

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND ARGUMENTATION

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In this chapter I argue that intellectual humility is related to argumentation in several distinct but mutually supporting ways. I begin by drawing connections between humility and two topics of long-standing importance to the evaluation of informal arguments: the *ad verecundiam* fallacy and the principle of charity. I then explore the more explicit role that humility plays in recent work on critical thinking dispositions, deliberative virtues, and virtue theories of argumentation.

1. ARGUMENTUM AD VERECUNDIAM

Modern textbook treatments of informal fallacies offer “*argumentum ad verecundiam*” as an alternative name for “appeal to illegitimate authority” (for example, Copi et al., 2007, p. 51). However, “*verecundiam*” is not Latin for illegitimate authority; it is Latin for modesty, reverence, shame, or, perhaps, humility. Together with *argumentum ad hominem* and *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, *argumentum ad verecundiam* owes its name to John Locke. Locke does not explicitly characterize any of these arguments as fallacies, but he does say that they are “arguments, that men, in their reasonings with others, do ordinarily make use of, to prevail on their assent; or, at least, so to awe them, as to silence their opposition” (Locke, 1836, IV.xvii.19). As Locke explains, the trick to *ad verecundiam* argumentation,

is to allege the opinions of men, whose parts, learning, eminency, power, or some other cause has gained a name, and settled their reputation in the common esteem with some kind of authority. When men are established in any kind of dignity, it is thought a breach of modesty for others to derogate any way from it, and question the authority of men, who are in possession of it. This is apt to be censured as carrying with it too much of pride, when a man does not readily yield to the determination of approved authors, which is wont to be received with respect and submission by others: and it is looked upon as insolence for a man to set up and adhere to his own opinion against the current stream of antiquity, or to put it in the balance against that of some learned doctor, or otherwise approved writer. Whoever backs his tenets with such authorities, thinks he ought thereby to carry the cause, and is ready to style it “impudence” in any one who shall stand out against them. This I think may be called *argumentum ad verecundiam* (ibid.).

Locke diagnoses the weakness of such argumentation as taking “another man’s opinion to be right, because I, out of respect, or any other consideration but that of conviction, will not contradict him” (ibid.). In modern treatments of this argument, as the fallacy of appeal to illegitimate authority, it is implicitly contrasted with a non-fallacious pattern of argument: appeal to legitimate authority, or more commonly, appeal to expert opinion. Hence modern treatments of the

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fallacy are often much concerned with the recognition of legitimate expertise. In this respect, the *ad verecundiam*, like several other well-established fallacies, has somewhat drifted from its original designation. Firstly, Locke, as a good empiricist, is prepared to throw doubt on any appeal to authority. Secondly, Locke goes further than recent accounts into the psychological mechanism whereby *ad verecundiam* arguments succeed. This is the point at which humility becomes relevant. Although Locke does not directly invoke humility in his brief discussion of the *ad verecundiam*, he is clearly in the near vicinity: indeed, he does employ cognate terms, such as modesty, and antonyms, such as pride.

Ian James Kidd defends an account of intellectual humility as “a virtue for the management of intellectual confidence” (Kidd, 2016, p. 396). The intellectually humble would thereby manifest appropriate levels of intellectual confidence, avoiding both the over- and under-valuation of their intellectual circumstances (succumbing neither to the Dunning–Kruger Effect nor to Imposter Syndrome, as it were). On such an account, at least some instances of appeal to illegitimate authority may be seen as manifesting the associated vice of deficiency in deferring to someone else’s arguments, since lacking confidence in your own. The corresponding vice of excess would represent overconfidence in the face of legitimate authority. This has received less attention in discussion of fallacies. However, the problems it can cause have been addressed by Michelle Ciurria and Khameiel Altamimi, who observe that standard treatments of *ad verecundiam* are silent “when an appeal to authority has been illegitimately dismissed due to the operation of epistemic injustice or epistemic irresponsibility on the part of a judge or community” (Ciurria and Altamimi, 2014, p. 451). As I have observed elsewhere, such cases may best be understood as a distinct fallacy, dual to the *ad verecundiam* (Aberdein, 2016a, p. 421). At least on Kidd’s account of the virtue, instances of both the *ad verecundiam* and its dual could be attributed to their proponents’ lack of intellectual humility.

2. PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

Thomas Aquinas maintained that “humility necessarily accompanies charity” (quoted in Overmyer, 2015, p. 658). Nonetheless, the sense in which charity is invoked in argumentation may initially seem somewhat distant from humility. As with the *ad verecundiam*, it is possible to precisely date the inception of the “principle of charity”: it originates in an otherwise obscure article by the philosopher Neil Wilson, from which it was swiftly raised to much greater fame by W. V. O. Quine.¹ For Wilson, the principle of charity requires that we favour that interpretation of a word “which will make the largest possible number of [the speaker’s] statements true” (Wilson, 1959, p. 532). Quine applies it to somewhat broader purpose, as embodying the “common sense” that “one’s interlocutor’s silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation” (Quine, 1960, p. 59). In the hands of Donald Davidson, the principle of charity was to become a major methodological maxim: one that “counsels us quite generally to prefer theories of interpretation that minimize disagreement” (Davidson, 1984, p. xvii).

Unsurprisingly, the attention paid to the principle of charity in the philosophy of language soon crossed over into logic. In a useful survey, the argumentation theorist Ralph Johnson traces the earliest appeal to a principle of charity in a logic textbook to three works published in the mid-1970s. (I have been unable to find any earlier.) However, as Johnson complains, these three works already employ

¹It should be noted that, although the explicit invocation of a principle of charity can be dated with confidence to the 1950s, the underlying sense of charity is manifestly older: Thomas Carlyle, for one, could write of a “charitable reading” almost a century earlier (Carlyle, 1865, p. 560).

the principle in distinct ways. For Stephen Thomas, charity mandates that we read a passage as non-argumentative rather than ascribe bad reasoning to its author (Thomas, 1973, p. 9). Robert Baum applies the principle to the evaluation of enthymemes, and construes it as requiring us “to add whatever premises are needed to make the argument as good as possible” (Baum, 1975, p. 15). Michael Scriven offers a much more sweeping definition. For him, the “Principle of Charity requires that we make the best, rather than the worst, possible interpretation of the material we’re studying” (Scriven, 1976, p. 71). He glosses this in explicitly ethical terms, as requiring fairness or justice in criticism.

Johnson’s own definition hews closest to Scriven: “The Principle of Charity which governs all levels of argument analysis is that the critic should provide the best possible interpretation of the material under consideration” (Johnson, 1984, p. 5). He moderates this definition with a restriction on the circumstances in which the critic is so obligated: “the heavy artillery of argument analysis, monitored by the requirements of the Principle of Charity, is to be pressed into service only when one confronts (i) a fully expressed argument (ii) from a serious arguer (iii) on a serious matter” (Johnson, 1984, p. 8). The critical thinking theorist Richard Paul, to whose work we will shortly turn, proposes a similar definition to Johnson’s, but makes the connection to humility explicit: “We must feel *obliged* to hear [views we oppose] in their strongest form to ensure that we do not condemn them out of our own ignorance and bias. At this point we come full circle back to where we began: the need for *intellectual humility*” (Paul, 2000, p. 170). Here Paul explicitly invokes humility in implicit support of a thesis familiar from Mill’s *On Liberty*: “there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides: it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices” (Mill, 1977, p. 257). And, if we should listen to the other side, we should listen to them at their best.

As with the *ad verecundiam*, the principle of charity may be understood as a mean between complementary vices, here with respect to interpretation of another’s arguments rather than acceptance of their premisses. The vice of deficiency may take the form of wilfully obtuse misinterpretation, as in the straw man fallacy; the vice of excess what Scott Aikin and John Casey have characterized as “a little noticed variety of straw man—the distortion which results in being overly charitable to someone’s argument, or, as we shall call it, the iron man” (Aikin and Casey, 2016, p. 432). Once again we have uncovered an unfamiliar fallacy dual to a more familiar fallacy. In Kidd’s terms, these extremes may also be seen as manifesting the under- or over-regulation of intellectual confidence, whether arrogantly twisting an argument into a straw man or obsequiously striving to reinterpret it as an iron man. Thereby each exhibits a failure of humility.

3. CRITICAL THINKING DISPOSITIONS

Modern argumentation theory is a synthesis of several older research programmes; one of the most important of these is the critical thinking movement. From a trickle at mid century, by the 1980s this had grown into a major programme of educational reform, focussed on improving the thinking abilities of schoolchildren, students, and society at large. For most theorists of critical thinking, such abilities comprise not just a skillset, but also “tendencies, propensities, or inclinations people have to think in particular ways in particular contexts . . . [which] are not the same as, or reducible to, either formal rules of good thinking or specific behaviors or patterns of behavior” (Siegel, 1999, p. 220). Such dispositions are seen as essential to the successful internalization of critical thinking techniques: they present a response to the “transfer problem”, that of ensuring

that learners go on to use their newly acquired skills outside the classroom (Bereiter, 1995; Howell and Kingsbury, 2015). Different theorists propose different lists of dispositions, but most such lists include “open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, independent-mindedness, an inquiring attitude, and respect for others in group inquiry and deliberation” (Bailin and Siegel, 2003, p. 183). These dispositions sound more than a little like virtues, an identity some theorists make explicit. Indeed Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby argue that intellectual virtues are superior to dispositions in a characterization of critical thinking, since “virtues are not psychological reifications added on to the skills of reasoning, but are inherent to the practice of inquiry and come out of appreciation of the nature of the practice” (Bailin and Battersby, 2007, p. 113). They conclude that virtues are better placed to capture the intrinsic value of reason. However, none of the virtues they propose sounds that much like humility.

Perhaps the most overt invocation of virtue language by a major proponent of critical thinking lies in the work of Richard Paul. Paul draws a distinction between weak and strong sense critical thinking. The latter comprises “a) an ability to question one’s own framework of thought, b) an ability to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one’s own, and c) an ability to reason dialectically (multilogically) to determine when one’s own point of view is weakest and when an opposing point of view is strongest” (Paul, 1990, p. 185). As we saw in the previous sections, such abilities can plausibly be seen to depend, amongst other virtues, upon intellectual humility. Indeed, this is a relationship which Paul makes explicit: “To cultivate the kind of intellectual independence implied in the concept of strong sense critical thinking, we must foster intellectual (epistemological) humility, courage, integrity, perseverance, empathy, and fairmindedness” (Paul, 2000, p. 166). Paul defines intellectual humility as “a consciousness of the limits of one’s knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one’s native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias, prejudice and limitations of one’s viewpoint” and a “lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one’s beliefs” (ibid.).

In a helpful comparative survey of several distinct sets of critical thinking dispositions, the educational theorist Ron Ritchhart proposes six groups of dispositions: “the disposition to be open-minded, to be curious, to be metacognitive, to be strategic, and to be investigative and inquiring, and to reason and use evidence” (Ritchhart, 2001, p. 148). Paul is the only theorist in Ritchhart’s survey to propose intellectual humility as a critical thinking disposition. Ritchhart classifies it as borderline between two of his categories: the dispositions to be “metacognitive” and “a truth seeker” (Ritchhart, 2001, p. 149). Paul’s conception of strong sense critical thinking certainly stresses metacognitive factors: indeed questioning, or at least reflecting upon, one’s own framework of thought is close to a definition of metacognition. Nor is Paul alone in linking metacognition with intellectual humility. Kidd’s understanding of intellectual humility requires individuals to reflect upon their own cognition, since they must be “alert to the ways that ... complex agential, collective, and deep conditions underlie and shape their intellectual confidence” (Kidd, 2016, p. 396). Some virtue epistemologists have made stronger claims for metacognition. For Jerry Green, it is a virtue in its own right (Green, 2019, p. 120). But for Christopher Lepock metacognition is a necessary component of any intellectual virtue—and specifically of intellectual humility (Lepock, 2014, p. 43). Metacognition also has much in common with

Jonathan Adler's account of open-mindedness, as "an appreciation of our fallibility" that takes the form of "a second-order (or "meta") attitude toward one's beliefs as believed, and not just toward the specific proposition believed, just as fallibilism is a second-order doubt about the perfection of one's believing, not a doubt about the truth of any specific belief" (Adler, 2004, p. 130). But James Spiegel argues, I think convincingly, that Adler's account should be understood as defining humility rather than open-mindedness (Spiegel, 2012, p. 34). Without taking a stance on any of these specific claims, it does seem reasonable to conclude that the traditional virtue of intellectual humility is closely allied to metacognition, and thereby to critical thinking.

4. DELIBERATIVE VIRTUES

Another argumentative context in which the virtue of intellectual humility has been explicitly invoked is the analysis of group deliberation. Scott Aikin and Caleb Clanton have argued that success in group deliberation, and thereby in democratic forms of political decision making, depends on the individual participants manifesting what they call "group-deliberative virtues" (Aikin and Clanton, 2010, p. 413). They stress that such virtues differ from epistemic virtues since they are not just truth-conducive, but also "conducive to cooperation and good sentiments among the deliberators in a group" (Aikin and Clanton, 2010, p. 421). Of course, such well-conducted deliberation may in turn be more likely to settle on the truth. One of Aikin and Clanton's virtues is deliberative humility, which they define as "the willingness to hold one's view fallibly and in such a way as to admit that one might be shown to be wrong in light of better reasons, evidence, and argument" (Aikin and Clanton, 2010, p. 419). They situate deliberative humility as a mean between two vices they term "deliberative hubris" and "deliberative insecurity": the former "the unwillingness to even consider that one's view could be refined or refuted by others", the latter "the inability to think that one could ever be on target about an issue" (Aikin and Clanton, 2010, p. 420). This approach to humility bears an obvious similarity to Kidd's confidence management account. Aikin and Clanton go further than Kidd, however, in arguing that the "epistemic norm of humility is ... embedded in the very practice of holding any belief whatsoever", since to hold a belief is to be willing to defend it, and to defend it adequately is to give a fair hearing to such challenges as may be raised against it (*ibid.*).² This makes intellectual humility pivotal to the practice of group deliberation: without it deliberation cannot be expected to proceed in good faith, but with it belief in all but the safest of claims ought, at least in principle, to lead to group deliberation. The political scientist Kyle Scott takes this point further, arguing that Aikin and Clanton's seven other deliberative virtues (deliberative wit, friendliness, empathy, charity, temperance, courage, and sincerity) all critically depend on humility, which makes humility essential for group deliberation, and thereby for any feasible concept of deliberative democracy (Scott, 2014, p. 230).

There is some empirical support for these positive conclusions about the value of intellectual humility for deliberation. There is, as one recent survey has it, an embarrassment of riches in the empirical measurement of humility (McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2018). That survey compares 22 different measures, of which four are specifically measures of intellectual humility (McElroy et al., 2014; Hoyle et al., 2016; Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse, 2016; Leary et al., 2017). Yet more such measures have been published since the data collection period of this survey (Alfano et al., 2017; Haggard et al., 2018; Porter and Schumann, 2018). For example,

²The rhetorician John Duffy makes a complementary point: "to provide evidence is to subject one's self to the authority and judgment of another, which is a form of humility" (Duffy, 2014, p. 220).

the psychologists Tenelle Porter and Karina Schumann have developed one of the simpler measures of intellectual humility, consisting of an inventory of nine questions, each to be answered on a seven-point Likert scale (Porter and Schumann, 2018, p. 143). This includes both positively worded questions, such as “I am willing to admit it if I don’t know something” and “I like to compliment others on their intellectual strengths”, and (reverse scored) negatively worded questions, such as “I feel uncomfortable when someone points out one of my intellectual shortcomings” and “I don’t like it when someone points out an intellectual mistake that I made”. Porter and Schumann’s factor analysis suggests that this measure is one-dimensional, by contrast with some other studies (for example, Alfano et al., 2017; Haggard et al., 2018, whose studies yielded four and three factors, respectively). Porter and Schumann found that “participants who were higher in intellectual humility were more respectful of and more interested in trying to learn about opposing perspectives” both in classroom debates and on emotive public policy issues, such as gun control or same-sex marriage (Porter and Schumann, 2018, pp. 145 ff.). They also demonstrated that “those higher in intellectual humility read a greater proportion (and higher number) of opposing vs. matching reasons than those lower in intellectual humility” (Porter and Schumann, 2018, p. 153). Other studies using different measures have found similar results. For example, Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso and colleagues found that intellectual humility “was associated with more reflective thinking, need for cognition, intellectual engagement, intellectual curiosity, intellectual openness, and open-minded thinking” and “also associated with less social vigilantism, which may promote collaborative and cooperative learning” (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2019, p. 14). The results of these studies are consistent with Aikin and Clanton’s conclusion that intellectual humility in participants is a crucial, perhaps indispensable, asset in group deliberation.

5. VIRTUE THEORIES OF ARGUMENTATION

Although, as we have seen, virtues have been invoked for some time in theories of argument, an explicit virtue theory of argumentation (VTA) is a more recent innovation (for a brief survey, see Aberdein and Cohen, 2016). One of the difficulties that besets argumentation theory as a whole is that it is massively interdisciplinary: it brings together work from many different disciplines, including logic, epistemology, both cognitive and social psychology, communication, management, rhetoric, decision theory, law, computer science, education, economics, and others. This is, of course, a tremendous opportunity, but it also presents a massive coordination problem: it can be difficult for the minority of people in each discipline who focus on argumentation to find each other (and avoid duplicating each other’s work). That problem is exacerbated for sub-disciplines of argumentation theory, such as VTA, since the numbers involved are even smaller. Perhaps for this reason, VTA has mostly drawn inspiration from the familiar fields of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology; there has as yet been much less interaction with virtue jurisprudence or virtue-theoretic work in rhetoric and economics, although there is an independent interest in applying virtues (including humility) to argumentation in all of these areas (for example, de Bruin, 2013; Agnew, 2018; Amaya, 2018).

A crucial question for VTA is whether its virtues are argumentation-specific or whether it just applies generic intellectual (or moral) virtues to argumentation. For present purposes, this is to ask whether there is any such thing as argumentative humility, distinct from, or a special case of, intellectual humility. If we concede as much, perhaps we should also recognize deliberative humility

and critical thinking humility as further subdivisions. We have already seen that Aikin and Clanton distinguish deliberative from epistemic virtues, since being conducive to truth need not be conducive to the optimal conduct of deliberation. In other words, deliberation and belief formation have a different telos. Elsewhere, I have argued that the telos of argumentation is the propagation of truth: “where virtuous knowers are disposed to act in a way that leads to the acquisition of true beliefs, virtuous arguers are disposed to spread true beliefs around” (Aberdein, 2010, p. 173). Katharina Stevens has a more sweeping proposal: “the good of argumentation is the bettering of belief-systems—furthering of knowledge, extension of justificatory inferences, gaining of information and understanding etc.” (Stevens, 2016, p. 377). However, the same virtue may contribute to the successful pursuit of different activities with different ends. So, it need not follow that argumentation (let alone deliberation or critical thinking) requires a distinct set of virtues just because it has its own telos. On this basis, at least on Kidd’s confidence-calibration account, I think it is reasonable to see intellectual humility as contributing to all of these goals.

If intellectual humility is a virtue of argument, how is it related to other such virtues—and what are these other virtues? One radical perspective would be to argue that traditional character virtues, such as intellectual humility, are all that is needed for argumentation. Against such a position, Olivier Morin maintains that “mere civil virtues (respect, humility or honesty) do not suffice: we need virtues that specifically attach to the practice of making conscious inferences” (Morin, 2014, p. 499). I shall not attempt to adjudicate this issue here, although in my own work I follow Daniel Cohen, an early advocate of VTA, in proposing four basic virtues of argument: willingness to engage in serious argumentation; willingness to listen to others; willingness to modify one’s own position; and willingness to question the obvious (Cohen, 2005, p. 64). Each of these is to be understood as a mean between a pair of vices. I complicate Cohen’s typology by subdividing each of his virtues (and vices) to make room for many of the more traditional, character-based virtues and vices, especially those invoked in the responsibilist approach to virtue epistemology (Aberdein, 2010, 2016a). Specifically, I list intellectual humility as a subtype of willingness to modify one’s own position. Perhaps it might with equal justice have been treated as a subtype of willingness to listen to others. Certainly, if one modifies one’s own position after carefully listening to another’s arguments, one has exercised humility at each step; which step took the greater humility is presumably specific to the individual case.³ More generally, no typology of this kind can be more than suggestive, since the relationship between the virtues is too multi-dimensional to be fully captured by a simple hierarchical classification.

Some scholars argue that intellectual humility is not just *a* virtue of argument, but *the* virtue of argument—that it has a significance more profound than other such virtues. For example, Lois Agnew maintains that intellectual humility is “a guiding principle of public discourse”, central to the discipline of rhetoric (Agnew, 2018, p. 335). And we have already noted Kyle Scott’s argument that “humility is pivotal to the proper functioning of the other virtues” (Scott, 2014, p. 230). The concept of a higher-order virtue that is necessary for the regulation of the others is an ancient one. For Aristotle this is the virtue of *phronesis*, variously translated as wisdom or common sense. A number of virtues of

³On this basis, I am unconcerned by the apparent tension between the discussion of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy above as a failure of humility and my earlier treatment of it as primarily a failure of recognition of reliable authority, treated as a subtype of willingness to listen to others (Aberdein, 2016a, p. 420). As I argue in that paper, we should not expect fallacies to map neatly to vices: which of these vices is uppermost will turn on features of the individual fallacious argument.

argument have been proposed as candidates for a higher-order role in VTA, notably “willingness to inquire” (Hamby, 2015) and “willingness to be rationally persuaded” (Baumtrog, 2016). Elsewhere, I have suggested that intellectual humility may function in this role (Aberdein, 2016b, p. 8). We have already noted the close affinity between intellectual humility and metacognition, which is naturally implicated in any project of higher-order regulation of thinking dispositions. Moreover, the other candidates appear to be subordinate to intellectual humility: if one’s level of intellectual confidence is appropriately calibrated, then one should also be both willing to inquire and willing to be rationally persuaded; but if it isn’t, one won’t be. Nonetheless, as just remarked, the relationship between virtues is complex and multi-dimensional. For this reason, we should be cautious about any simple assignment of priority among virtues. Anything less would be a conspicuous failure of intellectual humility.

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