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Inference and Virtue

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What are the prospects (if any) for a virtue-theoretic account of inference? This paper compares three options. Firstly, assess each argument individually in terms of the virtues of the participants. Secondly, make the capacity for cogent inference itself a virtue. Thirdly, recapture a standard treatment of cogency by accounting for each of its components in terms of more familiar virtues. The three approaches are contrasted and their strengths and weaknesses assessed.

KEYWORDS: acceptability, cogency, epistemological approach, inference, relevance, reliabilism, responsibilism, sufficiency, virtue argumentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtue theories of argumentation (VTA) have recently attracted significant interest (Aberdein and Cohen, 2016). This paper addresses the possibility of analysing inference in terms of VTA. There aren't an enormous number of virtue argumentation theorists, but almost all of them, possibly all of them bar me, believe that virtue theory is not sufficient to describe inferences in a meaningful way (see, for example, Bowell and Kingsbury, 2013; Cohen, 2013; Gascón, 2015). The evaluation of inferences is seen as something that should be handed off to some other argumentation theory, of one of the many available flavours. The idea that it could be in any sense "virtues all the way down" is a position that I have advocated for, but so far I don't think I've succeeded in persuading anyone else. This paper is an attempt to do that—or at least to defend my obduracy.

There are at least three options for a virtue-theoretic account of inference. Firstly, we might adopt "virtue eliminativism", by analogy

with similar positions in virtue epistemology which maintain that traditional epistemological concepts are incommensurable with—and should be replaced by—virtue theory. In the context of argument, this could take the form of rejecting altogether the existence of argument patterns that all virtuous arguers accept, and thereby assessing each argument individually in terms of the virtues of the participants. Secondly, we could seek to transpose cogency into virtue-theoretic terms by making the capacity to produce and recognize cogent inference a virtue. Thirdly, we could attempt to recapture a standard account of cogency in terms of more familiar virtues. This is perhaps the most ambitious of the three (and fittingly corresponds to what Fabio Paglieri has dubbed "ambitious moderate" VTA: Paglieri, 2015, 77). Such an approach would require accounts of all components of cogency in terms of virtues. I shall address each of these options in turn.

2. VIRTUE ELIMINATIVISM

In dubbing the first option "virtue eliminativism", I follow the virtue epistemologist Heather Battaly: "virtue-eliminativism ... argues that epistemological projects other than explorations of the virtues should be eliminated: we should abandon discussions of knowledge and justification, and replace them with analyses of the virtues" (Battaly, 2008, p. 642). She is describing one strategy virtue epistemologists could take, and not what most of them do; most virtue epistemologists use virtues to recapture more traditional approaches to epistemology. By contrast, virtue eliminativists seek to rebuild everything from a fresh virtuistic foundation and if there are certain things which just don't get to be rebuilt on that foundation, bite that bullet and jettison those things. This is not a position Battaly is advocating, and its VTA counterpart is not a position I am advocating. I am not sure whether anyone actually is advocating either position. There is an undeniable anarchic thrill in dismissing all talk of cogency as a bad idea and concentrating on the virtues of arguments, first and last, even if that means we need to abandon any prospect of a shared structure between arguments and evaluate each argument individually. But although it is a position open to somebody, it is not one that I support.

3. COGENCY AS A VIRTUE

Another approach that is much more likely to prosper is what I shall refer to as "cogency as a virtue". We might also think of this as the easy road, or the low road. The key thought here is that being able to produce

cogent arguments, and being able to recognize them when they are produced by other people, is a virtue. That solves the problem, at least to some extent. This would be continuous with the virtue reliablilism of Ernest Sosa, in which deductive inference is identified as a virtue:

> Whatever exactly the end may be, the virtue of a virtue derives not simply from leading us to it, perhaps accidentally, but from leading us to it reliably: e.g., 'in a way *bound* to maximize one's surplus of truth over error'. Rationalist intuition and deduction are thus prime candidates, since they would always lead us aright. But it is not so clearly virtuous to admit no other faculties, seeing the narrow limits beyond which intuition and deduction will never lead us. What other faculties might one admit? ... There are faculties of two broad sorts: those that lead to beliefs from beliefs already formed, and those that lead to beliefs but not from beliefs. The first of these we call 'transmission' faculties, the second 'generation' faculties. Rationalist deduction is hence a transmission faculty and rationalist intuition a 'generation' faculty. Supposing reason a single faculty with subfaculties of intuitive reason and inferential reason, reason itself is then both a transmission faculty and a generation faculty. (Sosa, 1985, p. 227).

One reason for the lengthy quotation is that Sosa can be somewhat skittish about actually using the word "virtue". He often prefers to speak of "faculties". I quote him here at length to remove any doubt that these faculties are indeed intended to be virtues. He acknowledges "rationalist intuition and deduction" as "prime candidates" for being virtues, and he talks about reason as "a single faculty", that is virtue, "with sub[virtues] of intuitive reason and inferential reason". Thus we have a faculty of reason that is cashed out in virtue terms. So, at least in some respects, that does what we need. Indeed, it would have the advantage that successful cogent inference is more readily observed than valid deductive inference, answering the charge that virtues should be attainable, and not a seldom achieved ideal. Nonetheless, it may seem a bit of a cop out: in essence, we've just said, "There's a virtue for that!" And that's it.

4. COGENCY RECAPTURE: RSA

A more interesting approach may be to take an off-the-shelf account of cogent argument, and then cash it out in virtue terms. The go-to off-the-

shelf account of cogent argument is the RSA, aka ARG, approach to cogency. Here is Trudy Govier's version:

> The basic elements of a cogent argument, referred to here as the **ARG conditions**, are as follows:
>
> i.   It has **acceptable premises**. That is, it is reasonable for those to whom the argument is addressed to believe these premises. There is good reason to accept the premises—even if, in some cases, they are not known to be true—and there is no good evidence indicating that the premises are false. When you are evaluating an argument, the person to whom the premises must be acceptable is you yourself. You have to think about whether you do accept them, or have good reason to accept them. ...
>
> ii. Its premises are relevant to its conclusion. By this we mean that the premises state evidence, offer reasons that support the conclusion, or can be arranged into a demonstration from which the conclusion can be derived. The **relevance of premises** is necessary for the cogency of an argument. ...
>
> iii. The premises provide adequate or **good grounds** for the conclusion. In other words, *considered together*, the premises give sufficient reason to make it rational to accept the conclusion. (Govier, 2010, p. 87).

What are our prospects for cashing all this out in terms of virtues? There are three sub-projects here, obviously: acceptability, relevance, and grounds (or sufficiency).

4.1 Acceptability

Acceptability is the easiest of the three. We already have some acknowledgement of its agent-relativity in Govier's definition: it is "reasonable for those to whom the argument is addressed". So, being the sort of person who has the right sense of what acceptable means is a plausible candidate for a virtue. Likewise, for Ralph Johnson, "acceptability will have to be understood in terms of a dialectical situation, of the interplay between arguer and Other" (Johnson, 2000, p. 195). Of course, "dialectical" is still quite a long way from virtue, but we're heading in the right direction. Specifically, it is not hard to see how that interplay could be cashed out in terms of the virtues of the

respective parties, such as recognition of reliable authority or willingness to question the obvious.

4.2 Relevance

Relevance is going to be harder work. Johnson states that "relevance is a dialectical criterion" too (Johnson, 2000, p. 204). As noted above, this is at least a step in the right direction. More promisingly, Paglieri proposes that VTA take a lead from relevance theory in pragmatics. Specifically, he cites this definition of "Relevance of an input to an individual at a time" from the pioneering relevance theorists Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber:

> (a)   Everything else being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved in an individual by processing an input at a given time, the greater the relevance of the input to that individual at that time.
> (b)   Everything else being equal, the smaller the processing effort expended by the individual in achieving those effects, the greater the relevance of the input to that individual at that time. (Wilson and Sperber, 2002, p. 602).

As Paglieri observes,

> Here relevance is no longer a property of the argument per se, but rather a feature of the interaction between argument, context, and interpreter. While relevance theorists may leave it at that, virtue theorists will want to go a step further and add that also the ability to *be* argumentatively relevant (that is, to produce arguments that are relevant to one's intended audience within the appropriate context) is a virtue worth having—now for the producer of the argument, rather than its interpreter. (Paglieri, 2015, pp. 79 80).

However, at least as written, this won't work: we are looking for an explication of the relevance of premisses to conclusion, not of arguments to audiences. (Paglieri acknowledges as much: his purposes are not mine.) Indeed, audience relevance would seem to fall under acceptability, so we would appear to be no further forward. Nonetheless, we may reasonably ask whether premiss–conclusion relevance can be addressed in virtuistic terms. Certainly there are some virtues, such as recognition of salient facts, which seem suited to play a role here. But in order for them to do so, we must overcome the intuition that premiss–conclusion relevance must be agent-neutral.

4.3 Sufficiency

The trickiest of the RSA/ARG triple is sufficiency. Once again, we can take some comfort from Johnson: "It seems clear that the question to be asked requires that the critic look at all the evidence produced by the arguer and ask whether the premises, taken together, provide enough support for the conclusion" (Johnson, 2000, p. 205). At least we've got some sense of this being something which people do. So we have a process-based understanding of how this goes, that this isn't just a property of arguments as abstract objects, this is something that arises out of the interplay between the various parties concerned. Perhaps we can make a stronger case to cash this out in detail in virtue terms, for example by stressing the importance of intellectual empathy, in the form of insight into problems, and of intellectual perseverance.

But we always have a fall-back option, courtesy of Sosa and the low road. We have travelled some way up the high road, by noting that acceptability at least can plausibly be cashed out in virtue terms. Perhaps we have made less progress on relevance and sufficiency, but we can detour back onto the low road to finish the job. Thereby we can at least narrow down the task that we want the virtues to do from analysing cogency as a whole to analysing some of its essential components. So the route is not blocked, but perhaps we end up back on the low road after all. Nonetheless, I think we've learned something by going some distance on the high road.

5. COGENCY RECAPTURE: MERITS

Another high road strategy would be to observe that, although the RSA/ARG account has been very influential and widely adopted it is not the only way of thinking about cogency. A different analysis of cogency may do a better job of giving us a virtue account. Here, for example, is William Rehg:

> I have distinguished three types of merits of cogent arguments as products of argumentative practices. *Content merits* can be identified in the text of the argument itself by applying various analytic tools to an interpretation of that text. An argument has *transactional merits* to the extent that it wins acceptance in a local dialogue (an exchange in a small group and/or between an arguer and a text) conducted in a way that fosters reasonable judgment. The conditions for ascribing transactional merits vary according to the particular transactional context—the capacities of the participants to

> process information, their background knowledge, local conventions of argument, and so on. An argument has *public merits* insofar as it can travel across different transactional locales whose macrosocial arrangement and aggregate conditioning sustain collective reasonableness (Rehg, 2005, p. 110).

He talks about "merits" rather than virtues, but the difference would seem to be primarily terminological. The major point of contrast is that these are not virtues of persons, they are the virtues of the arguments themselves. But this is akin to an alternative strategy in virtue epistemology, perhaps especially the use of virtue theory in the philosophy of science, of talking about virtues of theories rather than virtues of persons. So this is potentially a starting point for another way of scouting out the high road, and a rather different approach to VTA, to take a virtue approach to arguments as products, and then either satisfy yourself with that, or try and understand how an account of arguers might emerge from that project.

6. COGENCY RECAPTURE: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH

There is another approach to the high road which offers more immediate promise. In an earlier paper, I pointed out that, while different approaches to argumentation were more or less promising for VTA, if you take an epistemological approach to argumentation and you are also a virtue epistemologist, it is hard to avoid being a virtue argumentation theorist (Aberdein, 2014, p. 79). This does not work for every iteration of the epistemological approach to argumentation. But Christoph Lumer's helpful survey allows us to pinpoint where it does work (Lumer, 2005). Most obviously perhaps, we could employ Lumer's "responsibilist criteria" (RE), which place the emphasis squarely on the arguer:

> RE1   1   The arguer justifiedly believes in the reasons.
>   2   In case of uncertain arguments the arguer does not dispose of further information relevant to the implication.
> RE2   1   The arguer justifiedly believes that the reasons' acceptability, according to an effective epistemological principle, implies the thesis' acceptability.
>   2   Because of these beliefs the arguer believes in the thesis. (Lumer, 2005, p. 195).

Alternatively, we could prioritize the respondent, as Lumer does in his "gnostic or weak epistemic criteria" (G):

> G1   1   The argumentation's addressee justifiedly believes in the argument's reasons.
>   2   And he has no further information that would defeat that argument.
> G2   It is reasonable for the addressee to proceed from believing in the reasons to believing in the argument's thesis.
> (Lumer, 2005, p. 194).

Lumer has other criteria for the evaluation of arguments which are not as good a fit. But these two would fit a virtue-based approach very nicely. Of course, we are then faced with another question within the epistemological approach, and between it and its critics, of whether these criteria yield a good enough account of cogency. I shall not address that question here; for present purposes it suffices to observe that some flavours of the epistemological approach to argumentation, when combined with a virtue approach to epistemology, lead to a virtue approach to argument evaluation, that is, another path to the high road.

7. CONCLUSION

We have seen that there are a number of live options for a virtuistic account of inference. The eliminativist approach would be very radical indeed. This I remark upon as being a possibility which nobody has as yet seriously entertained, probably for very good reasons. But it is at least a position in the conceptual space. Perhaps it is worth someone, even more extreme than me, investigating exactly what it would entail. Another approach would be what I've been calling the low road: make the ability to produce cogent arguments and the ability to recognise them themselves virtues. The low road will have implications for what the virtues of argument will look like, since it seems to take VTA further in the direction of reliabilism than most accounts. Nonetheless, it offers a clear route to a virtue-based account of inference. As for the third option, piecemeal cogency recapture, what I've been calling the high road, we have seen that there are a number of different possible projects which one might pursue under that heading. Recapture of the RSA/ARG account remains a work in progress, but we have a fall-back position of diverting onto the low road to cover any gaps. Alternatively, a synthesis of VTA with the epistemological approach offers a promising alternative plan for constructing a high road. So my overall moral is that

my lonely position is lonely for bad reasons—I would welcome company!

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