are bound to address the attitudes of arguers. Broadly, internalist epistemic argumentative theories are proposed by Aikin (2006, p. 99; 2008a, p. 243), Feldman (1994, p. 196), Freeman (2005, pp. 73-6) and Lumer (2005, p. 196). Internalist theories of epistemic justification require that for subjects to be justified in their beliefs (or for the beliefs to be justified for them), the justifying reasons must be available and recognizable as justifying reasons for the subject (cf. Audi, 2001b; Bonjour, 2002b; Chisholm, 1966; Feldman & Conee, 2001). That is, you are justified only if you can explain how you are. So, returning to Huss's example of gamblers with no motivation to follow the advice of avoiding the gambler's fallacy, we see that the case works against the epistemic theory only if the gamblers do not see the reasons for why the fallacy is a fallacy. But internalist theories of justification would not hold that these gamblers are in the right epistemic relation to the rule—Huss's gambler case shows the epistemic theory doesn't work only because the people in the example don't live up to the epistemic demands of the theory. The internalist epistemic theorist would give the advice: give the gamblers a demonstration of why the fallacy is a fallacy so that they have justifying epistemic reasons (and hence a motive) to avoid the inference form.

This brings us to the question of why we must address those who are not motivated by the right epistemic norms. On the epistemic theory, arguments deployed according to the right epistemic norms are correct. Correcting those who do not have the right norms or even addressing them is not necessarily a desideratum of an argument. One might say that all of the pragmatic *use* of argument drops out of the epistemic consideration. This may be right for *arguments* considered as sets of premises supporting conclusions, but only on the thought that the norms are considered very strictly. There are plenty of broader *cognitive* norms that, though not in the service of constituting *knowledge* (hence, *epistemic*), are nevertheless correct rules for the management of one's intellectual life. Two joint goals of reasoning are that of *securing the truth* and *understanding what those truths are*. Having no answer to people with whom one disagrees strikes me as a compelling reason to think that someone even with good *prima facie* reasons doesn't know in a way that satisfies our epistemic duties of understanding the things we know.

Take, for example, my daughter (a first grader). She can't answer my question as to why we don't count *the grouping* of 2 and 2 when we add them. If we count the grouping, then $2+2=5$, but she nevertheless knows in some attenuated way that $2+2=4$. However, someone who *can* answer the question *understands* the notions of addition and number better than someone who cannot. And consequently, one may say this person *knows it better* than someone who does not. Attending to those with whom we disagree is a cognitive duty (or I prefer to say a *broader epistemic duty*), one that comes part and parcel with the commitment to what we believe—we are committed to the truth and to its intelligibility. If we care about understanding the things we think we know, having satisfying answers to those with whom we disagree is a positive duty.

One way to see these broader epistemic norms of engagement is in cases of deep disagreement, where a disagreement between two parties is not held against a broader agreement in many other matters, but is against a backdrop of wider disagreement. Take, for

example, the perennial debates concerning evolution. Denyse O'Leary, a Canadian author and blogger critical of evolution, tells the following story:

A couple of years ago, after I had been following the controversy for several years, I found myself listening to a long lecture by a Darwinist, replete with bafflegab and pretty lame examples. Finally, sensing (correctly) that I was unconvinced, he proclaimed to me, "You just don't understand how natural selection works, do you?"

And suddenly, the penny dropped. *What he meant was that I just don't believe in magic.* I can't make myself believe in magic; I haven't been able to since I was a child. And I was no longer going to give the matter any attention. (O'Leary, 2009)

P.Z. Myers, a biology professor at the University of Minnesota in Morris and *Pharyngula* blogger, responds to O'Leary by first correcting the assumption that evolution is magic, but then notes an inconsistency in O'Leary's own position:

Natural selection is not magic; there are no miracles, no unexplained steps in the process, and once you grasp it, it's simple and obvious. That O'Leary equates the two means the correct answer to the question was "yes".

The real funny part, though, is that O'Leary is an intelligent design advocate and ardent Catholic. She does believe in magic! (Myers, 2009a)

Two important norms are in sharp focus here. One is deliberative honesty—namely, that in argumentative exchanges, one must (unless overtly taking on the viewpoint of an unrepresented side in playing the devil's advocate) present as honest and thorough version of one's commitments as the circumstances allow. Disagreements will not be resolved if one fails to be honest about what produces them. Moreover, one will not learn anything if one will not be honest about what one does not know. Myers' charge is that O'Leary hasn't done that—she has inverted the dialectical relationship between intelligent design/creationism and evolution by saying that it is *evolution* that is the magical explanation. Not only has O'Leary misrepresented the dialectical situation, she has misrepresented on what side of the disagreement she really is on—*she* is the one who accepts supernatural explanations, not the evolutionists. Until it is clear what the issues are and how those in the argument are coming down on them (and until they can be consistent in reporting their views) no progress in resolution or inquiry is likely.

The second norm O'Leary's post and Myer's response brings out is that there are responsibilities of clarity. O'Leary notes the 'bafflegab' of the 'Darwinists,' and thereby, she makes the charge that the failure of clarity on behalf of the 'Darwinists' is reflective of a kind of evasion. The question, of course, is whether jargon in the papers she heard was there to *prevent outsiders* from understanding and contributing, or to *facilitate insiders'* dialogue. If the former, then the regular charge of academic and scientific elitism is appropriate—something implicit in O'Leary's terms, namely, that the big technical words are simply to baffle and thereby cow their non-specialist audience. But the test for this is whether the terms can be explained and made accessible in other contexts. And further, whether accessible answers to creationist challenges are available. Responding to a different but direct charge of academic elitism, Myers notes:

Read any of Stephen Jay Gould's books . . . and you'll find them to be lucid and enthusiastic and eager to explain. Even more so, crack open one of Richard Dawkins' books—they are exceptionally clear. Heck, just walk into your bookstore, find the tiny, narrow little shelf where the science books are hidden, and you'll find lots of plain-spoken exposition.

Science *papers* tend to be heavy on the jargon because they are tightly condensed. It's a highly refined format

designed to facilitate communication between knowledgeable people in the field. It's not that hard, though: we teach undergraduates how to read and write science papers, and although admittedly they find them difficult at first, it only takes a little knowledge to be able to work through them. (Myers, 2009b)

Myers' point is that dialogue requires work from both sides, and one cannot expect to step directly into the cutting edge of a technical discipline without at least a modicum of training. Technical papers come across as 'bafflegab' because hearers often do not know how little they know. Making the accusation of evasive and overbearing language (and the attendant elitism) requires that one have done one's homework and know the clearer and more accessible alternatives. But without having done any of that work, O'Leary and most elitism chargers fail to make their case.

But the two-way element of dialectic also puts an epistemic burden on those who defend evolution from these charges, too. Writing popular science requires a knowledge of widespread audience temperament, temptations to misunderstand, hotspots for further disagreement, terms that enrage, and so on. The first reason why this is important is that one understands the issue best when one knows the other side's case and can answer it. The second reason why this is so important is that knowledge cannot be transferred or understood if it is not in a form that is accessible to its audience. Again, epistemic theories of argument require that arguments be evaluated by their comprising epistemic reasons, and if a given argument fails to give its audience epistemically good reasons because the audience fails to understand and thereby believe on their basis, the argument fails to be epistemically successful. The argument's *author* may understand and successfully believe on the basis of those reasons, and thereby be justified and herself know. But if the argument is not conducive of knowledge in its *audience* in a similar fashion, the argument is a failure, and not for *moral* reasons, but for *epistemic* reasons—it fails to transmit knowledge.

Respecting the dignity and perspectives of audience is epistemically important, because a failure to do so reflects a form of short-sighted dogmatism. Many issues are vexing and difficult, and any theory worth its salt must be capable of accommodating the possibility (even likelihood) that people can be reasonably engaged in a dispute and that one side (or both) can be wrong. That is, it is a desideratum of a theory of argument and rationality generally that it be possible that people can be rational but wrong. 'Fallibilism' is broadly the term denoting this view, and it is a positive epistemic failure of advocates of views to mistake the perceived errors of those with whom they disagree to be indicators of their irrationality, stupidity, or duplicity. As a consequence, eagerness to clarify, enthusiasm for dispute, and willingness to revise one's views in light of criticism are reflections not only of our respect for the dignity of others in a discussion, it is a necessary component for epistemically responsibly holding our beliefs. Consequently, the way we respect the dignity of those with whom we disagree is in giving them arguments. Precisely, we respect their dignity in giving them arguments that (a) they can see from their own internal reasons are good (so that they will come to have epistemic justification), (b) they will come to understand the disagreement and its resolution, and (c) that have space for their response and for their own case to be brought to bear on ours (so that if *they* have the better argument, *we'll* come to have justification for changing our minds and understanding the resolution).

These goals are primarily cognitive, but they clearly have a meet-up with pragmatic-rhetorical norms. We should give epistemically good arguments, because those are the arguments that are most likely to withstand criticism, and we should give accounts that address widely flung forms of critique, because these strategies yield more stable commit-

ments. That is, if we argue to change someone's mind as the rhetorical and dialectical theories run, it seems right that we should proffer arguments that not only resolve the disagreements but do so with some measure of stability to that resolution. Epistemically good arguments (ones that both provide justification constituting knowledge but also provide broader understanding of the issue) are going to be the ones that best achieve these goals. Cognitive stability is one sort of good, but cognitive stability when we have the truth seems much better. So, in giving these arguments, a broader epistemic theory *does* promote the moral goods of respecting the dignity of fellow arguers, since it is pursuant of bringing them to know and to understand a point at issue by their own lights. And if the arguments we proffer don't work but our interlocutor's do, *then it's our duty to change our views*. This requires that we make room for objections from far-flung quarters, for extended discussion, and for sometimes leaving things open. For those who come out of argumentative contexts with the best epistemic reasons, we must run the argumentative context fairly and be attentive to the reasoning on the various sides of the debate. This requires that we treat them with dignity, but it needs to be noted that this dignity is mediated by cognitive goals—we have the dignity we do because we are honest inquirers.

This defense of epistemic theories of argument has required that the *exclusivity* of epistemic norms be weakened to their *primacy*. We primarily seek good knowledge-conducive arguments, but there are other goods to be achieved by argument. These are precisely those pursued in the *act of arguing*: resolving disagreement, improvement of understanding of the issue, and promoting a stable dialectical situation (one constituted by the exchange of good arguments instead of vicious means of resolving conflict). Classically, these *process* elements of arguments have been considered under the rubric of rhetoric. Admittedly, these ancillary goods are ones that are not exclusively *epistemic* (as ones directly pursuant of the goal of knowledge), but they are *broadly cognitive* in that they are reflective of our general epistemic responsibilities, and they additionally reflect our practical-rhetorical interests in argument. As a consequence, the best defense for epistemic theories of argument is for them to be parts of wider cognitively eclectic theoretical programs wherein the variety of goods aimed at in arguing can be accommodated.

This epistemic eclecticism amounts to a broadly epistemic theory of arguments not only as *products* but also as bearing on *processes* of argumentation. As a consequence, it bears a resemblance to earlier much stronger epistemic theories of rhetoric, namely, the thesis that *all rhetoric is epistemic*. In fact, I think it is fair to classify the view defended here, in the end, as a mitigated form of an epistemic theory of rhetoric. However, there are two features distinguishing it from the standard views in the epistemic theory of rhetoric.

First, nothing here requires that *all* rhetoric is epistemic. Cherwitz and Hikins, for example, defended this strong view, and though my view bears a strong resemblance to it, I do not hold that all forms of rhetoric must be devoted to being rational representations of reality. Bullshitting, for example, is often effective rhetoric, but it is overtly non-representational (cf. Frankfurt's (1988) "On Bullshit"). Second, the view defended here is not posited on any substantive theory of epistemic justification, truth, or knowledge. One can be agnostic about what the ultimate analyses of the main epistemic concepts are and yet still hold that those concepts constitute the norms of argument-assessment and argumentation generally. This contrasts starkly with the main competitors in the realm of epistemic rhetoric, as Scott's classic case for epistemic rhetoric was on the grounds of a form of relativism (1967, p. 13; 1976, p. 261). Cherwitz and Hikins' case for epistemic rhetoric proceeds from a linguistic theory of content and an ontology of relations (1986, pp. 41, 150). Farrell's case depends on

the thesis that all knowledge “depends on human consensus” (1976, p. 4). Finally, Foss’s connection between epistemology and rhetoric is posited on the inference that, “in the field of communication, the idea that rhetoric creates reality is known as the notion that rhetoric is epistemic, which simply means that rhetoric creates knowledge” (1989, p. 122). My own attitude regarding these epistemic theories of rhetoric is that they are more rhetorical theories of epistemology, but that is not the issue. Rather, the point is that a *thin* epistemic theory of argument (one that takes no substantive stand on the issues internal to the analysis of epistemic terms) is what is on offer, as opposed to a *thick* one (that requires a substantive stand).

Contrast the thin view on offer here with the contentious views that previous forms of the case for epistemic rhetoric. The defense of epistemic theories on offer here is in a better dialectical position. This is for two reasons. First, because criticisms of epistemic theories of argument, at least the ones surveyed here, are targeted at the family. I’ve argued that the criticisms *of the family of views* can be rebutted, and so it is best not to adopt any one epistemic position to provide this case. Second, because epistemological theories are highly controversial within epistemology, it is best to get as much as one can for argumentation theory independently of the controversial theories. Having one’s entire case for an epistemic theory of argument hang on a highly controversial premise in, say, meta-epistemology is recipe for a theoretical disaster. Moreover, it runs headlong into the contestability objection. Finally, a theory of argument should be able to apply to how epistemologists themselves do epistemology, which isn’t that they assume their epistemic theories are right in their details, and criticize the arguments of others accordingly. Instead, they do their best to argue in fashions that are neutral with regard to which theory is correct. Or at least, they should.

Instead, if it is clear that however one comes down on the concepts *knowledge*, *belief*, *justification*, *truth*, and so on, one can see them bearing relevantly similar fruit in argument-evaluation, then a much more defensible form of the epistemic theory of argument is in the offing. I, myself, defend a mixed view of epistemic infinitism, foundationalism, and contextualism, but I do not think that any of those commitments are necessary for the defense of the family of epistemic theories provided here.

A final worry must be addressed, as it has been charged by one of the blind reviewers for this paper that epistemic theories of argument (and epistemology generally) suffers from a hasty generalization from the validity of epistemic norms in argument evaluation to their primacy. An unjustified privileging, it is charged, occurs when one takes the formal norms of knowledge-assessment and their demands into an area of informal reasoning. We argue, often, not just to know, but also to cajole, to explore, to tease, to make nuisances of ourselves, to pass the time, to edify, or to humiliate. These are not overtly *epistemic* employments of argument, and so goes the objection, the centrality of epistemology to these employments of argument is an illusion of taking one case as paradigm.

This is a serious challenge for the epistemic theory on offer. I cannot answer the objection completely in this short space. However, there are two rebuttals to be made. The first is stipulative: epistemic theories of argument are about how arguments improve our cognitive position on an issue. As such, they are devoted to capturing the norms of public reasoning in inquiry, critical discussion, and deliberation. If people perform combative or argumentative speech acts for other purposes, they may *look like* arguments, and maybe they are in some cases to be evaluated according to epistemic rubrics in addition to other criteria (aesthetic, moral, agonistic, etc.), then these are *arguments* in a derivative sense. Again, this point is admittedly stipulative, and it isn’t designed to move the dialogue any further on this

point beyond clarifying the issue. But the stipulative point isn't just out of the air. There's a thought behind it—namely, that in all these alternative cases of argument, epistemic elements are clearly significant, if not still central. It surely seems that if one is merely *exploring* an issue, one would want epistemically better rather than worse reasons comprising that exploration. Were one out to be a nuisance or hurt people's feelings, the best means to do that would be to provide arguments that have epistemic weight behind them. The more likely that the things one says are true (or pass for true) makes them more likely to cause actual difficulty or hurt those challenged. The same goes, as far as I can see, for teasing, cajoling, and so on. The quality of a good tease depends on how well it purports to reflect or transmit knowledge of a situation—you can only tease people for things that they and you take yourselves to know to be true about them.

The broad epistemic view on arguments has been, I take it, reasonably criticized by those in the rhetorical tradition. The process elements of argumentation and the demands of addressing audiences should be reflected by a theory of argument. However, I've argued here that epistemic norms bear on the process elements of argumentation and that they require attentiveness to disagreement. Consequently, we can see epistemic norms of argument as a constitutive part of a wider set of cognitive and practical responsibilities.

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