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Arguments as Unexpected Puppies: Agential Disrespect through Rational Persuasion

Abstract: In this article, I identify a tension between two forms of respect, respect for others' agency and respect for their rationality. This tension emerges, I argue, when one person presents another with a nuanced argument on an important topic, thereby complimenting their rationality, but draining their agential resources by demanding their attention. Giving someone an argument can therefore generate a structurally similar double bind to giving them a puppy as a present: refusing is normatively uncomfortable, but accepting requires a significant sacrifice. I conclude by considering how certain factors can weaken the double bid, including rhetoric.

Keywords: Respect, attention, rationality, agency, arguments, rhetoric

"This year for your birthday, I got you something special. I know you feel bad about big dogs that need homes. So I've been visiting shelters, and I found this adorable little friend. He's part Irish Wolfhound and part Saint Bernard, so he should get up to over 120 pounds. That's why he wasn't adopted before, despite his *precious* face and non-stop energy. Honestly, if I didn't have my allergies, I'd have kept him. But I'll come by for weekly visits!"

This is a nightmare scenario for most people. The nightmarish quality comes from being pulled in two directions. On the one hand, when friends work hard to find gifts that connect to our personal concerns, we have strong reason to accept those gifts and to incorporate them into our lives. On the other hand, we all have limited bandwidth, and so typically avoid taking on big commitments like raising a puppy. Hence, unexpected but demanding gifts like puppies can put us in an uncomfortable double bind.

My primary aim is to argue that presenting someone with an *argument* can put them in a similar double bind, albeit a less nightmarish one. I mean "argument" in a fairly broad sense: any presentation of reasons meant to demonstrate the attractions of some belief or action. We present each other with arguments in many contexts, ranging from in-person "don't you realize??" political confrontations to cool-headed emails to coworkers about policy issues.

This double bind I'm concerned with does not arise from the values of friendship or puppies. Instead, it arises from moral respect. Building on the work of George Tsai,¹ my subsidiary aim here is to show that moral respect is more complex than philosophers

sometimes assume, such that communication that is respectful along one dimension can be disrespectful along another.

I begin by distinguishing two kinds of respect: respect for others' *rationality* and respect for their *agency*. I then turn to the topic of attention, first arguing that attention is crucial for agency, and then arguing that arguments demand attention – especially arguments that express robust rationality respect. With that in place, I spell out the relevant double bind, where a robust expression of rationality respect comes at the cost of respect for agency, leaving the recipient of the argument in a difficult position. I conclude by considering factors that can loosen or prevent that double bind.

Two caveats. First, there are multiple theoretical approaches to topics of argument and attention in the literature. For the sake of brevity, I make use of intuitive notions, with the hope that my argument is compatible with various approaches.² Second, my discussion focuses on what Stephen Darwall famously dubs “recognition respect,”³ though I do not attempt to analyze respect beyond my initial distinction. By streamlining my discussion, I do not mean to deny to complexity of the underlying issues.

1. Two kinds of respect

Presenting someone with an argument is a paradigmatic demonstration of respect, showing due regard for them as another rational being. That's why we don't try to saw people who seem completely irrational with arguments. Similarly, when others attempt to influence us through non-rational means, we can feel slighted as rational beings. To be sure, not every expression of an argument is respectful. Some arguments are condescending, such as when people offer blatantly obvious reasons, or when they pose their arguments in condescending terms.⁴ Other expressions of arguments are manipulative, such as when they're used to move us towards a vulnerable emotional state.⁵ Someone who offers an argument with full respect avoids all that, and instead aims at productively engaging with someone's capacity for rational judgments, their capacities for evaluating arguments.

In the Kantian ethical tradition, however, moral respect is primarily directed at others' spheres of *agency*, not at their capacities for rational judgment.⁶ Respect is about giving others space to live,⁷ and about not using them as mere means for our ends.⁸ Kant's famous image of the 'Kingdom of Ends' involves this kind of respect: everyone engaging in their individual projects just up to the point where they interfere with others' projects, and coming to mutual agreements around conflicts.

I will refer to these two forms of respect as “rationality respect” and “agency respect.” Agency and rationality themselves are interconnected, so these forms of respect overlap. Still, *robust* expressions of each differ. Presenting someone with a nuanced, challenging argument can be a robust expression of rationality respect, but it is not normally a robust expression of respect for their agency. By contrast, carefully observing

“No Trespassing!” signs can be a robust expression of agency respect, but it is not normally a robust expression of respect for someone’s rationality.

2. Attention is necessary to agency

Next, consider a principle about agency: you interfere with someone’s agency when you deprive them of a necessary condition for their intended actions, even when that deprivation is temporary. For example, if I prematurely close our committee’s Zoom meeting before you’ve had a turn to talk, I’ve temporarily deprived you of certain courses of action. Or if I park my truck in front of your driveway on election day, I have deprived you of the possibility of driving to vote, at least temporarily. In both cases, I probably owe you an apology, because I have interfered with your agency.

The same point holds for *depleting* a necessary condition for action. If I suddenly declare that there’s only 5 minutes left in the meeting, or park my truck blocking most of your driveway, I’ve made certain actions more difficult for you (expressing your views, driving to vote) without making them impossible. Such depletion is not as serious a failure as depriving you of the necessary condition altogether, but it’s still a failure of agency respect.

Attention is necessary for agency, or at least for most exercises of agency.⁹ Reading, planning, and careful listening all require significant amounts of attention. That is why all those activities become more difficult in the presence of distractions, such as intense itches or yelling strangers.

In recent decades, attention has sometimes been described as a scarce (albeit renewable) resource, resulting in an “attention economy.”¹⁰ These descriptions actually under-emphasize how important attention is to agency. Attention isn’t just a resource, it’s central to our cognitive, agential functioning. Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, for instance, put attention at the center of our moral agency.¹¹ The same point emerges within Daniel Kahneman’s influential dual-process model of cognition. According to Kahneman, we *identify* most with ‘System 2’ – our highly attentive, deliberate cognitive processes, in contrast to the vitally important but less attentive processes known as ‘System 1.’¹²

As a result of the importance of attention to agency, depleting someone’s attention can be failure of agency respect. This is why playing loud music at work can be a failure to respect your coworkers. How a serious failure it is depends on *how much* attention you take up and on whether your coworkers *consent* to the activity. The longer and louder you blast your music, the more serious the failure, though there might be no failure if your coworkers have made it clear they don’t mind.

3. Arguments demand attention

At first pass, it might seem that offering an argument to someone makes only a miniscule demand on their attention – at least, provided you’re not yelling it repeatedly. Many arguments are simple, and so easily registered (“oh, right – good point”). Moreover, much communicative activity is consensual. If I’ve consented to talking, emailing, or texting with you, I’ve consented to give you some attention. As a result, you can offer me an (appropriately sized) argument without any failure of agency respect.¹³ So the double bind I am exploring does not appear every time someone offers an argument.

The cases where it does appear, however, involve the most robust demonstrations of rationality respect. We may not know how much someone really respects us until we discover that we disagree about an important topic, such as climate change or reproductive rights. It is tempting to avoid confrontation in those cases, whether out of prudence or out of contempt (Kant plausibly takes all expressions of contempt to be failures of respect¹⁴). By contrast, it’s hard to imagine a greater expression of rationality respect than you engaging with me on a difficult topic, taking the time to construct the best argument you can against my view, and presenting that argument to me. When you do this, you’ve avoided the lure of contempt. In fact, putting together the best argument you can muster is a compliment to my intelligence, and be part of a broadly cooperative epistemic activity – making us members of the kingdom of epistemic ends. Argumentation can be a shining example of robust rationality respect.¹⁵

Rationality respect requires receptivity as well, of course. Another one of Kant’s plausible suggestions is that we should not dismiss others’ judgments as absurdities, but should instead *seek out some truth* in them.¹⁶ This is a strong demand: not just a willingness to listen, but an active attempt to find something correct in others’ beliefs. That demand naturally extends to inviting others to tell us their reactions. So presenting an argument isn’t a full expression of rationality respect unless it comes with an openness to hear the other person’s reactions.

As a result, sincerely offering someone an argument generates at least three levels of demand on their attention. To illustrate why no level of demand is trivial, we can consider how they play out in academic contexts. The first level is a demand that they *accurately understand* the argument. On points of significant disagreement, charitably, accurately understanding others’ arguments is notoriously challenging: even within academic subdisciplines, experts often talk past each other. The second level of demand is that the argument’s recipient gives it a *fair hearing*, whether or not they ultimately end up agreeing.¹⁷ This is also difficult, even for people with similar disciplinary backgrounds, hence the frequency question-begging responses within academic exchanges. Finally, a third level of demand comes from inviting someone’s reactions to an argument. If you show full respect for my rationality with your argument, I am morally pressured to show similar respect for your rationality in my response. Respectfully responding often requires a significant amount of time and attention – hence, the widespread expectation that conference presenters send their papers to their commentators well in advance.

When it comes to moral or political topics, there is sometimes a fourth level of demand on attention, one that arises from the second level. Our moral and political beliefs shape much of our lives: our social circles, our causes and projects, our sense of self-esteem, etc. When someone gives us a good argument that challenges those beliefs, we are left with the challenge of figuring out its implications for our broader lives.¹⁸ For example, if someone radically changes their beliefs about reproductive rights, they may no longer be welcome in their social circles, and they may have to wrestle with the implications of their past actions. That change might put them on a better life path, but even then, such changes shouldn't be foisted on someone lightly.

Those demands on attention can go beyond what people implicitly consent to within normal communication. When I answer your phone call, e.g., I'm consenting to giving you some of my attention, but within limits. Those limits vary between contexts, but rarely do we invite communication that will require hours of our attention (whether in the conversation, or afterwards).

4. The double bind

The parallel with the puppy case should now be clear. Giving a puppy to a dog-loving friend is an expression of friendship and regard for their values. Similarly, giving someone a carefully constructed argument on a topic of mutual concern is an expression of respect for their rationality. Both acts feel like compliments or favors, which cannot be easily turned down, and which also have significant, longer-term demands on our attention. Both puppies and arguments can be fun to play with and can enrich our lives, but engaging with them depletes a necessary condition for much of agency, and so almost inevitably interferes with other actions. In both cases, there is some level of implicit consent. Most people implicitly consent to receiving *some* sort of gift on their birthday, even ones like houseplants with longer-term needs. Similarly, most people implicitly consent to sharing *some* of their attention in communication. But puppies and nuanced, well-constructed arguments on important topics typically demand more than was implicitly consented to, and so more than we expect.¹⁹

I'm not arguing that we should simply avoid arguments. Offering someone a good argument on an important issue can be the most robust expression of rationality respect for them. Precisely for that reason, however, it can sometimes be a failure of agency respect. How serious that failure is depends on other factors, of course. But many people would reasonably resent having a 'bombshell' revelation dropped on them during a busy day, and expressions of arguments can have similar impacts.

5. Loosening or avoiding the double bind

In our original case, the friend shouldn't have given you the puppy as a surprise gift. Sometimes, the parallel omission is the best option when it comes to arguments: when someone is spread thin, it's better not to offer them complex, challenging arguments. An advantage of arguments over puppies is that they can often wait – hence the value in inviting someone to hash out some issue over coffee sometime. The person may decline that invitation, but they can regard the offer itself as an expression of respect for both their rationality and their agency.

Before concluding, I want to briefly consider three other factors that can loosen the double bind.

The first factor is when the moral stakes are high. Having incorrect beliefs about an important issue isn't always a big deal. In other cases, though, having correct beliefs makes a moral impact. An argument that brings someone out of a dangerous cult is a morally good thing, even if it temporarily disrupts their agency. Similarly, if a CEO is about to implement a deeply harmful policy, and if there is a real chance that they can be dissuaded, then agency respect no longer seriously weighs against arguing with them. Even if the argument ends up disrupting their lives, the potential harms morally outweigh any obligation to respect their sphere of agency.

The second factor is institutional. As social creatures, institutions structure our agency, down to the level of our attention. Unfortunately, many institutions direct our agency and attention *away* from careful, fair-minded engagement with arguments on important issues. The profession of academic philosophy is supposedly all about engagement with novel, nuanced arguments, but philosophers' professional objections make little room for it. We're supposed to teach material we already know, respond to emails, complete online trainings, and so on. Yet some institutions *can* make room for fair-minded engagement with challenging arguments. Classes in philosophy and other humanistic disciplines sometimes provide students exactly that. When all goes just right, those classes facilitate rationality respect without any compromise of agency respect.

The third factor is rhetoric. Some uses of rhetoric are incompatible with rationality respect – as when a morally-deficient politician uses misleading stories to persuade people to vote against their own self-interest. Yet, as even Kant implicitly acknowledged, certain forms of rhetoric are compatible with rationality respect.²⁰ For example, an emotionally charged story can help someone appreciate the moral significance of an issue. Provided that story is accurate and representative, it can simply be a way of making the relevant reasons clear. But such rhetoric is not merely compatible with rationality respect. It can also be an *expression* of agency respect. Consider Daniel Kahneman's choice of "System 1" and "System 2" to describe two types of mental processes. Kahneman emphasizes that these simple labels are meant to help us track a complex distinction.²¹ He thereby makes his discussion easier to follow, demanding less of his readers' attention than more complex terminology would have, but with no sacrifice of rationality respect. Similarly, I hope, with

my analogy of the unexpected puppy, which is meant to illustrate the structure of a moral double bind in a processing-friendly way.²²

The take-home lesson of all this is that robust expressions of rationality respect sometimes come with a moral hazard, namely, agency disrespect. In other words: we're automatically not in the clear, morally speaking, just because we're sincerely offering good arguments.²³

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¹ (Tsai 2014).

² For relevant overviews, see, respectively, (Tindale 2015)4/11/2025 7:07:00 PM and (Watzl 2022).

³ (Darwall 1977).

⁴ See (Tsai 2014) for other ways that rational argumentation can be disrespectful. I set aside concerns here about whether arguments infringe others' epistemic autonomy (but see (Casey 2024)).

⁵ (Gorin 2014).

⁶ I discuss my version of the distinction in greater detail in (Marshall Forthcoming).

⁷ (Kant 1996, 569).

⁸ (Kant 1996, 79).

⁹ See again (Watzl 2022) for an overview.

¹⁰ For an informal but helpful overview of reasons to resist classifying attention as a resource, see (Nixon 2018).

¹¹ See (Panizza 2022).

¹² (Kahneman 2013).

¹³ For a finer-grained discussion of legitimate demands of attention within communication, see (Flowerree 2022).

¹⁴ (Kant 1996, 579-80).

¹⁵ See, e.g., (Aikin and Talisse 2018).

¹⁶ (Kant 1996, 580).

¹⁷ See (Rini 2018) on the obligation to be open to moral persuasion.

¹⁸ I explore related themes further in (Marshall Forthcoming).

¹⁹ Of course, tragically, some puppies end up not living long. Similarly, but less tragically, some arguments end up so obviously invalid they are easily ignored. But what matters morally is the intention, and the expression of friendship or respect comes with *taking* a puppy to be healthy or an argument to be valid.

²⁰ See (Stroud 2016) and (Ercolini 2016), who build on (Garsten 2009).

²¹ (Kahneman 2013, 28–31).

²² For one discussion of the varied effects of rhetoric on processing, see (Menninghaus et al. 2015).

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