

Commentary on Gascón, Virtuous Arguers: Responsible and Reliable

ANDREW ABERDEIN
Florida Institute of Technology
aberdein@fit.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

The principal difficulty I had responding to José's paper was working out exactly where I disagreed with him. And also finding a way of explaining how I disagreed with him that amounted to more than "Come to my paper this afternoon, when all will be explained!" Our papers dovetail quite closely: they both tackle the issue of virtue-based argument evaluation, a project I have greater hopes for than does José. But there were a few points where I hope I can contribute something of direct relevance to José's project.

2. NINE TYPES OF VIRTUE ARGUMENTATION

José reminds us of the distinction between reliabilists and responsibilists which has been very influential in virtue epistemology, and he links it up to argumentation. This is how he puts it:

One of these kinds of argumentative virtues will explain the informal logic skills that the virtuous arguer must have; the other kind of argumentative virtues will account for the character-based, ethical traits that the virtuous arguer must cultivate and display.

Fig. 1 is an attempt to capture how this distinction cuts across another important distinction, that of the type of project VTA should pursue. It is based on a similar account of distinctions drawn within virtue epistemology (the picture is mine, but the way of splitting up the territory is from Alfano, 2012). For the epistemologists, the y-axis comprises two intersecting sets of virtues: reliabilist virtues, à la Ernest Sosa, for whom the faculty of sight is a paradigm virtue; and the more

ethical-sounding responsibilist virtues, à la Linda Zagzebski. Since you could also employ a combination of the two, there is also a third, “mixed” option. The distinction on the x-axis concerns the choice of project to which these virtues might be applied. By “classical” Alfano means old-school epistemology: defining knowledge, trying to solve the Gettier problem, and so forth. He contrasts these projects with what he calls inquiry epistemology, which prioritizes hitherto overlooked questions about the value of knowledge, the nature of understanding, and so forth. Once again, these approaches intersect: some people say virtues can both solve the old-school problems and do more besides.

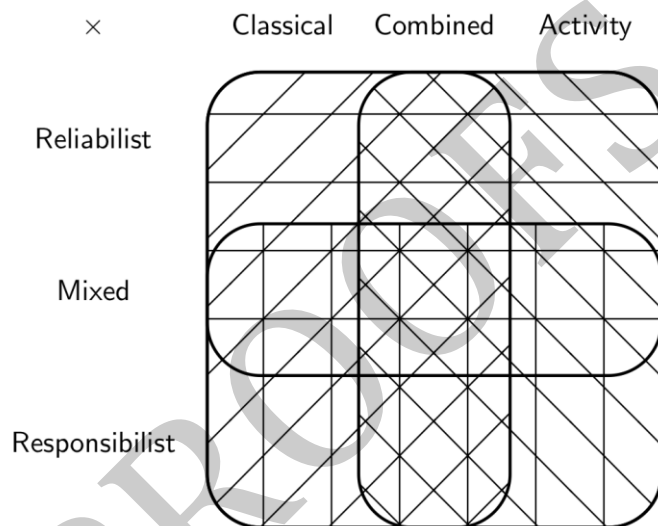


Figure 1 – Nine Types of Virtue Argumentation

Virtue argumentation has essentially the same map (Fig. 1). I’ve changed Alfano’s terminology only slightly (from inquiry to activity). On the y-axis, the actual virtues may be different, but the distinctions still seem to hold: reliabilist versus responsibilist, or maybe both. On the x-axis, the project is different, because it’s not epistemology (or not that bit of epistemology). We are not addressing the definition of knowledge, we are addressing the definition of cogency. That is surely the core classical project of argumentation: distinguishing good arguments from bad ones. But, as in epistemology, there are other questions we may have overlooked: what the value of arguments is, how arguments can contribute to human flourishing, and so forth. Virtue epistemology is obviously far greater in scale and indeed has been around rather longer than virtue argumentation. You can probably find somebody in all nine of the squares. But virtue argumentation is more sparsely populated.

There's nobody in the left-hand column, for those just interested in classical projects; I'm possibly the only person in the centre column who thinks we can do both kinds of thing; and almost everybody else in virtue argumentation is in the right-hand column, and most of them are probably in one or other of the bottom two squares. That's to say, most people are either straight responsibilists in their choice of virtues or they're also throwing in some reliabilist virtues as well. I'm not aware of any straight reliabilists. Whereas I push more into the centre square, and the rest of the map may be *terra incognita*.

All of the foregoing is primarily to recap José's account. But I have a few further comments and questions that arise from this picture. Firstly, and this is as much a criticism of me as it is of José, but the reliabilist versus responsibilist way of carving up the territory is not necessarily the most productive way of doing so. It's historically important, and has the most easily identifiable characters, Sosa versus Zagzebski, but is it necessarily the best way of thinking about which virtues you're talking about and what makes them distinct? The problem is that most people want their virtues to be both: responsibilists want their virtues to be reliable too. Sosa is associated with "virtues" that people don't think of as virtues, and it doesn't help that Sosa doesn't always use the v-word—he spends a lot of time talking about "faculties"—but he clearly means virtues. But more recently Sosa has been grumbling that people didn't really understand the scale of his project: they think that he was just concentrating on what he calls "animal knowledge", things like perception, as though that was all that he had to say, but he says, "frankly it has been challenging enough to try to deal with the simpler examples first" (Sosa, 2015, p. 65).

If even Sosa denies being the kind of strict reliabilist that he is sometimes painted as, perhaps there are more profitable ways of dividing up the territory. For instance, Heather Battaly distinguishes between virtues as requiring good ends (VGE) and virtues as requiring good motives (VGM) (Battaly, 2015, p. 9). By and large, responsibilist virtues need to have a good motive and reliabilist virtues would not be reliable if they did not have a good end. Ideally, of course, you want both: you want virtuous activity to be well-motivated and to bring about a good end. But you don't always get what you want. The ethical examples which tease these conceptions apart are such cases as the wealthy person who gives a lot of money to charity, but only because they like hobnobbing with celebrities: they're not well-motivated, but all that money actually does some good. Are they really benevolent? Well... kind of? Conversely, consider somebody who deeply cares about the issues but is really unlucky, so they keep giving money to conmen, or

schemes that fail, or schemes that are hopelessly counter-productive. So that would be someone who always has the right motives but their apparent benevolence doesn't produce good ends. By way of an argumentational example, consider the virtue of being willing to listen to others. On the one hand, an arguer might do so only for ulterior motives, perhaps to receive a good grade in a speech class, or because their interlocutor told some good jokes. Nonetheless, their attentive listening might lead them to contribute to a virtuous argument as a result. Conversely, a well-motivated arguer could be consistently unlucky in their choice of interlocutors, none of whom ever put forward an argument worth listening to, such that no good end ever comes from the arguer's good motives. Obviously you hope that you get both good ends and good motives, but we need to consider the cases where you don't. This suggests that a VGE/VGM distinction, insofar as it diverges from the reliabilist/responsibilist distinction, may be a better way of carving up the terrain. In particular, VGE are easier to check than VGM, because they are externalist—they do not require knowledge of the arguer's state of mind. This may make a VGE approach a more practicable way of incorporating argument evaluation into VTA.

3. VIRTUES AKIN TO SKILLS

I have another couple of observations about exactly how virtues relate to skills. José writes that

I will argue that the skills related to the production of good arguments can be integrated as virtues into virtue argumentation theory. Thus, although virtue argumentation theory will not cover argument evaluation, it will acknowledge and incorporate the skills that make an arguer reliably produce cogent arguments.

Reliabilist virtues often end up sounding a lot like skills. But you can distinguish between skills which you also label as virtues and skills which are essential to the exercise of a virtue. So it might be helpful to keep the skill/virtue distinction, rather than trying to make all the skills into a special kind of virtue. You have to be able to get this sort of thing right before you can have that type of virtue. Just as fair-goers are told "Must be this high to take this ride", we may be told "Must have this level of skill before you can exercise this virtue". For example, you can't really be courageous in battle unless you have had some kind of military basic training. It's not the military training that's the virtue—that's a skill; but it's a skill that's necessary before you can exercise the virtue.

Likewise, there are skills which are essential for virtuous participation in some arguments: innumerate arguers are all but certain to argue badly in statistical arguments, no matter what virtues they possess, for example. (Although numeracy could also be construed as a reliabilist virtue.) So that's one way of perhaps complicating the picture.

4. A WIDESPREAD AND WELL-ESTABLISHED INTUITION

Finally, José tells us that “the proponent of a virtue approach to argumentation” is faced with a dilemma:

Either (a) she takes argumentative virtues as the basis from which the quality of arguments derives, or (b) she admits that cogency is not to be defined in terms of qualities of the arguer. Option (a) clashes with a widespread and well-established intuition that in general arguments should be evaluated on their own merits, and not on the basis of who puts them forward. On the other hand, option (b) leads to a gap in virtue argumentation theory regarding argument quality—a crucial part of argumentation—so that seemingly a virtuous arguer could systematically produce bad arguments or assess arguments incorrectly.

The grip of José's dilemma depends upon what he proposes as a “widespread and well-established intuition”—the widespread and well-established intuition that Aberdeen is wrong!—that “in general arguments should be evaluated on their own merits, and not on the basis of who puts them forward”. It certainly sounds very widespread and well-established when you put it in those terms. Not least because, as José puts it, “a virtuous arguer can put forward a bad argument, and a vicious arguer can put forward a good argument”. However, as may be anticipated, I dispute that this intuition blocks option (a). I shall attempt to briefly explain why I think this.

A crucial qualification is that a virtuous arguer can put forward a bad argument, but not *qua* virtuous arguer, not when they are arguing virtuously. Likewise, a vicious arguer can put forward a good argument, but only by arguing as a virtuous arguer would argue. The foundation of a virtuous analysis of argument quality will not be whether the arguers are *actually* virtuous—perhaps an impossible question to answer—but whether they are arguing as virtuous arguers would argue. What this standard actually comprises may not be so very different from what more conventional accounts of good argument propose (at least, it won't be any laxer). Good arguments₁ should still have true premisses

and conclusions that follow from them with certainty or high likelihood; good arguments₂ should still be chiefly composed of good arguments₁. But this will be because that is how a virtuous arguer is overwhelmingly likely to argue. In particular, the virtue that will end up doing much of the work necessary to achieve this project is the virtue of common sense. Under the ambit of common sense you can smuggle a great deal of good argumentational practice (Aberdein, 2016a, p. 419). Essentially, I am using common sense as a translation of phronesis, so I'm ultimately indebted to Aristotle for the idea that the intellectual virtue of phronesis is the one which allows you to recognize and formulate a good argument (as I have discussed at greater length elsewhere: Aberdein, 2016b). So we are not presented with two evaluative strategies—evaluate arguments on their own merits; evaluate arguments on the basis of who puts them forward—nor am I proposing that we should abandon the former and embrace the latter. Rather, when properly understood, these are two differently incomplete descriptions of the same strategy: evaluate arguments on their own merits as manifest in the actions of the arguers who put them forward (and are otherwise engaged in them).

In closing, I should like to reiterate my thanks to José, for helping to sharpen some of these contrasts, and thereby exhibiting many of the virtues essential to good argument.

REFERENCES

- Aberdein, A. (2016a). The vices of argument. *Topoi*, 35(2), 413–422.
- Aberdein, A. (2016b, June). *Was Aristotle a virtue argumentation theorist?* Paper Presented at Argumentation in Classical Antiquity: Dialectic, Rhetoric & Other Domains, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany.
- Alfano, M. (2012). Extending the situationist challenge to responsibilist virtue epistemology. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 62(247), 223–249.
- Battaly, H. (2015). A pluralist theory of virtue. In M. Alfano (Ed.), *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory* (pp. 7–22). London: Routledge.
- Sosa, E. (2015). Virtue epistemology: Character versus competence. In M. Alfano (Ed.), *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory* (pp. 62–74). London: Routledge.