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An Agentive Response to the Incompleteness Problem for the Virtue Argumentation Theory

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This paper outlines an agent-centered theory of argumentation. Our working hypothesis is that the aim of argumentation depends upon the agenda agents are disposed to close or advance. The novelty of this idea is that our theory, unlike the main accounts of argumentation, does not establish a fixed function that agents have to achieve when arguing. Instead, we believe that the aims of argumentation depend upon the purposes agents are disposed to achieve (agendas).

KEYWORDS: agenda, agent, agent-centered theory of argumentation, function of argumentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtue argumentation theorists claim to adopt an *agent-centered* approach to argumentation. From our perspective, an agent-centered approach to argumentation should provide an explanation of what an agent is and the role arguments have in agents' cognitive economies. Therefore, such approach should provide an account of "what agents are like, what their interests are, and what they are capable of" (Gabbay & Woods, 2009, pp. 70-71). Virtue argumentation theorists seem not to satisfy this requirement, because their focus is the virtues an arguer might or might not have, but not the arguer as such. This is our argument:

- (1) The traditional virtue argumentation approach claims it is an agent-centered approach.
- (2) The traditional agent-centered approach studies the virtues an agent has.
- (3) The virtue argumentation approach is a virtue-centered approach, and not an agent-centered approach.

For instance, Andrew Aberdain claims: “We have seen that a virtue theoretic approach to argument must focus on agents rather than actions. This entails distinguishing good from bad arguers rather than good from bad arguments ... This raises the question of what the virtues of the ideal arguer are expected to track” (2010, pp. 171-173). This quote confirms the allegedly methodological option of the virtue argumentation approach, as it is stated by proposition (1). Proposition (2) shows that the virtue argumentation approach does not study agents, but their virtues. Therefore, this is a virtue-centered approach, and not an agent-centred approach, as it is stated in proposition (3).

From our perspective, the focus on virtues and not on agents, leads the virtue argumentation approach to the Incompleteness Problem (IP). First, they cannot deal with conflicts of argumentative virtues without using extra-virtue theoretic considerations. Second, they do not justify why it is good to be a virtuous arguer without using utilitarian considerations (MacPherson, 2013, p. 1). The aim of this paper is to provide an agentive response to IP. First, we will outline Daniel H. Cohen’s virtue argumentation approach as it was presented in “Virtue Epistemology and Argumentation Theory” (2009). Second, we will show how Cohen’s virtue argumentation theory is vulnerable to IP, as it was suggested by Brian MacPherson in “The Incompleteness Problem for a Virtue-based Theory of Argumentation” (2013). Third, we will propose an agentive solution for IP. Our working hypothesis is that a theory of argumentation clarifying the cognitive agendas of the agents arguing not only provides a response for IP, but also shows the virtues of argumentation in agents’ cognitive enterprises.

2. COHEN’S VIRTUE ARGUMENTATION APPROACH

Cohen’s main motivation to adopt a virtue approach to argumentation takes the form of an analogy: As the virtue approach has been theoretically fruitful for ethics and epistemology, it could be fruitful for argumentation theory. Let’s explore the first term of the analogy. On one hand, virtue ethics is “better situated than [its] consequentialist and deontological counterparts to recognize, accommodate, and appreciate ethical but non-moral values without flattening them into moral values.”

On the other, virtue epistemology is “perfectly situated to recognize, accommodate, and appreciate *cognitive* but *non-epistemic* values without having to flatten them into the standard epistemological categories” (Cohen, 2009, p. 2). For Cohen, virtue ethics takes into account “important goods” that alternative theories such as deontology and consequentialism do not. For example, virtue ethics is able to explain why family and friendship are *ethically good* but not *morally obligatory*: family and friendship are goods that contribute to the enjoyment of life, but someone lacking family or friendship networks is not morally blameworthy. Virtue epistemology seems to have a similar explanatory power. While the received epistemological view exclusively focuses on the attainment of propositional knowledge, virtue epistemology recognizes both that “[t]here are many different cognitive achievements in addition to knowledge and justified belief” and that “[t]here are different cognitive *abilities* leading to those achievements that are not reducible to propositional knowledge” (Cohen 2009, p. 3). For instance, traditional epistemologists cannot see the virtue of closed-mindedness and the vice of open-mindedness because they do not seem to contribute to the justification of our beliefs. However, virtue epistemology would claim that close-mindedness is virtuous and the opposite is vicious in cases in which a justified belief has been achieved, and it is counter-productive to re-open unnecessary questions (Cohen, 2009, p. 4).

If Cohen is right, virtue ethics and virtue epistemology have a distinctive element giving them their allegedly explanatory power. For him, that is the agent-centered approach adopted by both views. Firstly, “[v]irtue ethics focuses broadly on agents and their lives, rather than narrowly on just their actions, just their motives, or just governing principles”. Secondly, virtue ethics had “a change in focus from beliefs to believers” (Cohen, 2009, p. 2), that is, “from *what to think* to *what kind of thinker to be*” (Cohen, 2009, p. 4). Consequently, Cohen’s contention is that if argumentation theory wants to be as fecund as virtue ethics and virtue epistemology seem to be, it has to adopt an agent-centered approach, too. From his view, this means that theories of argumentation should agree on the claim that “a good argument is one that has been conducted virtuously” (Cohen, 2009, p. 1). Spelling out Cohen’s concept of a good argument calls for the clarification of the concept of “virtue.” In his words, virtues are “the conditions that are conducive to the desired ends” (Cohen, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, a good argument is the one satisfying the conditions for the achievement of the desired end. This second formulation of Cohen’s concept of a good argument requires some precision on the concept of “desired end.” Because one of the things arguments can do is to transform agent’s doxastic states from

disbelief to belief via persuasion, arguments have to do with cognitive ends (Cohen, 2009, p. 5). Good, or virtuous, arguments, as a result, are catalysts of cognitive achievements. For instance, along with persuasion, other argumentative virtues allowing cognitive advancements are:

- a deepened *understanding* of one's own position;
- the *improvement* of one's position;
- the *abandonment* of a standpoint for a better one – *other than the opponent's*;
- a deepened understanding of the *opponent's* position;
- a deepened *appreciation* of the opponent's position;
- *acknowledgement* of (the reasonableness of) another's position;
- greater *attention* to previously over-looked or under-valued details;
- better *grasp* of connections and how things might be fit together in a big picture;
- *entitlement* to one's own position. (Cohen, 2009, p. 7)

3. THE INCOMPLETENESS PROBLEM FOR THE VIRTUE ARGUMENTATION THEORY

Virtue argumentation theories, such as Cohen's, have been recently attacked by the Incompleteness Problem (*IP*). According to MacPherson, the incompleteness of virtue argumentation theories are two sides of the same coin. On one side, the virtue approach to argumentation is incomplete because it has to recur to elements external to the virtue approach to resolve conflicts of argumentative values. On the other side, if virtue argumentation theorists confine themselves to the limits of their approach, they are not able to "provide us with a reason for why it is good to be a virtuous arguer" (MacPherson, 2013, p. 1). This being so, the virtue-centered approach to argumentation is vulnerable to *IP* because its theoretical tools are not enough for dealing with some of the problems arising from its own theoretical framework. What is more, when virtue argumentation theorists deal with problems such as the mentioned above, they are forced to use elements belonging to their antagonistic theories such as the utilitarian or the dialectical-obligation approach to argumentation.

MacPherson illustrates the problem of conflicts of argumentative virtues with the following example:

Suppose two evolutionary biologists [Deborah and Ibrahim] are deeply divided on the issue of whether evolution is a result of mutation, natural selection, migration, and genetic drift

(traditional theory) or whether evolution is explainable simply in terms of genetic drift (the “neutral” theory). ... [S]uppose that Ibrahim like Deborah values both tenacity with respect to one’s position along with keeping an open mind. Ibrahim is committed to the neutral theory of evolution on the grounds that it can offer new insights into the evolution of sexual reproduction in eukaryotic organisms, which remains somewhat of a mystery in the context of a more traditional account of evolution. However, because he also values being open-minded, he does not carry his tenacity to a vicious extreme. He is willing to concede to Deborah’s arguments for the traditional view, provided that they are cogent and closer to the truth than the neutral theory. He is even willing to completely abandon his own account of evolution if it does not stand up to the traditional account of evolution, but not to the point of simply abandoning his position without putting up a serious defense of his own views. (MacPherson, 2013, pp. 3-4)

According to MacPherson, this case shows the main elements of *IP*. First, in this case, there is a clash of argumentative values. On one hand, Ibrahim values the tenacity with respect to his own position given increasing evidence in the scientific literature supporting the neutral theory. On the other hand, he considers it important to keep an open mind so that he recognizes arguments that could defeat his position. None of these argumentative values are endorsed to an extreme position making them a vice. That is, Ibrahim neither defends his position to the point of becoming dogmatic, nor is he as open-minded as to accept any kind of argument against his point of view. Secondly, given that the virtue argumentation theory does not provide criteria for valuing an argumentative value over another, Ibrahim cannot, with the virtue argumentation approach, decide whether to prefer to be tenacious defending his position or to be open-minded to recognize possible defeaters against his theoretical weaknesses. Finally, if one of the values under conflict had to be preferred over the other, extra virtue theoretical elements should be used, such as if Ibrahim would have preferred to stay open-minded because of the utilitarian criterion of the progress of science, or if he would have chosen to be tenacious defending his view because he believes there is a moral responsibility to defend a neutral theory of evolution.

To clarify *IP*’s second aspect, MacPherson recalls that Cohen grounds argumentative virtues on cognitive achievements as the understanding and improvement of one’s own position, the abandonment of a standpoint for a better one, the understanding and appreciation of the opponent’s position, and so on. In this sense, “open-mindedness is an argumentative virtue grounded in the cognitive

achievement of more deeply appreciating other points of view. On the other hand, tenacity is an argumentative virtue grounded in the cognitive achievement of entitlement to one's own position" (MacPherson, 2013, p. 5). Consequently, MacPherson interprets that Cohen claims that we should be virtuous agents because it leads to the attainment of important cognitive ends "that are universal and regarded as important by all human beings". The problem for Cohen is that his cognitive achievements are not necessarily universal. For instance, the deepened appreciation of another's position might be different for different individuals. Additionally, the cognitive achievements suggested by Cohen can conflict with each other. This takes us back to the lack of criteria for resolving conflicts of argumentative values.

4. AN AGENTIVE RESPONSE TO THE INCOMPLETENESS PROBLEM

Our working hypothesis is that a theory of argumentation clarifying the cognitive agendas of the agents arguing not only provides a response for *IP*, but also shows the virtues of argumentation in agents' cognitive enterprises. Our inspiration comes from the theory of fallacies as cognitive virtues of Dov Gabbay and John Woods (2009), more precisely, from their multi-volume of *Practical Logic of Cognitive Systems* (2003; 2005; Woods, 2013). Shortly, from this view, some fallacies are cognitive virtues when they meet the conditions of resolution of the agenda, or agendas, an agent is disposed to close or advance. To clarify, an *agent* is an entity with capacity for acting and the objective he/she is trying to obtain is his/her *agenda* (Gabbay & Woods, 2003, pp. 183-185; pp. 195-219; Niño, 2015, p. 39).¹ According to Dov Gabbay and John Woods, there are two factors that determine the different types of cognitive agents (2005, p. 11). Firstly, there is the degree of command of resources (time, information and computational capability) an agent needs to advance or close his/her agendas. Secondly, is the height of the cognitive bar that the agent has set for him/herself. With this in mind, Gabbay and Woods incorporate a *hierarchical approach to agency*. It postulates a hierarchy in which agents are placed in light of their interests and their capacities. In this model, individuals would be placed

¹ There is a remarkable difference between Gabbay and Woods's and Niño's approaches. While in Gabbay and Woods's proposal, the agenda is understood as the aim plus the plan for its realization, in Niño's account, the agenda is just the objective, and it is distinguished from its conditions of resolution. As a consequence, while in the former, if something is not planned, it is not an agenda, in the latter, everything that appears as an aim for an agent, either deliberately planned or not, is recognized as an agenda.

towards the bottom of the hierarchy and theoretical agents would be higher up. While individuals “perform their cognitive tasks on the basis of less information and less time than they might otherwise like to have”, theoretical agents “can wait long enough to make a try for total information, and they can run the calculations that close their agendas both powerfully and precisely” (2005, pp. 11-12).

The standard of exigency for determining the precision of a response changes in each case: a major precision involves more specific information or more strict reasoning methods. This is why it is exaggerated to call for inductive standards (sampling, probabilities calculus, etc.) for practical agendas of practical agents such as us. For instance, whereas in the traditional view the arrival to a generic proposition such as tigers are striped, from the fact that one has seen a striped tiger would be considered a fallacy, in Gabbay and Woods approach, this reasoning is considered as a real cognitive virtue because without a reasoning of this kind, our species would have been not survived (2009, p. 86). On the contrary, inductive standards are exigible to theoretical agents such as NASA who have a great amount of time, information and computational capacity.

Let us examine MacPherson’s response to *IP*. In his words:

Suppose Ibrahim finds out that his research proposal for the [Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) of Canada] defending the neutral theory of evolution has a good chance of being short-listed since there is increased interest in the scientific community regarding the neutral theory. Then it may be in his best interest to pursue tenacity with respect to his own theory and to focus less on being open-minded with respect to defenses of traditional evolutionary theory. If Ibrahim’s project is funded, he can employ graduate students to help out with the research along with bringing prestige to his institution, and it may advance significantly the field of evolutionary theory. (...)

For MacPherson, the conflict among virtues (open-mindedness vs. tenacity) is solved when one keeps in mind Ibrahim’s agendas. However, MacPherson takes for granted what an agent is, particularly, an agent who is a biologist researcher. Certainly, his discussion is about the conflict among virtues, but it is important to establish how an agent adopts certain goals or entertain certain interests and not others. The social role of a scientist in his/her community implies that in order to advance a hypothesis he/she should take into account theoretical factors such as simplicity, consilience and coherence (cf. Thagard, 1978; Lipton, 2004), compacity, falsifiability, and consequences on other

hypotheses. Considering *all* those factors is part of the standard of exigency and precision a good scientist should take into account. In MacPherson's example, Ibrahim does not contemplate all those factors, but he can choose tenacity because, among other things, he can fund his research and bring prestige to his university. Thus, some relevant theoretical considerations are not taken into account. Ibrahim's consideration, instead, seems to be advantageous for the institutional or administrative community, but it does not seem evident that it is so for the scientific community. On the contrary, this would imply giving priority to some agendas related to other roles, rather than the one he is supposed to fulfill. The point here is not only to keep in mind the agendas an agent has at any moment, but also if this agent adopts the agendas (and their standards) he/she should have adopted at each moment and how he/ she behaves up to it.

Notice that in certain social roles (i.e., being a lawyer, a medical doctor, a biological researcher, etc.) the exigible standard for closing the agendas is established socio-historically. To illustrate, the determination of a certain body temperature as fever requires two exigency and precision standards if the agent is Jimmy's father or Jimmy's pediatrician. In this sense, an agent performance *evaluation* relates the efficiency and effectiveness of the deployment of his/her cognitive resources in reference to the standard that his/her agendas demand for their proper closure. When an agent accepts or adopts a social role (or at least, when it is imputable to him/her), it is exigible to him/her that his/her performance meets those standards. This shows that in order to behave properly, the agent needs to align his/her own agendas to the agendas specified by the role he/she is supposed to embody. When this is the case and the agent systematically succeeds in achieving those role-related agendas, with their socially standardized levels of exigency and precision, the agent is not only skillful, but also virtuous.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, from our view, an agent is an entity with capacity for acting, which means, to have agendas and to try to carry them out according to the resources at his/her disposal. Someone is a virtuous agent -in the sense of being doxastically reliable - when, under his/her actual circumstance, systematically and successfully uses the resources at his disposal as a means of adjustment and compensation in order to obtain his/her agendas in the best way. The evaluation of "the best way" occurs as a relationship to the exigency and precision the standards of the agendas that are intended (or should be intended) to close

according to the roles he/she embodies, and this involves another type of virtuosity: doxastic responsibility. This implies, in itself, also to choose which agendas to give priority, and accordingly, this involves that he/she should align her personal agendas with those imposed and expected by the role.

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