

# Arguing with Arguments: Argument Quality, Argumentative Norms, and the Strengths of the Epistemic Theory

**HARVEY SIEGEL**

*Department of Philosophy*

*University of Miami*

*P.O. Box 248054*

*Coral Gables, FL 33124-4670, USA*

*hsiegel@miami.edu*

**Abstract:** ‘Argument’ has multiple meanings and referents in contemporary argumentation theory. Theorists are well aware of this but often fail to acknowledge it in their theories. In what follows, I distinguish several senses of ‘argument’ and argue that some highly visible theories are largely correct about some senses of the term but not others. In doing so, I hope to show that apparent theoretical rivals are better seen as collaborators or partners, rather than rivals, in the multi-disciplinary effort to understand ‘argument,’ arguments, and argumentation in all their varieties. I argue as well for a pluralistic approach to argument evaluation and argumentative norms, since arguments and argumentation can be legitimately evaluated along several dimensions, but urge that epistemic norms enjoy conceptual priority.

**Résumé:** « Argument » a de multiples significations et référents dans la théorie contemporaine de l’argumentation. Les théoriciens en sont bien conscients mais oublient souvent de le reconnaître dans leurs théories. Dans ce qui suit, je distingue plusieurs sens du terme « argument » et je soutiens que certaines théories très visibles sont largement correctes dans certains sens du terme mais pas dans d’autres. Ce faisant, j’espère montrer que les théoriciens apparemment rivaux sont mieux perçus comme des collaborateurs ou des partenaires, plutôt que comme des rivaux, dans l’effort multidisciplinaire visant à comprendre « argument », les arguments et l’argumentation dans toutes leurs variétés. Je soutiens également une approche pluraliste de l’évaluation des arguments et des normes argumentatives, puisque les arguments et l’argumentation peuvent être légitimement évalués selon plusieurs dimensions, mais je conseille vivement que les normes épistémiques bénéficient d’une priorité conceptuelle.

**Keywords:** argument, arguments, argumentation, epistemic theory, pragma-dialectical theory, rhetorical theory, virtue argumentation theory

The whole concept of argument... rests upon the ideal of rationality – of discussion not in order to move or persuade, but rather to test assumptions critically by a review of *reasons* logically pertinent to them.  
--Israel Scheffler<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

‘Argument’ has multiple meanings and referents in contemporary argumentation theory. Theorists are well aware of this, but often fail to acknowledge it in their theories. In what follows, I distinguish several senses of ‘argument’ and argue that some highly visible theories are largely correct about some senses of the term but not others. In doing so, I hope to show that apparent theoretical rivals are better seen as collaborators or partners, rather than rivals, in the multi-disciplinary effort to understand ‘argument,’ arguments, and argumentation in all their varieties. I argue as well for a pluralistic approach to argument evaluation and argumentative norms, since arguments and argumentation can be legitimately evaluated along several dimensions, but urge that epistemic norms enjoy conceptual priority.

## Some examples of arguments

- A. All people are mortal.  
Socrates is a person.  
Therefore, Socrates is mortal. (Found written on a Philosophy 101 classroom whiteboard)
- B. God is the being greater than which none can be conceived.  
Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scheffler 1989, p. 22, emphasis in original.

Therefore, a being that exists in the understanding alone is not God.

God exists in the understanding.

Therefore, God exists in reality. (Ditto)

- C. Euclid's argument (proof) that there is no highest prime number.
- D. Democrats: The US Constitution guarantees the right of privacy, which includes the right to end a pregnancy by means of abortion, free from government interference.  
Republicans: No it doesn't. Moreover, the fetus' right to life outweighs the right to privacy if there is one.
- E. HS: A and B are arguments.  
DC: No, they're not. Arguments require arguers.  
HS: Yes they are. No they don't. Quarrels require quarrelers; arguments don't require arguers.<sup>2</sup> (With thanks to Daniel Cohen)
- F. AMS: The aim of argument is the resolution of disagreement and the attainment of consensus.  
BS: No it isn't. (With thanks to Michael Gilbert)
- G. That's a good argument. It sure persuaded me!
- H. Jack: Let's see the Spielberg remake of 'West Side Story' tonight.  
Jill: No, I don't like musicals. Let's go out for a Rijsttafel instead.  
Jack: Good idea, I haven't had one in ages. Maybe we could have a koffie verkeerd afterwards.  
Jill: Sounds like a plan!

---

<sup>2</sup> Biro and Siegel 2015, pp. 30-32.

I. Sophia: NATO and the EU should move immediately to accept Ukraine's applications for membership.

Jens: That is a terrible idea. It would increase the chance of war, which would result in unnecessary death, destruction, and misery for the people of Ukraine.

Sophia: In the short term, you may be right. But in the longer term, the benefits of NATO and EU membership outweigh the costs, not only for Ukraine but for Western Europe more broadly.

Jens: You're right. Let's go to the rally this afternoon and register our support for Ukraine's entry into NATO and the EU.

(Written before the Russian invasion)

These few examples of arguments are not all of a piece, and no doubt many more yet different types could be added. Examples A, B, and C are exemplars of the (1) *abstract propositional* sense of 'argument.' A and B are familiar to philosophy students and are perfectly analyzable in terms of abstract propositions and logical/inferential or epistemological relations, sometimes referred to as 'premise-conclusion (or 'reason-conclusion') complexes.' C is perhaps best understood as a sub-category of such complexes, namely mathematical proofs, again understood in terms of abstract propositions and inferential relationships. These examples also exemplify a second (2) *speech act* sense of 'argument' when they are spoken or otherwise enacted.

Examples D, E, and F exemplify arguments involving *disagreements*: All three register disagreements by way of speech acts and set the stage for attempts at persuasion and dispute resolution. As such, they are examples of the second speech act sense of 'argument.' They also exemplify a third (3) *social/dialogical/communicative* sense of 'argument,' which is often better understood as the social phenomenon of *argumentation*. Arguments involving speech acts needn't be either social, dialogical, or communicative—I might argue with myself, for example. Nevertheless, senses (2) and (3) frequently go together. But even so, it is useful to distinguish them for analytical purposes, especially because it is crucial theoretically to distinguish *arguments*, composed either of propositions or of speech acts, from the social,

dialogical phenomenon of *argumentation*. E and F are disagreements involving the nature of argument, and as such, they rightly find a home in the conceptual space of argumentation theory. D and E contain arguments in the first, abstract propositional sense of ‘argument,’ while F does not.

Example G is not itself an argument but rather a report of the speaker’s reaction to and evaluation of one. Example H is a conversation, or dialogical exchange, in which the parties are negotiating a mutually agreeable plan for the evening. It does not seem to be an argument, even in the social/dialogical sense of that term, although exchanges like it are sometimes so regarded and labeled (perhaps because Jack and Jill both offer reasons for their preferences). Example I is a successful resolution of a difference of opinion concerning an issue of political moment, now sadly outdated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It exemplifies all three of the senses of ‘argument’ mentioned thus far: It contains arguments in the abstract propositional sense; it records specific speech acts; and it exemplifies the social/communicative sense of ‘argument’—that is, it is an instance of argumentation—in that Sophia and Jens exchange reasons in order to communicate with one another in an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion concerning an issue of concern to them both.

It goes without saying that nothing much turns on the examples themselves. They are intended only to illustrate the different ways in which ‘argument’ is used, both by ordinary speakers of English and by scholars studying arguments and argumentation. Such theorists use the word ‘argument’ to refer to all these things and more, despite the substantial ways in which they differ. The multiple senses of ‘argument’ in play in the scholarly world of argumentation theory, I submit, has led to both theoretical problems and seemingly intractable disagreements. They also have led to a confusing array of criteria of argument evaluation: logical validity, logical or epistemological cogency, persuasive force or effect, the achievement of consensus, the ‘satisfying-ness’ of an argumentative exchange, and so on. In what follows, I will suggest that an explicit recognition of the ambiguity of ‘argument’ in the literature, and a delineation of the domains in which the different senses of ‘argument’ rightly play a role, will help us both resolve such

disagreements and avoid them in the future. They will also help us see more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of some familiar theories of argumentation, in particular those of the pragma-dialectical theory, virtue argumentation theory, and Christopher Tindale's rhetorical theory, all of which are right about some senses of 'argument' but go wrong when they either ignore or extend themselves to other senses of the term or understand that term in overly broad ways. Equally helpful is an explicit recognition of the multiple, legitimate criteria of argument quality: arguments and argumentative exchanges, I will argue, can be evaluated along several dimensions, all of which are perfectly legitimate though not of equal priority from the point of view of argumentation theory.

### The nature of argument

Argumentation theorists theorize about all sorts of things,<sup>3</sup> including the nature of argument itself. Here an often cited contribution is Daniel O'Keefe's (1977, p. 121) distinction between *argument*<sub>1</sub> ("a kind of utterance or a sort of communicative act"—the *products or constituents* of argumentative episodes) and *argument*<sub>2</sub> ("a particular kind of interaction"—the *processes* by which those products are produced during such episodes). This is an important distinction, to be sure, but notice that both disjuncts fall in the domain of *argumentation*, the social communicative activity, not argument in the (abstract propositional) sense illustrated by exam-

---

<sup>3</sup> This interdisciplinary field includes scholars from a wide variety of academic disciplines and studies a wide range of phenomena from a bewildering array of perspectives; I can't do more than note some of them here. Dutilh Novaes (2021a) discusses several types of argumentation and several disciplines that contribute to its theoretical efforts. Theorists study its epistemic, rhetorical, and dialectical features, and urge the study of arguments not presented in language, for example, visual (Groarke 2019; for a dissenting voice see Žagar 2021), and auditory/prosodic (Kišiček 2018), and urge the study of 'multimodal' argumentation (Gilbert 1994, 1995, 1997, Groarke 2015, Tindale 2021). Scholars study argument schemes (Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008) and argument mining (Reed and Norman 2004). Groarke 2021 provides a helpful overview of much of this work. Many topics are studied, both empirically and conceptually; this note barely touches the surface.

ples A and B above. Charles Willard similarly held that argumentation is best understood in social communicative terms, arguing that an argument is “a kind of interaction in which two or more people maintain what they construe to be incompatible positions” (1983, p. 21). The more fundamental distinction is that between *arguments* as constituted by sentences, or the propositions they express, and the inferential or epistemic relations obtaining among them<sup>4</sup>, or the speech acts by which they are expressed, on the one hand, and *argumentation*, the interpersonal activity in which reasons for beliefs, opinions, and policy proposals are considered, discussed, and exchanged and, in the good case,<sup>5</sup> defended and criticized by way of arguments (in the abstract propositional sense), on the other. Both disjuncts of O’Keefe’s distinction, as well as Willard’s construal, fall on the argumentation side of the ledger.

But ‘argument’ is itself multiply ambiguous, as we have seen. Most fundamentally, *arguments are what arguers traffic in when arguing*. If I’m (sincerely) arguing with you concerning a candidate belief, proposition, or viewpoint about which we disagree, I’m giving you *reasons* that I believe, hope, and intend will make the case for my preferred attitude (belief, acceptance, rejection, doubt, hope, etc.) toward that proposition or viewpoint, and/or will make the case against your preferred attitude. If you’re arguing with me, you’re doing the same thing with respect to your own preferred attitude and/or mine. If we’re not giving each other such

---

<sup>4</sup> As J. Anthony Blair puts it, “an argument is a proposition and a reason for it” (2004, p. 137). More expansively, he writes: “I propose that we conceive a set of one or more propositions to be an *argument* (understanding ‘proposition’ in a broad sense) just when all but one of them constitute a *reason* for the remaining one. And a set of propositions are a reason for a belief, attitude or decision, just when the former *support* the latter to some degree. What constitutes support is an epistemological question, understanding epistemology in a broad way, so as to be the theory of the justification of attitudes and various kinds of normative propositions as well as of beliefs” (pp. 141-142, emphases in original). It would be hard to find a clearer statement of the epistemic view defended here, although I recommend keeping open the possibility that a reason can fail to provide support but still be a reason, albeit a bad one that offers no support.

<sup>5</sup> A ‘bad’ case is one that John Biro and I have termed ‘quarrels’, that is, disagreements in which no reasons or arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) are advanced.

potentially epistemically forceful reasons, we're not *arguing*—though we may of course be cajoling, bullying, persuading, inquiring, joking, quarreling, or many other things. Arguments (in the abstract propositional sense<sup>6</sup>) engage this epistemic task of advancing/challenging the cases made for and against the standpoints at issue and discussed in argumentative dialogues or dialectical exchanges and, as John Biro and I have argued for decades, their ability to accomplish this task is the mark of an argument's epistemic quality: An argument is good, epistemically, to the extent its premises/reasons warrant belief in its conclusion/standpoint, that is, to the extent it *renders belief rational*.<sup>7</sup> But as already noted, 'argument' is also used to refer to the actions performed to make such a case or to effect the exchange of reasons that occurs during our argumentative interaction. A useful way to understand this ambiguity, we have suggested, is in terms of *abstract structures* vs. *sequences of events*: 'Argument' is used to refer both to the abstract propositional structure advanced or challenged by arguers in the course of their argumentative activities and to the acts of arguing, usually speech acts, in which arguers engage when arguing (Biro and Siegel 2006a, p. 92).<sup>8</sup>

It is perhaps regrettable that 'argument' can be and is often used to refer to both of these and more besides. Catarina Dutihl Novaes' excellent *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on 'Argument and Argumentation' begins:

An argument can be defined as a complex symbolic structure where some parts, known as the premises, offer support to another part, the conclusion. Alternatively, an argument can be viewed as a complex speech act consisting of one or more acts of premising (which assert propositions in favor of the conclusion), an act of

---

<sup>6</sup> Goddu (2015) offers a sustained case for treating arguments as abstract objects.

<sup>7</sup> For an early statement, see Biro and Siegel 1992, p. 92. The view is developed further in Biro and Siegel 2006a, 2006b, and 2015, and Siegel and Biro 1997, 2008, 2010, and 2021.

<sup>8</sup> We also distinguish arguments from the *uses* to which they are put by arguers (Biro and Siegel 2015, pp. 30-32).

concluding, and a stated or implicit marker (“hence”, “therefore”) that indicates that the conclusion follows from the premises ...

Argumentation can be defined as the communicative activity of producing and exchanging reasons in order to support claims or defend/challenge positions, especially in situations of doubt or disagreement (Dutilh Novaes 2021a, pp. 2-3)

thus using ‘argument’ to refer to (1) the abstract structures exemplified by examples A–C above, and (2) the speech act of arguing exemplified by someone articulating, in speech or some other way, such an abstract structure (e.g., Aristotle uttering A or Anselm writing B). *Argumentation* in turn picks out the communicative, dialectical/dialogical social practices and activities exemplified by examples D–F and H–I, as well as A–C if articulated during the course of such activities. D and E include arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) and also satisfy Dutilh Novaes’ ‘speech act’ characterization of the second sort of argument she delineates, while F does not contain any argument of either sort and so is a disagreement or quarrel, but not an argument in either sense.

While the fact that ‘argument’ is used to refer to the two quite different things Dutilh Novaes delineates—roughly, abstract structures and complex speech acts that articulate and utilize such structures—may be regrettable, since the risk of equivocation is high, this is how the word is used in English, and theorists of argument and/or argumentation should be on guard to avoid such equivocation. The situation is complicated by the fact that the second, ‘complex speech act’ sense of ‘argument’ is typically manifested in the social activity of *arguing*, which itself is what argumentation theorists usually call *argumentation*—the latter is simply the social, communicative activity that utilizes such speech acts in arguing.<sup>9</sup> More troublesome still is the fact that extended episodes of argumentative interaction are also referred to as arguments, as in “Over the past two weeks my students have had a rip-

---

<sup>9</sup> For some reservations concerning the sense of ‘argumentation’ just mentioned, see Biro and Siegel 2006b, p. 1, note 1 and Siegel and Biro 2021, p. 184, note 4, which also discusses what is, in our view, Douglas Walton’s (1990) unfortunate treatment of the terms ‘argument’ and ‘argumentation.’

roaring argument about the mind-body problem.” ‘Argument’ is thus (at least) quadruply ambiguous: We use the term in the abstract propositional sense, the speech act sense, the social communicative sense, and the extended argumentative episode sense. There is little to distinguish the second, ‘speech act’ sense of ‘argument’ from argumentation, other than that the former can be manifested in the absence of a dialogical partner: They both pick out complex speech acts involving arguments (in the abstract propositional sense), and those social, communicative practices might not involve arguments in that sense at all, as in example F, but rather quarrels, fights, or disagreements, none of which need involve arguments in that sense. There are thus four senses of ‘argument’ that are best distinguished: (a) arguments in the abstract propositional sense, (b) arguments in the complex speech act sense, which may or may not constitute instances of argumentation, (c) arguments as communicative activities that constitute instances of argumentation involving arguments in either or both of the first two senses, and (d) extended episodes of argumentative interaction. These should all be distinguished from disagreements or quarrels, which are communicative activities not involving arguments at all.

I argue next that three important argumentation theories—the pragma-dialectical theory of the Amsterdam School, virtue argumentation theory, and Christopher Tindale’s rhetorical theory—either fail to honor these distinctions, or insightfully treat one sense of the term but illicitly extend their analyses to other senses of it, and, as a result, err in important but remediable ways. I will also suggest that the usual measures of argument quality—validity, cogency, dispute resolution, the achievement of consensus, the psychological reaction of arguers to argumentative episodes in which they are engaged, etc.—are all reasonable and legitimate ways to evaluate arguments in one or more of that term’s senses, but they are not of equal priority.

### **Pragma-dialectics and the dialectical conception of arguing**

The argument/argumentation distinction looms large in the argumentation literature, and some theories address both; when they do, one of them sometimes dominates and takes precedence in the

expressed theory, and that theory's treatment of the other suffers. The Amsterdam School is a case in point. As Biro and I have argued *ad nauseam*, the pragma-dialectical theory (henceforth PD) takes arguments to be fundamentally dialogical or dialectical exchanges, and although it incorporates epistemic-evaluative terms like 'validity,' 'rational,' 'fallacy,' and the like, it reconceives these terms so that they apply to dialectical 'moves' that do/do not conform to the theory's rules for conducting critical discussions, rather than to arguments in the abstract propositional sense. As a result, the theory declares hoped-for argumentative outcomes—the resolution of a difference of opinion and the achieving of consensus—to be rational, even though a given outcome might nevertheless enjoy no epistemic support from its allegedly justifying reasons, and so is not rational in that primary and standard sense of the term.

In his response to our (and others') criticisms, Frans van Eemeren (2012) underlines PD's insistence that arguments are to be understood as interpersonal dialectical exchanges, thus failing to address the problem posed: Arguments (in the sense of dialectical exchanges) that result in resolutions the theory deems rational are not. Van Eemeren is clear that for PD, argument quality involves "normatively ideal argumentative discourse" (2012, p. 440) rather than the usual marker of epistemic quality, namely, the ability of the premises/reasons offered to increase the justificatory status of a standpoint or the achieved resolution, outcome, or conclusion of the discussion. In his most explicit comments on criticisms of PD launched from the epistemic perspective, he writes:

Basically, the criticisms of the epistemic dimension of pragma-dialectics boil down to the accusation that following the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure correctly may in some cases lead to the acceptance of standpoints that are not epistemically tenable – which generally means that they are not to be considered true. Leaving aside that it is sometimes hard to tell with certainty that a standpoint which is accepted is untrue, this accusation misses the point. As argumentation theorists, pragma-dialecticians are out for the best method for resolving differences of opinion on the merits and determining whether the standpoints at issue are acceptable on reasonable grounds. This means that they want to develop ade-

quate ('problem-valid') testing procedures for checking the quality of the premises used in argumentative discourse and the way in which they are used in defending standpoints (van Eemeren 2012, pp. 451-2, notes and references deleted).

I will address van Eemeren's subsequent text below. First, let me note some initial worries.

### *Truth and certainty*

Although it is correct that standpoints that are not epistemically tenable are not to be considered true, 'epistemic tenability' is not equivalent to 'true,' and the focus on truth here is misleading. Such tenability is first and foremost a mark of *justificatory status*: A belief, resolution or standpoint is epistemically tenable to the extent that it enjoys some substantial measure of evidential or reasoned support. Such support is typically truth-indicative, in that if I have good reason for thinking that *p*, I have good reason for thinking that *p* is true. That is, to believe that *p* just is to believe that *p* is true. This is what it is to believe something, and this is one way that truth enters into the epistemic theory.<sup>10</sup> A second way that truth enters the picture on the epistemic view is that good arguments, according to that view, afford epistemic *improvement* and thus the opportunity for gains in knowledge or justified belief, and since truth is a condition of knowledge (insofar as one cannot know something that is false), a good argument may afford its recipient gains in knowledge, which entails gains in true beliefs. Of course, it is sometimes hard to tell whether or not a candidate belief or standpoint is true, as van Eemeren rightly notes. Equally, sometimes it is easy. (For example, it is clearly and unproblematically true (skeptical worries aside, which are not entertained in van Eemeren's discussion) that it's now sunny outside my study window, that I'm now discussing van Eemeren [2012], that van Eemeren prefers PD to the epistemic theory, and that his middle initial is 'H'.) The epistemic theory takes good arguments to be vehicles for epistemic improvement, and such improvements sometimes in-

---

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the relations obtaining among knowledge, belief, justification, and truth, see Siegel 1998.

volve gains in true beliefs. Epistemic improvement includes as well—indeed primarily—gains in justificatory status, which is what a good argument delivers to its conclusion/standpoint. For this reason, van Eemeren’s focus on truth is misplaced. It is not truth, but rather the *justificatory support* offered to candidate beliefs/standpoints/conclusions by premises, reasons, or evidence that renders such standpoints *worthy* of belief that is the chief preoccupation of the epistemic theory. And while strong support or high justificatory status is, as is often said, a ‘fallible indicator’ of truth, it is indeed fallible, as even strongly justified beliefs and standpoints can nevertheless be false (just as unjustified beliefs can nevertheless be true). The epistemic theory endorses fallibilism as strongly as van Eemeren does. His mention of *certainty* (“it is sometimes hard to tell with certainty” [2012, pp. 451-452]) is disappointingly straw-mannish, as neither truth nor evidential/reasoned support require it, and it is no part of the epistemic theory, which rejects it as firmly as PD does. (The epistemic theory is characterized further below.)

*‘On the merits’*

Van Eemeren writes that “pragma-dialecticians are out for the best method for resolving differences of opinion on the merits” (2012, p. 452). What are these ‘merits’? Two pages earlier, he explains that one minor change made to PD over the years is “the addition of the qualification ‘on the merits’ to ‘resolving a difference of opinion’ (which is exactly what ‘resolving in a reasonable way’ in pragma-dialectics means)” (p. 450). And what is it to resolve a difference of opinion in a reasonable way? On the PD view, the reasonableness of a particular discussion rule—the rule that licenses a particular argumentative move—is a function of the rule’s conducing to the resolution of the relevant difference of opinion in ways that are acceptable to the discussants, and the reasonableness of such a resolution is strictly a matter of its conformity with such rules. Thus ‘the merits’ in ‘resolving a difference of opinion on the merits’ involve just the efficacy of dispute resolution (problem validity) in accordance with rules governing procedures the parties accept (conventional validity). They are not *epistemic* merits, such that the strong support offered to them by their premises, reasons,

or evidence renders their standpoints, opinions, or conclusions better justified, epistemically speaking. In this respect, the addition of ‘on the merits’ to PD’s account of the resolution of differences of opinion does little to defend PD from the criticisms that Biro and I, along with other defenders of the epistemic view, have leveled against its account of reasonableness. For PD, ‘reasonable’ refers to dialectical rules and the moves they sanction, and ‘justified’ refers to resolutions reached by such moves in accordance with such problem- and conventional-valid rules. Justification in the sense of evidential or reasoned support for the standpoint at issue plays no role—for PD, if a resolution is achieved in accordance with such rules, the standpoint is ‘reasonable’ or ‘justified.’ This is manifestly not what ‘justified’ means, epistemically speaking.<sup>11</sup>

*‘Justificationism’ and positive support*

Van Eemeren protests that Biro and I misunderstand PD’s rejection, following Popper and ‘critical rationalism,’ of ‘positive justification,’ pointing out that PD has always allowed for ‘pro’ as well as ‘contra’ argumentation (2012, p. 451).<sup>12</sup> He insists that PD’s rejection of justification amounts only to the rejection of the possibility that standpoints can be legitimized “definitively” (*ibid.*). We agree, if ‘definitively’ means that a dispute’s resolution is certain or that the dispute can never be reopened—since we all endorse fallibilism, we agree that a dispute can always be reopened or a seemingly justified standpoint challenged anew, on the basis of new evidence or a new evaluation of previously considered evidence or arguments.<sup>13</sup> As we argued (in Siegel and Biro 2008), this is not what ‘justificationism’ means in the critical

---

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Octav Popa (2016, p. 196 ff.) makes a related objection in terms of circularity. Thanks to José Ángel Gascón for suggesting this reference.

<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that we anticipate van Eemeren’s complaint that we misunderstand PD’s rejection of justificationism and respond to the complaint in Siegel and Biro (2008, pp. 201-202).

<sup>13</sup> It is disappointing that van Eemeren has not seriously engaged our discussion of Popper, justificationism, and critical rationalism. He repeats his earlier usage of ‘definitively’ but fails to address the ambiguity we have pointed out. (Siegel and Biro 2008, p. 195; see also Siegel and Biro 2010, pp. 461-462)

rationalist literature. This is crucial, since van Eemeren adds in a footnote here that “Notions such as ‘pro argumentation’ and ‘justificatory force’ are in pragma-dialectics understood in a dialectical fashion and acquire a non-justificationist meaning” (2012, p. 451, note 27). Here van Eemeren seems to want to have it both ways, both allowing for the positive support that pro argumentation might provide but embracing critical rationalism, which rejects such positive support. If ‘pro argumentation’ offers positive support for a standpoint, or positive reason to embrace a belief or conclusion, then he is rejecting critical rationalism, which endorses no such thing (Siegel and Biro 2008, pp. 195-199). If by ‘non-justificationist meaning’ he means simply that pro argumentation can provide support, although non-‘definitive’ support, then the new meaning proposed is just the same old meaning, while emphasizing the fallible nature of human judgment. I hope that van Eemeren really does endorse the idea that arguments can provide positive support, even if they cannot provide ‘definitive’ support. If this is actually the PD view, then it is difficult to see how it differs from the epistemic view, which says the same thing. But that depends on the ‘non-justificationist meaning’ PD gives to the notion of positive support, which is problematic in the ways pointed out above and in the just-mentioned papers.<sup>14</sup>

Van Eemeren continues by offering “three crucial points [that] need to be born in mind, however, when considering how they deal with argumentative reality”:

*First, in the pragma-dialectical view, argumentation theory is neither a theory of proof nor a general theory of reasoning or argument, but a theory of using argument to convince others by a reasonable discussion of the acceptability of the standpoints at issue...* (2012, p. 452, emphasis added).

Leaving aside the provocative phrase ‘argumentative reality’—suggesting as it does that arguments that aren’t dialectical aren’t

---

<sup>14</sup> I leave aside the obvious sense in which the redefinition of epistemic terminology in PD terms invites charges of equivocation and straw man.

real<sup>15</sup>—the italicized text is remarkable in a couple of ways. For one thing, the sense of ‘argument’ in play is ambiguous in that it suggests all of the first three senses of the term delineated above. For another, it suggests that, in the PD view, argumentation theory is not, even in part, a theory of argument. This will surprise many theorists, including some of the biggest names in the history of the field, who took themselves to be offering just such a theory. Perhaps more surprising still, it suggests that, in the pragma-dialectical view, anyone who isn’t a PD theorist isn’t engaged in argumentation theory at all! For who besides PD theorists theorize about “using argument to convince others by a reasonable discussion of the acceptability of the standpoint at issue” (2012, p. 452), with the particular meanings those terms have been given in PD? Are there really no other topics or issues that argumentation theorists, operating in that capacity, might address? Are there no other approaches to the field that argumentation theorists might legitimately take? The passage suggests that the pragma-dialectical view restricts the entire domain of argumentation theory to its own concerns.

But the biggest problem lurking for PD here is its implicit conceding of the main criticism of it launched by the epistemic theory: that arguments judged to be good by PD lights may nevertheless be bad, epistemically speaking, in that they do not enhance the justificatory status of the belief, conclusion, or standpoint at issue. This is because “reasonable discussion of the acceptability of the standpoints at issue” (2012, p. 452) amounts for PD simply to following the PD rules, which can be followed without any resulting epistemic or justificatory gain. Problem-validity does not help secure such gain in justificatory status since it involves simply the possibility of resolution of differences of opinion, whether epistemically rational or not; nor does conventional validity, which is

---

<sup>15</sup> I am here speculating on what van Eemeren means by ‘argumentative reality’ since he doesn’t clarify the term in the text. It would be good to know which arguments fail the ‘reality test’ (so to speak), and what such reality comes to. For example, are examples A and B above arguments occurring in ‘argumentative reality’, even though they are composed of sentences on a whiteboard and so are not part of any dialectical exchange?

simply a measure of the acceptability to the participants of the recommended dialectical procedure, which acceptability again does nothing to secure such gain.

Van Eemeren emphasizes the importance of persuasion and agreement on the PD view, noting that “getting the truth of a standpoint accepted by others who are in doubt” (2012, p. 452) is independent of the justificatory status of the standpoint. He is right about this, and importantly so; that is one reason that argumentation theorists are interested in rhetoric and persuasion and have been since at least the days of Aristotle. The epistemic view does not deny this; it simply insists on distinguishing between an argument’s ability to secure the epistemic status of its conclusion, on the one hand, and its ability to persuade interlocutors of that status, on the other hand.<sup>16</sup> To insist that the latter is the mark of argument quality is to conflate these two independent measures of argument quality—two different ways that arguments can be good (or not). More on this below.

Van Eemeren’s second crucial point is that PD, allegedly unlike the epistemic view, is interested in more than truth claims, including

standpoints involving acceptability claims of a somewhat different nature, such as evaluative standpoints expressing ethical or aesthetic judgments and prescriptive standpoints advocating the performance of a certain action or the choice of a certain policy option....This means that in the pragma-dialectical view a theory of argumentation needs to have a scope that extends dealing with the truth-related issues which are the primary interest of epistemologists (*ibid.*).

I have already noted van Eemeren’s misleading focus on, and claims regarding, truth. Here the false suggestion is that the epistemic theory cannot speak to the quality of reasons that may be offered in support of ethical or aesthetic judgments or of particular actions or policies. Its falsity is manifest, as people regularly offer reasons for such judgments, actions, and policies, and those rea-

---

<sup>16</sup> See especially Biro and Siegel (2006b).

sons are manifestly evaluable in terms of their ability to support their judgments, actions and policies (e.g., ‘It’s wrong to do action *A* because it’ll cause unnecessary suffering’; ‘Shakespeare is better than Donald Trump at characterizing the qualities and subtleties of basic human emotions’; ‘Don’t perform action *A* because it’ll frustrate your subsequent effort to secure goal *G*; do *B* instead’; ‘The government should do what it can to eliminate hunger, rather than concentrate on economic growth at the expense of the poor’). The epistemic theory’s scope is as broad as the many domains in which reasons can be offered, challenged, or evaluated and in which justificatory considerations can be raised and addressed.<sup>17</sup>

Van Eemeren’s third crucial point centers on his denial of the epistemic theory’s main criticism of PD, namely, that problem-validity and conventional-validity do not ensure or amount to justificatory status. In response to Biro’s and my complaint that “discussants may share, and rely on, unjustified beliefs, and they may accept, and use, problematic rules of inference and reasoning”—which he claims is a caricature of PD—van Eemeren writes that “if problem-validity is properly understood, this is not possible – at least if there is a better – i.e., more problem-valid – alternative available” (p. 453, quoting Siegel and Biro 2010, p. 458). Why is it not possible? Because “starting points and rules are reasonable only if they have been subjected to and passed critical tests” (*ibid.*, quoting Botting 2010, p. 423).<sup>18</sup> And what are those critical tests? They are those that establish the problem- and conventional-validity of dialectical moves sanctioned by those very starting points and rules. Despite van Eemeren’s complaint here, it

---

<sup>17</sup> In a footnote at this point, van Eemeren suggests that “the ‘justified beliefs’ involved in dealing with evaluative and prescriptive issues can as a rule be better treated in terms of intersubjective acceptability than in terms of objective truth” (2012, p. 452, note 33). He is right about this, if the focus of argumentation theory is restricted to the overcoming of disagreement and the achieving of consensus, although such intersubjective acceptability, as we have urged, is not in itself a mark of epistemic quality. For consideration of the breadth of the domains in which reasons can and often do play a justificatory role, see Siegel (1988, 1997, and 2017) and the many references to Israel Scheffler’s work, in Scheffler (1989) and elsewhere, contained therein.

<sup>18</sup> I resist the urge to reply to Botting’s paper here. Instead, I strongly recommend Christoph Lumer’s (2012) powerful, indeed devastating, reply.

is manifestly possible for discussants to share and rely on unjustified beliefs and use problematic rules of inference and reasoning, which he surprisingly but quietly concedes.<sup>19</sup>

*Is dialectic all there is to argumentation?*

Perhaps the fundamental point that divides PD and the epistemic theory is the centrality to argumentation theory of *dialectic*. The basic counter-objection van Eemeren poses to the epistemic theory is that it is insufficiently communicative, discursive, dialogical or dialectical: It insists on considering arguments in non-dialectical terms, and it doesn't embrace PD's redefinition of epistemic terms into dialectical ones. As we have seen, PD, on the other hand, insists upon those redefinitions and, most importantly here, insists upon a dialectical understanding of arguments: "As argumentation theorists, pragma-dialecticians are out for the best method for resolving differences of opinion on the merits and determining whether the standpoints at issue are acceptable on reasonable grounds" (2012, p. 452); argumentation is "not to be studied as a structure of logical derivations, psychological attitudes or epistemic beliefs, but as a complex of linguistic (and sometimes also non-linguistic) acts with a specific communicative function in a discursive context."<sup>20</sup> While epistemic theorists recognize the value of

---

<sup>19</sup> Van Eemeren grudgingly concedes this: "A consequence [of the requirement of intersubjective agreement] may be that... 'good' arguments and standpoints are eventually rejected and 'bad' arguments and standpoints accepted" (2012, p. 452, note 31). He continues that "This happens only on reasonable grounds however if the arguers have complied with all the required testing procedures. A 'better' result can only be achieved if the problem-validity of the testing methods for establishing truth etc. are first improved and the tests are made acceptable to would-be discussants", thus again making problem- and conventional-validity the ultimate arbiters of epistemic quality, which, as we have seen, they are not and cannot be.

<sup>20</sup> Van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2003, p. 388. For another explicit statement of the centrality for PD of dialectical considerations, including where participants might best start a critical discussion, the importance of "the particularities" of actual discussions, and the centrality of "dealing with argumentative discourse," see van Eemeren (2012, p. 453, note 36). For yet further evidence of PD's understanding of reasonableness and argument normativity in strictly dialectical terms, see Biro and Siegel (2006b, pp. 5-10), and the several passages from van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) quoted and discussed therein.

linguistic and dialectical analysis, they insist that this cannot be the whole of argumentation theory, precisely because within such dialectical exchanges lurk the substance of actual arguments (in the abstract propositional sense), and their justificatory force is a central mark of argument quality. In effect, the dispute between PD and the epistemic theory comes down to this: PD, wanting argumentation theory to facilitate high quality ‘real world’ argumentation—that is, communicative, discursive efforts to resolve differences of opinion in ‘argumentative reality’ in accordance with PD rules that honor and ensure problem- and conventional-validity—insists on a dialectical approach, and further on understanding argument quality in dialectical terms such that the quality of an argumentative exchange consists entirely in its specifically dialectical quality. What is needed, on the PD view, is an account of argument quality “that does justice to dialectical considerations” (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 50). The epistemic theory, by contrast, is interested in the epistemic, justificatory-force-enhancing quality of the actual arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) embedded in dialectical exchanges, as well as arguments occurring in non-dialectical contexts. PD aims to guide such exchanges; the epistemic theory aims to determine the specifically epistemic improvements those exchanges might bring. Biro and I (2006b) have argued that both are important dimensions of argumentation theory and that the two theories should be seen as partners rather than rivals.<sup>21</sup> Van Eemeren, in insisting on a wholly dialectical, discursive, communicative approach that concentrates on ‘argumentative reality,’ rejects the very essence of argumenta-

---

<sup>21</sup> Gascón (2017) similarly and insightfully argues for the compatibility of PD and virtue argumentation theory (see next section). The view here defended—that the several theories of argumentation discussed are compatible in particular ways and have their strengths with respect to particular senses of ‘argument’—suggests the prospect of a broad compatibility among apparently conflicting theories. This suggestion leads naturally to a call for theory integration, such as that made by Tony Blair in “A Time for Argument Theory Integration”, reprinted in Blair (2012, ch. 15). Thanks to Chris Tindale for suggesting the connection between Blair’s call for integration and the present effort, which recommends acknowledging the strengths of the several theories with respect to one or another of the senses of ‘argument’ delineated above, while cautioning against their extension to other senses of the term, where they fare less well.

tion, as we see it, by denying that argument quality is a function of an argument's ability to enhance the justificatory status of its conclusion. Van Eemeren denies that PD denies this, but this is because he understands the key epistemic phrase 'justificatory status' in non-epistemic terms.<sup>22</sup>

The justificatory force of premises/reasons in securing the epistemic propriety of conclusions/standpoints cannot be captured by dialogical/dialectical rules, however 'reasonable' or helpful in the resolution of differences of opinion they might be. Epistemic quality is simply not a function of dialogical or dialectical rules— $p$ 's (propositional) justificatory status, and the (doxastic) justificatory status of a subject  $S$ 's belief that  $p$ , are not functions of the dialectical features of an exchange, or of  $S$  persuading their interlocutor or being persuaded by them that  $p$  in accordance with dialectical rules, or of  $S$  and their interlocutor achieving a consensus concerning  $p$  in accordance with such rules. Rather, it is strictly a matter of the objective support  $p$  enjoys from the reasons and evidence that provide (or do not provide) such support. Dialectical rules simply cannot determine epistemic propriety, tenability, or justificatory status.<sup>23</sup> For this we must look not to rules such as those put forward by PD, but rather to the usual criteria of epistemic quality—strength of evidence; degree of support offered to the conclusion/belief in question by that evidence; probability of the conclusion given the evidence; strength and security of the inferential link between premises/reasons/evidence and conclusion; consideration of the total evidence, including counter-evidence; fair evaluation of the evidence; etc.—that have long been the business of epistemologists to theorize, codify, and explore. In insisting that arguments be evaluated in strictly dialectical terms, PD comes dangerously close to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We counsel partnership rather than rivalry, which preserves the baby—arguments evaluated epistemically—

---

<sup>22</sup> As do Garssen and van Laar (2010). For detailed discussion see Siegel and Biro (2010).

<sup>23</sup> For further arguments for this conclusion, with special reference to Habermas, see Siegel (2018). As Blair succinctly puts it, "Dialectic thus presupposes reason-giving as a tool or move, and reason-giving presupposes the possibility of reasons supporting propositions, namely arguments" (2004, p. 142).

along with PD's dialectical evaluation. Dialogue, discourse, dialectic, and persuasion are important loci of argumentation theory's concerns, to be sure. But they are not, and cannot be, the whole story.<sup>24</sup>

Let me conclude this section by declaring once again that in my view, resolving differences of opinion in reasonable ways is a good thing and that providing a theory of it is a laudable one. PD has made an important contribution, one that has set the agenda for much of the argumentation theory community for decades. Biro's and my criticism is simply that it does not capture the epistemic normativity of arguments (in the abstract propositional sense), and so of argumentation, which does its business by way of such arguments.<sup>25</sup>

I next address *virtue argumentation theory*, which offers an instructive perspective on argumentative norms and criteria of argument quality.

### **Virtuous argumentation and virtue as a criterion of argument quality and a norm of argumentative practice**

Virtue argumentation theory (henceforth VAT) holds that the *character of the arguer* is a key determinant of argument quality. More specifically, VAT offers an *agent*-based assessment of argument quality such that an argument (in the social communica-

---

<sup>24</sup> Dutilh Novaes (2021b) offers an impressive discussion of the dialogical 'emergence' of deduction over the centuries from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and applies the results to a broad range of issues in the philosophies of logic and mathematics. But, despite the enormous scholarly bonanza the book provides, it does not argue for the *conceptual* priority of dialogical dimensions of deduction specifically or of argumentation more generally; there is little in it that challenges my case (below) for the conceptual priority of the abstract propositional sense of 'argument' and its associated norms. Given human reliance on dialogue and conversation until the transition from oral messages to written texts, documented both in this book and in Tindale (2021), it is hard to think of any human concept or practice that has not 'emerged' dialogically or does not have 'dialogical roots.' Thanks here to Dan Cohen for enlightening conversation.

<sup>25</sup> I want to thank van Eemeren for his helpfulness over the years, both personally and professionally, and to acknowledge my debt to him, despite our scholarly differences.

tive sense) is good insofar as its participating arguers manifest *argumentative virtues*—for example, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, willingness to listen and to take unfamiliar positions seriously, etc.—in their arguing. Such agent-based assessment, which focuses on “arguers, rather than (just) arguments” (Aberdein and Cohen 2016, p. 340),<sup>26</sup> insists upon “the importance of agents to the normative evaluation of arguments” (*ibid.*, p. 339). It is offered as an alternative to argument evaluation that centers on the properties of arguments conceived independently of the arguers who engage in them.<sup>27</sup> Inspired by philosophical enthusiasm for and recent advances in virtue theories in ethics and epistemology, VAT takes its place alongside those more familiar virtue theories, extending the reach of virtue theories into the domain of argumentation (Aberdein 2010, pp. 169-170).

Of special relevance here is VAT’s conception of arguments: “Arguments are dynamic, multi-agent events” (Aberdein and Cohen 2016, p. 339). As such, VAT, like PD (as we have seen) and Christopher Tindale’s rhetorical theory (AA, as we will see below), focuses on arguments in the social, communicative sense; it downplays or ignores arguments in the abstract propositional sense, and, again like PD and AA, it emphasizes “the dialectical nature of argumentation” (Aberdein 2010, p. 165), holding that “Argument, unlike knowledge, is intrinsically dialectical” (*ibid.*, p. 175). We have already seen some difficulties with this claim. First, it is *argumentation*, rather than argument, that might be intrinsically dialectical; otherwise, the argument concerning Socrates’ mortality, used as an example of a valid argument in logic instruction for centuries, doesn’t count as an argument. More importantly, at least philosophically, it rules out famous arguments—Anselm’s ontological argument, Aquinas’ cosmological argument, Moore’s

---

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert 1995 offers a clear and in many respects compelling defense of shifting the focus of evaluation from *argument* to *arguer* in critical reasoning courses. Gilbert’s view also aligns strongly with Christopher Tindale’s, discussed in the next section, which Tindale (2021) explicitly acknowledges.

<sup>27</sup> This is an overgeneralization, as one prominent advocate, Andrew Aberdein, defends VAT as relevant to the assessment of argument quality in the abstract propositional sense as well. His view is taken up below.

open question argument, Searle's Chinese room argument, and other famous arguments that are routinely rendered on classroom whiteboards and studied as such in philosophy classes for their structure and the degree of support their premises afford their conclusions—*as arguments*: The 'intrinsically dialectical' conception of argument entails that the ontological argument, as rendered in example B above, is not an argument! This untoward result, by itself, should raise serious doubts about this view of argument and argument evaluation. But there are other problems with the 'intrinsically dialectical' conception of argument in general, and with VAT in particular, that I briefly explore next.

Virtue theories of argumentation face what seems an overwhelming initial difficulty, that of explaining how the virtues and vices of arguers could have anything to do with the quality of arguments. Can't a vicious arguer produce a good argument? Can't a virtuous arguer produce a bad one? There seems to be a fundamental distinction to be drawn between the character traits of arguers and the quality of the arguments they produce. It is difficult to see how a virtue theory of argumentation might shed light on the normative evaluation of arguments (in the abstract propositional sense). It seems to be committed to something like the view that an argument is good—epistemically good, such that its premises/reasons provide support for its conclusion—*because* it has been argued for virtuously. This seems at best a *non sequitur*, since the quality of an argument (in the abstract propositional sense) hinges entirely on the support for the conclusion offered by its premises. It seems also to conflate *arguments*—in the primary sense of the term (as argued above and below), abstract objects whose premises support (or not) their conclusions—and *argumentation*, the social, communicative activity of giving, analyzing, criticizing and evaluating arguments, which can be evaluated in terms of epistemic strength, rhetorical or persuasive force or effect, ability to bring about consensus, aesthetic properties, or along yet other dimensions.<sup>28</sup> My diagnosis is that some advocates of VAT, such as Daniel Cohen, do not mean to be, or take themselves

---

<sup>28</sup> Which of these takes precedence is itself a hotly contested issue among argumentation theorists. I trust it is clear that I am here plumping for the legitimacy of them all but the primacy of the first. More on this below.

to be, offering a theory concerning the evaluation of arguments in the abstract propositional sense at all. Rather, theirs is an account of argument quality concerning arguments in the social, communicative, dialogical/dialectical sense. Other advocates, in particular Aberdein, do take themselves to be offering a theory concerning the evaluation of arguments in the abstract propositional sense as well as in the social communicative sense. Aberdein's case is taken up next. In any case, distinguishing these senses of 'argument' enables us to see that VAT's contribution to argument evaluation (in the social communicative sense) is important and largely correct, but that it goes astray when applied to argument evaluation in the abstract propositional sense.

Aberdein notes correctly that VAT seems more amenable to "rhetorical and consensus approaches" to argument evaluation but defends its appropriateness to "the epistemological approach" (2014, p. 78) as well. His discussion in this paper centers on the critique of VAT offered by Tracy Bowell and Justine Kingsbury (2013), in which they suggest that VAT, in committing itself to an agent-based approach to argument evaluation, runs the risk of committing the *ad hominem* fallacy, since it urges that argument quality depends upon features of the arguer rather than the argument, while textbook discussions of the fallacy typically hold that all such evaluations are fallacious. Aberdein's discussion of the *ad hominem*, in particular his distinctions among various forms of it, is sophisticated and telling. He is right that some *ad hominem* arguments are in fact epistemically strong<sup>29</sup> and that VAT can escape the charge.<sup>30</sup> That said, Bowell and Kingsbury's (2013) discussion is clear and compelling in several respects. In particular, they urge, in agreement with Aberdein and Cohen (Aberdein 2010, pp. 171-172; Aberdein and Cohen 2016, p. 342), that whether or not VAT offers a plausible account of argument goodness, "there is much to be gained by identifying the virtues of the good

---

<sup>29</sup> See Biro and Siegel (1992, pp. 88-89); Siegel and Biro (1997, pp. 285-289); Aberdein (2014, pp. 82-83).

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that Bowell and Kingsbury agree that in some cases information about the arguer can be relevant to the evaluation of an argument—"there are legitimate *ad hominem* arguments" (2013, p. 25; cf. 31). There is in fact less disagreement here than meets the eye.

arguer and those of the good evaluator of arguments, and by considering the ways in which these virtues can be developed in ourselves and in others” (2013, p. 23), thus acknowledging the benefits of VAT’s focus on arguers. Even critics of VAT as a measure of argument quality (in the abstract propositional sense) endorse the value of developing accounts of argumentative virtue, both pedagogically and as an independent dimension on which to assess such quality.<sup>31</sup>

Bowell and Kingsbury characterize good arguments thus: “A good argument is an argument that provides, via its premises, sufficient justification for believing its conclusion to be true or highly probable, or for accepting that the course of action it advises is one that certainly or highly probably should be taken” (2013, p. 23). Aberdein suggests that ‘sufficient justification’ in their characterization can be understood “in terms of the virtues of the arguer (and, perhaps, those of the respondent)” (2014, p. 78), thus rendering it compatible with VAT. Is this right? Can ‘sufficient justification’ of the sort that is rendered to conclusions by suitable premises be afforded by arguers’ virtues?<sup>32</sup> It is hard to see how, since virtuous arguers can offer reasons or premises that, although arrived at virtuously, fail to afford any such justification—though open-minded, intellectually humble, willing and able to take unusual positions seriously and to modify their own positions, etc., they might nevertheless reason badly such that their reasons/premises afford little or no justification to their conclusions. Aberdein responds by arguing that the traditional intuition that “arguments should be evaluated on their own merits, and not on the basis of who puts them forward” (2018b, p. 127 [quoting Gascón 2018, p. 163]) is in fact compatible with an agent-based approach to argument evaluation (in the abstract propositional

---

<sup>31</sup> See for example José Ángel Gascón’s discussion of “the fostering of argumentative virtues in education” (2016, p. 448).

<sup>32</sup> Aberdein is clear that he wants his account to deal with *cogency*, a mark of argument quality that has traditionally centered on arguments in the abstract propositional sense. That is, he wants cogency to be itself determined by the virtues of participating arguers. See Aberdein (2010, p. 171; 2014; 2018b, p. 124; and especially 2018a).

sense). That is, he urges that (1) ‘arguments should be evaluated on their own merits and not on the basis of who puts them forward’ is actually compatible with (2) ‘the quality of an argument in the abstract propositional sense is a function of the virtues of its arguer.’ This seems suspiciously like a contradiction, as it seems to entail that argument quality (in the abstract propositional sense) both is and is not independent of who puts the argument forward. Aberdein suggests that the contradiction is only apparent and that an arguer’s argument will afford sufficient justification if it is made *while arguing virtuously*:

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 virtuistic 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 arguments<sup>1</sup> should still have true premisses and conclusions that follow from them with certainty or high likelihood; good arguments<sup>2</sup> should still be chiefly composed of good arguments<sup>1</sup>. But this will be because that is how a virtuous arguer is overwhelmingly likely to argue.... 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). (Aberdein 2018b, pp. 127-128, emphases in original).<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> ‘Argument<sup>1</sup>’ and ‘argument<sup>2</sup>’ here refer to O’Keefe’s (1977) distinction, briefly discussed above. Aberdein (2023, p. 273) repeats the argument just quoted, but does not offer any additional consideration that would deflect or challenge the criticism offered in the text immediately following this note.

Whether or not the contradiction is genuine or spurious can perhaps be set aside here. For Aberdein's proposal, even if correct, does not help VAT overcome its difficulty concerning the traditional intuition. It may be true that good arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) share two features: they are good because of their epistemic merits—for example, because they “have true premisses and conclusions that follow from them with certainty or high likelihood”—and that when they are advanced in argumentative exchanges those merits are “manifest in the actions of the arguers who put them forward (and are otherwise engaged in them)” (*ibid.*). But their being so manifest is not what makes them good; rather, their goodness is strictly a reflection of their epistemic merits. That the merits are manifest in virtuous exchanges is only derivatively (if at all) a mark of an argument's quality. The manifestation is in effect an epiphenomenon of the epistemic features of the argument: it is those features—not the fact that they are reflected in virtuous argumentative exchanges—that make the argument good. Those features are independent of who (if anyone) puts them forward and of how they are put forward, and remain so even if the argument is never put forward, virtuously or otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

In short: Aberdein is clearly correct that arguers' status as virtuous arguers is a function of the argumentative virtues being manifest in their argumentative efforts. But that is because those efforts comport with epistemic criteria of argument quality. If they did not so comport, they would not be argumentative virtues. When it comes to argument evaluation as determined by the degree of support offered to a conclusion by its reasons/premisses, it is that support (or its absence) that determines an argument's quality. The virtues manifested might reflect that independently established quality, but they do not determine it.

Because argument quality can be measured along several distinct axes, as I've been arguing and argue further below, Fabio Paglieri's (2015) delightful and insightful critique of Howell and Kingsbury's cogency-based account of that quality does not quite succeed: He is right that cogency is not the only measure of such

---

<sup>34</sup> Goddu (2016) offers a compelling version of a closely related objection.

quality but not that it should be simply ignored by virtue argumentation theorists. It is one legitimate measure, and, if the epistemic theory is correct, the central one, though the others just mentioned are also legitimate. Paglieri (2015) is clear that his critique depends on “people’s intuitions” of such quality (p. 69; cf. p. 70), and in particular the “Cohen reaction”—“*Really? That’s your example of a good argument?!*”—to “uninformative, trivial, pedantic” examples of valid arguments, like that concerning Socrates’ mortality (p. 69, citing [Cohen 2013, p. 479]). But people’s intuitions vary widely here—mine, for instance, are quite different than Cohen’s—and that variance supports the ‘multiple measures of quality’ position defended here rather than the ‘cogency is irrelevant to argument quality’ view he attributes to ‘radical’ (p. 74) virtue theorists. As José Ángel Gascón suggests, we can and should evaluate arguments in terms of both cogency and argumentative virtues, and VAT shines on the latter measure (2016, pp. 445-446).

Bowell and Kingsbury (2013) argue that

The fact that a good argument can be put forward by an argumentationally unvirtuous arguer suggests that in those cases in which a good argument is put forward by a virtuous arguer, the goodness of the argument is not constituted by the virtues displayed by the arguer (pp. 30-31).

This is exactly right and is a variant of a point Biro and I have made repeatedly: People are all too often persuaded by bad arguments and fail to be persuaded by good ones. Consequently, the quality of an argument cannot be a matter of its persuasive effect. In the same way, vicious arguers can put forward good arguments and virtuous arguers can put forward bad ones. Consequently, the quality of an argument (in the abstract propositional sense) cannot be a matter of the virtues/vices of the arguer. David Godden makes this point forcefully: “The problem [for VAT] is that neither [an arguer’s] capacity for virtue nor his exercise of it on some occasion provides any support for his claims” (2016, p. 354; cf. also Goddu 2016, pp. 442-443). More expansively, he writes:

The goodness of a reason is a function of whether, and the extent to which, it supports a claim.

*Thus, support for claims originates in, and is explained by, the way reasons act, not the way reasoners act...* While argumentative virtues might well prescribe the ways that we should go about working with reasons (and hence engage in argumentative practices), virtues neither constitute the reasons themselves nor are they the features on the basis of which the goodness of reasons are determined (2016, p. 355, emphasis in original).<sup>35</sup>

That is, while VAT informs argumentative practice, and in that way determines arguers' quality *qua* arguers, it does not determine argument quality so long as that is conceived in terms of the strength of epistemic support conferred upon conclusions by their premises or the reasons offered on their behalf. As Gascón puts the point: "a theory of argumentative virtue should not focus on argument appraisal, as has been assumed, but on those traits that make an individual achieve excellence in argumentative practices. An agent-based approach in argumentation should be developed, not in order to find better grounds for argument appraisal, but to gain insight into argumentative habits and excellence" (2016, p. 441; see also his 2018).

*Is virtue all there is to argumentation?*

As Howell and Kingsbury, Gascón, and Godden urge, VAT provides important criteria for evaluating argumentative practices, moves, and behavior and important norms governing such practices. It is uncontroversially better to argue virtuously than viciously, and VAT provides important insight into the nature and desirability of argumentative virtue. All this is salutary and to be applauded. But it goes too far when it holds, as Aberdeen does, that argumentative virtues and vices can determine the epistemic quality of arguments in the abstract propositional (or premise/reason-conclusion) sense. Here the character of the arguer is irrelevant to the epistemic strength of the argument: A vicious arguer can put forward an excellent argument (in that sense), and a virtuous arguer a terrible one. Argument evaluation in terms of arguers'

---

<sup>35</sup> Godden (2016) offers additional powerful reasons for doubting that argument quality can be a function of the virtues/vices of the arguer advancing it.

virtues is one important way in which argumentation—the social, dialectical, communicative phenomenon—can be evaluated. But it is not the only way, and it should not be thought that arguments, in all the senses of that term rehearsed above, can or should be evaluated only in terms of virtue, vice, and character. Arguments can be evaluated along many dimensions; VAT insightfully emphasizes one such dimension.<sup>36</sup>

### **Tindale’s rhetorical theory of argument**

Christopher Tindale’s *The Anthropology of Argument* (henceforth AA) is an important recent contribution to the rhetorical approach to argument/argumentation.<sup>37</sup> In it Tindale seeks, in elegant and often provocative terms, to

shift... the focus away from the purely propositional element of arguments and onto how they emerge from the experiences of peoples with diverse backgrounds, demonstrating how argumentation can be understood as a means of expression and a gathering place of ideas and styles (2021, p. i).

In what follows, I treat those aspects of Tindale’s discussion that deal with ‘argument’ in its several senses, urging that, like PD and VAT, the central claims of AA concerning argument and argumentation are correct with respect to some of those senses, but not others; more to the point, I urge that its generous depiction of ‘argument,’ which treats all sorts of communications as arguments, is overly so. I begin with a brief overview of AA’s central claims.

---

<sup>36</sup> I don’t think that prominent virtue argumentation theorists, in particular Cohen, actually think that VAT offers the only way to evaluate arguments. In so far, their claims concerning the ‘intrinsic dialecticality’ of arguments, and the relevance of virtue theory to all argument evaluation, are probably best seen as enthusiastic overstatements. I hope I’m right about this! For a recent presentation of Cohen’s view, see his 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Tindale’s advocacy for and defense of the rhetorical approach to argumentation theory builds on his *Acts of Arguing* (1999) and on many other of his publications. Here I restrict myself to his *The Anthropology of Argument* (2021).

*'Encounter rhetorics' and 'imperialist' argumentation theory*

Much of AA focuses on *encounter rhetorics*: the initial coming together of different cultural and rhetorical traditions, in which people from different such traditions meet for the first time:

How are we to argue constructively with people who hold radical views in uncompromising ways?

Many of the problems entangled in this question, problems of incommensurability and deep disagreement, are anticipated in the encounters that have occurred between peoples, societies, and cultures meeting for the first time. I adopt the concept 'encounter rhetorics' to describe the rhetorical and argumentative experiences characterizing these first-contacts (*ibid.*, p. 19).<sup>38</sup>

When such encounters occur, members of each group must learn to understand the other, not just linguistically but rhetorically. These encounters are often not politically neutral, in that one group may have the power to impose its understandings of the world in general and of argumentation in particular on the other. A key claim of AA is that the Western intellectual tradition understands 'argument' in an overly narrow way, thereby ruling out arguments that are and should be seen as perfectly respectable but are not recognized as such because they don't conform to logical strictures— "...non-Western cultures also have their truths, just as they have their reasons. It is just that...what they count as truths (as reasonable) would not balance at all on Western scales" (*ibid.*, p. 33)—and in ruling them out we risk "the danger of 'Western

---

<sup>38</sup> I won't discuss incommensurability further here other than to note that the treatment of it in AA seems to attempt to re-litigate the rationality and relativism debates in the philosophy of science that dominated that branch of philosophy in its Kuhnian and post-Kuhnian eras, but with little reference to those debates. Cf. Siegel (2001, 2004) for discussion and references. Nor will I treat its discussion of deep disagreement; cf. Siegel (2013). It is worth noting that despite his case for the incommensurability of 'closed systems,' Tindale grants that it can be and often is overcome, thus rendering the problem moot, at least philosophically: "Closed systems (like those examined in encounter rhetorics) cannot remain closed for long, natural curiosity and the desire to understand new experience discourages this" (2021, p. 74).

intellectual imperialism,' which becomes particularly pernicious when it suggests we have some monopoly on understanding others and the world around us, and even ourselves" (*ibid.*, p. 4 [quoting Lloyd 2018, p. 96]). If we are to avoid such problematic imperialism, Tindale urges, we must not impose those logical strictures on very different cultural practices and products. We must rather seek to understand them from within, as they understand themselves, 'emic-ally' rather than 'etic-ally' (*ibid.*, pp. 4-5). A corollary, which AA exploits throughout, is that the Western understanding of *reasons* is itself problematically narrow, and that argumentation theory would do well to greatly expand its understanding of that notion and recognize "a wider range of what count as 'reasons,' – that is, legitimate grounds for supporting claims and theses" (*ibid.*, p. 2), because "[h]uman societies find their support for belief and action from a diverse range of sources" (*ibid.*, p. 99). If we are to do justice to the wide range of human societies and their argumentative practices, then the sources of reasons that argumentation theorists consider must be expanded to include dreams, rituals, landscapes, and narratives "from the personal story to the abstract myth" (*ibid.*). This is because some cultures take them to be reasons—they *are* reasons, for them—and if we are to understand them and their arguments and argumentative practices, we have no choice but to recognize that *they* see them as reasons, even if we do not. To fail to do this is to impose our understanding of reasons on them, thereby implicating ourselves in a morally pernicious and epistemically misguided form of cultural imperialism.

### *Going beyond propositions*

Tindale seeks to liberate argumentation theory from what might be called the 'tyranny of propositions': "I have begun to lay down the argument for disconnecting argumentation and argument from the Western logical tradition with its focus on propositions and particularly written propositions. The logical outcasts... may well make their assertions in the 'central' mode. But they conceal an experience of argumentation that clearly exceeds what the traditional model can accommodate" (2021, p. 57). He clearly recognizes the "purely propositional element of arguments" and wishes to divert attention from it in order to direct attention to the emergence of

arguments from “the experiences of peoples with diverse backgrounds, demonstrating how argumentation can be understood as a means of expression and a gathering place of ideas and styles” (*ibid.*, p. i). That is, he seeks to study arguments and argumentation as they emerge in their local cultural contexts. This is of course a laudable ambition, and AA achieves it admirably. However, his preferred understanding of argumentation “as a means of expression and a gathering place of ideas and styles” and of reasons as “expressions of meaningfulness, or simply sources of meaning” (*ibid.*, p. 165), is problematically broad; I will return to this matter below.

*Expanding the senses of ‘reasons’ and ‘rationality’*

Central to Tindale’s case against “the linear rationality of everyday consciousness” (2021, p. 106) is his claim that that rationality is not up to the task of doing justice to radically different forms of communication: “While we are the inheritors of a linear rationality that effected the shift from our earlier oral ways of life to those expressed through ‘texts,’ there are clear signs that that rationality is not sufficient to fully capture the ways of communication that are important to argumentation” (*ibid.*, p. 175). His analysis of that shift is insightful and plausible; his case, that what people take to be reasons and evidence differs across different temporal, geographical, and cultural contexts, is powerfully made. That case, made across several engrossing chapters treating the roles of place, myth, and narrative in argumentation, built upon evidence from anthropology, history, literature, psychology, and more, involves “reason itself, and the core focus on what kinds of things count as sources of reasons, signs of reasons, in different contexts of human encounters and interactions” (*ibid.*, p. 11):

Regardless of how argumentation and its aims are conceived, *reasons* (as I have explored them throughout the various inquiries of this book) constitute a central consideration or component. Reasons are given and received as evidence for claims. But, as the preceding studies have taken pains to stress and discuss, those reasons, or, as we might prefer to say, that evidence, can take a variety of forms (*ibid.*, p. 136, emphasis in original).

Examples from encounter rhetorics further bring home the variety of sources of reasons that may not initially be recognized as such from a standpoint within another rational system. The preliminary step, however, requires only that they be recognized as reasons to those that hold them, and thus that the sources of evidence from which reasons are derived be expanded.

...It challenges the Western mind to view dreams, rituals, landscapes, and even narratives as legitimate sources of evidence that form knowledge systems and corroborate truths within those systems. But that is exactly the challenge that must be met (*ibid.*, p. 74-5).

Reasons and evidence vary, and their quality is contextually bound: "...what matters is how supportive evidence is in the contexts of its use" (*ibid.*, p. 136).

Moreover, as reasons vary, so do the *systems of rationality* in which they are embedded.

### *Systems of rationality*

Tindale urges, not just that reasons vary across contexts, but also that they are embedded in 'systems of rationality' that equally vary across contexts, some of which can be and have been perniciously imperialistic by failing or refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative systems with their different understandings of what can count as evidence, a reason, or an argument. Speaking of the 'model of rationality' that Columbus and other colonizers inherited from the Greeks and brought with them to newly conquered lands, he writes:

The force of colonial oppression was felt not only in the loss of ways of life but also in ways of thought. Anthropologist Jack Goody (2006) invokes the "theft of history" to describe the pervasive Eurocentric colouring of historical writing in the West. It would be quite in keeping with such a sentiment, reinforced by the studies in this book, to speak of the "theft of reason" in describing a similar bias in Western works of logic and argumentation (*ibid.*, p. 174).

Speaking of such colonizers and their presumption of their own ‘model of rationality,’ Tindale argues that “[t]his was more than an imposition of one model of rationality; it was the suppression of all other models on the assumption that they did not qualify, that they were not ‘rational’” (*ibid.*, p. 179). Similarly, argumentation theory in the West has failed to recognize “other *reasons* and the systems of rationality that support them” (*ibid.*, p. 175, emphasis in original), and likewise failed to acknowledge, grasp, or understand the arguments “of those people who see evidence in sources still not endorsed by the dominant rationality...” (*ibid.*). Instead it has imposed the abstract propositional sense of ‘argument’ on the colonized, but this is a noxious mistake, since “[p]ropositional arguments have no authority over other arguments” (*ibid.*, p. 176).<sup>39</sup>

If correct, this is a damning indictment indeed. Is it? Though plausible, there are I think some problems it, and Tindale’s view more generally, faces.

#### *The strengths and weaknesses of AA*

I applaud Tindale’s anthropological approach, and his insistence that we look Western intellectual imperialist hegemony squarely in the eye, recognizing it for what it is. One might carp at the apparent ‘political correctness’ of the stance, but as the wag has put it, ‘would you rather be politically *incorrect*?’ I agree with the wag: Better to be correct than incorrect, in this instance and more generally. Setting political correctness matters to one side, what should we make of his anthropological theory of argument and argumentation?

#### *Communication as argumentation*

I suggested above that Tindale’s conception of argumentation “as a means of expression and a gathering place of ideas and styles”

---

<sup>39</sup> It is unclear, to me at least, that there actually *is* one ‘Western’ view of argument and argumentation, given the quite different theories of argumentation canvassed thus far, none of which concentrate on the abstract propositional sense of ‘argument’, let alone think it the only legitimate sense. Indeed, thinking so seems contrary to Tindale’s anthropological impulse.

(p. i) and of arguments as “expressions of meaningfulness, or simply sources of meaning” (p. 165) is overly broad—so much so that every communicative utterance or act counts as an argument (in the social communicative sense) or instance of argumentation, thus emptying these notions of the content of just the things about which argumentation theorists have endeavored to theorize. To take an obvious example: When I tell my friends or family members that I love or am angry with them, I’m communicating, but certainly not arguing. “Expressions of meaningfulness, and sources of meaning” is similarly problematically broad. Taking ‘meaningful’ to pick out things that are important or foundational to a person’s identity or belief system, which seems to be that to which Tindale is pointing with those expressions (rather than linguistic meaning), ‘God will forgive all who sincerely repent their sins,’ ‘The earthquake is a sign of the Gods’ anger with us,’ and ‘People are fundamentally good’ are meaningful to those who believe them, and may be components of arguments (in both the abstract propositional and the social communicative senses) and argumentative exchanges, but are not themselves arguments. (At best they can be *reasons* that are thought to offer support in particular arguments and exchanges, which is indeed a main point of Tindale’s discussion, and to which I turn below.) If it is true, as I’ve been urging, that arguments are what arguers traffic in when arguing, then it cannot be that every communication, or means of expression or source of meaning, is an argument or an instance of arguing or argumentation. AA is right that studying other cultures’ modes of communication, meaning-making, and expressions of meaningfulness is an important task and that rhetoricians, along with anthropologists and other scholars, are well placed to study them. Nevertheless, not all communicating is arguing, and neither are all “sources of meaning,” whatever these might be. AA’s focus on communication broadens the sphere of argumentation unduly: Not all communicative acts are argumentative ones.

### *Justification v. persuasion*

AA frequently skates over the distinction between justification and persuasion. In a clear articulation of the book’s overarching themes, Tindale writes:

From the perspective of argumentation..., the first thing that encounters [*sic*] rhetorics should bring forward is the diverse sources of evidence that might be used to construct a case, *for justification or persuasion*. If argumentative cultures are to overlap or be blended, then they must each admit, or recognize, the range of things that count as reasons.... Indigenous epistemologies open doors to the power of narrative and place, to the worlds of dreaming, and an extension of signs and symbols. At the heart of encounter rhetorics is a challenge to our epistemological prejudices, with the discarding or marginalization of certain potential sources. But on the positive side, there is the recognition of common human experience in the seeking of knowledge and the collecting of meanings. This is what has allowed mutual cognitive environments to develop. What stands in need of much further attention are the early histories of those environments as we enter into and begin to explore the anthropology of argument. This focus on the range of reasons, on what counts as signs of reasons in different cultures at different times is a common thread spun through the chapters of this book (*ibid.*, p. 32, emphasis added).

This eloquent passage not only articulates some of the book's central theses, it also makes clear that its primary focus is on argumentation as *rhetorical*. Which of course it is, in part: Every argument, along with many other communicative efforts, can be evaluated for its rhetorical features and persuasive power or force. But as argued above, that is not the only way arguments can or should be evaluated. Rhetorical/persuasive force is one thing, evidential/justificatory force quite another. But these are lumped together when Tindale writes of *argumentative force*: "My thesis, here, has been simply that myths have important argumentative force when presented in a specific kind of narrative, illustrated by the types of cases I have provided, and serve as sources of reasons in certain circumstances" (*ibid.*, p. 110). Let us grant that myths and narratives can and do have rhetorical force. Does it follow that they also have epistemological, probative, justificatory force? Clearly not. Rhetorical analysis is one crucially important dimension of argument evaluation, but it is not, and cannot be, the whole story. This is because, as is well known by students of argumentation and noted above, people are often persuaded by bad argu-

ments, and fail to be persuaded by good ones. Tindale writes of “[r]hetorical argumentation” (*ibid.*, p. 75) as if instances of argumentation can be sorted into rhetorical versus other sorts. But all argumentation can be evaluated rhetorically as well as epistemologically, dialectically, in virtue-theoretic terms, etc.; all the several ways discussed above in which arguments and instances of argumentation can be evaluated—in terms of justificatory force, rhetorical force, persuasive effect, the fostering of consensus, the resolution of disputes, the virtue or otherwise of the arguers, the aesthetic qualities of the argumentation, the psychological attitudes evoked in its participants, etc.—are legitimate. But rhetorical evaluation, as important as it is, is not and cannot be the whole story. Relatedly, he writes of the role of place in Barack Obama’s argumentation, describing its contribution as “evidential” (*ibid.*, p. 82), when that contribution is rather rhetorical (see also *ibid.*, p. 83-84; p. 93). AA’s emphasis on the rhetorical properties of arguments and instances of argumentation risks losing sight of other legitimate criteria of argument evaluation or of illicitly reducing them to the rhetorical. Tindale writes of “a latent fear of the rhetorical” (*ibid.*, p. 120), but this illicitly psychologizes. The problem is not that anyone fears the rhetorical, but rather that persuasion is not the same as, and does not amount to, justification.

*Is a (good) reason/is taken to be a (good) reason*

The ‘is/is taken to be’ distinction is basic, yet not acknowledged in AA, which takes for granted that if a person or group takes something to be a reason, it is one, at least for them, as several of the passages quoted above make clear. Tindale is correct when he writes that “[w]hat we are not free to do is ignore evidence of behaviour that appears reason-giving from an emic point of view” (*ibid.*, p. 10). But what some take to be a good, epistemically forceful reason need not in fact be such a reason; my taking something to be a reason for something else does not make it so. For example, I may take ‘red has come up ten times in a row’ to be a reason for thinking I should bet big on black on the next spin of the roulette wheel, but that reason offers no support for thinking I should bet on black next time, as the reasoning is an instance of the gambler’s fallacy. It is certainly not a *good* reason, that is, a

reason that provides probative support for the proposed next bet. One might take the proposed reason to be a genuine reason but a bad one, or rather take it not to be a reason at all; linguistic intuitions differ here. But if we count it as a reason, it is surely a bad one in that it offers no support whatever to its target concerning my next bet. Epistemically speaking, such a reason is inert in that it offers no support. Of course, such a reason, though epistemically inert, might be rhetorically effective, and this is just what Tindale seems to have in mind when he writes of “expanding the range of reasons.” On this point he is right, and importantly so. Still, rhetoric is not the only dimension of argument quality. The fact that I or members of my group take  $p$  to be a good reason for  $q$  might be of rhetorical importance but fail to be of epistemological importance. While we can and should study arguments and argumentation from a variety of perspectives other than the logical or epistemological, and should consider more than just the inferential relations obtaining among their sentential or propositional constituents, we cannot eliminate these from our theoretical analyses, insofar as arguments are indeed what arguers traffic in when arguing.

*Is rhetoric all there is to argumentation?*

These problems seem clearly enough to result in part from Tindale’s rhetorical perspective, which is important as far as it goes but is problematically taken to be the only perspective from which argument and argumentation can or should be studied. Like PD and VAT, AA locks in on one sense of ‘argument’—the perfectly respectable rhetorical sense, according to which an argument is a persuasive device to be evaluated in terms of its persuasive force or effect—but illicitly extends its analysis to other important senses of the term, in particular the abstract propositional sense, transforming it into something to be evaluated in terms of which its premises provide rhetorical (rather than epistemic) ‘support’ to its conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Tony Blair insightfully notes the error of conceiving of arguments as primarily instruments of persuasion, pointing out several other argument functions. Cf. Blair 2004, pp. 138-141.

Tindale's view of rhetoric is generous: "'rhetoric', 'insofar as we can limit it to a primary sense, is connected to the uncovering and modification of meanings'" (2021, p. 35, note 19, emphasis in original). Meanings, in turn, can emanate from a wide range of phenomena, including, as we have seen, narratives, landscapes, and even oracles: "...meaning can be found by resorting to oracles; ... these oracles supply reasons for action in that society, and those reasons are used to justify those actions and form an important part of the cultural understandings that are passed between generations..." (*ibid.*, p. 9). He is right that studying other cultures' modes of communication, meaning-making, and expressions of meaningfulness is an important task and that rhetoricians are well placed to study them. He suggests that it has not just anthropological but epistemic significance: "Rhetoric... expands our ideas about what counts as evidence..." (*ibid.*, p. 137). But this, as we have seen, is incorrect, at least if what is meant is that rhetoric expands our ideas about what counts as *genuinely probative* evidence. Similarly, Tindale writes: "If rhetoric involves the capacity to see the available means of persuasion, then rhetorical argumentation, as part of that capacity, involves the seeing of reasons" (*ibid.*, p. 75). But again, the reasons seen in 'rhetorical argumentation' (e.g., pp. 75, 118, 124-125) may or may not be evidentially forceful, however effective they are as means of persuasion. Moreover, 'rhetorical argumentation' is itself problematic, suggesting as it does that the phrase picks out a particular sort of argumentation, as opposed to other sorts such as the justificatory, the dialectical, the virtuous or vicious, etc. As suggested above, these are not different types of argumentation. They are rather different dimensions of argumentation, and of arguments, in accordance with which they can be analyzed and evaluated.

From the anthropological perspective, Tindale is clearly right when he writes:

When we adopt...the path of the dialectician or the rhetorician we are interested in tracing the argument to its roots, to reconnect it to its context.... We ask different questions about it, and we evaluate it with different criteria, this time ones that measure its appropriateness to the context and the social exchanges that produced it....

It... allows us to include a wider range of considerations, to expand the range of reasons (2021. p. 138).

He is also right from the rhetorical perspective—some cultures find rhetorical or persuasive force in reasons and arguments that we do not, and *vice versa*. But, while such force is one important thing that argumentation theorists study, it is not the only one. Unfortunately, AA sometimes reads as if rhetoric is the sole legitimate orientation to the study of arguments and argumentation theory. Some examples:

Th[e]se studies challenge the claim that arguments are solely a matter of collections of propositions or that they can be reduced to propositions alone. As persuasive devices, arguments have different types of force... (*ibid.*, p. 10).

...narrative rationality focuses on ‘good reasons’...: *elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical* (*ibid.*, 103, quoting Fisher 1987, 48, italics Fisher’s).

Tindale amplifies his treatment of ‘good reasons’ in several passages. For example, he writes:

Good reasons are meaningful engagements with the issue. And they are meaningful in the sense of having meaning for those involved. This, obviously, personalizes ‘good reasons’ and challenges the traditional idea that the goodness of reasons is integral to them and independent of any context in which they arise (*ibid.*, pp. 138-139).

As already noted, not all ‘meaningful engagements’ constitute reasons, let alone ‘good’ ones. But it should be noted that no respectable epistemologist thinks that ‘the goodness of reasons is integral to them and independent of any context in which they arise’ because the relation ‘is a good reason for’ is *a relation*; it relates the reason to its target: the proposition, belief, policy, or action for which it is a reason. ‘The ground is wet’ is perhaps a good reason for ‘it has rained recently’ but not for ‘US immigration policy is problematic’ or ‘atoms combine to form molecules

in accordance with the principles of contemporary quantum chemistry.’ Tindale is right to criticize the ‘traditional idea’ just articulated, but that should not be thought either to be an apt description of ‘the goodness of reasons’ or an idea that is widely endorsed by contemporary epistemologists, or to entail that the goodness of reasons is a matter of their meaningfulness—at least, not if that goodness is a measure of the support they offer to their targets.

He likewise urges us to be mindful of and open to “a wider range of reasons” (*ibid.*, p. 153), and “...an expansion of our sense of reason(s), that is, an openness to the range of experiences that influence human decisions” (*ibid.*, p. 170). But not everything that influences us or our decisions is a reason, at least not epistemically speaking. We are influenced by many things—reasons, to be sure, but also emotions, hunches, others’ criticisms and praise, our fatigue, appetites, blood oxygen and glucose levels, etc.—but only occasionally do the latter afford probative support to our decisions, however effective they might be as causes of those decisions.

One more example:

...there are different definitions of *argument*, but pragmatically, as an activity, it is the attempt to bring an audience (perhaps oneself) to consider or accept or act on some claim or proposal... And arguing is, importantly, a reason-giving activity. This means that arguments, when taken as artifacts or products, must contain some components that constitute the claim or proposal and some components that constitute the reasons.... The dual requirements of claim-components and reasons-components actually allow a lot of leeway... They do not, for example, limit us to collections of propositions that we could then determine to be true or false (*ibid.*, p. 116, emphasis in original).

Here too, Tindale’s point is arguably correct, though it does not distinguish arguing as a rational case-making activity from arguing as a persuasive one. In all these passages, Tindale treats argumentation, and reasons, rhetorically. Similar remarks apply to his advocacy of ‘the dynamic sense of arguments’:

The static sense of arguments sees them as products with no essential connection to the argumentative situation from which they

arose. They are inert pieces of discourse, connected statements that can be judged “good” or “bad” merely in terms of their relationships... By contrast, the dynamic sense of argument sees them as social events, personalized by those engaged in them. They are alive with meaning and movement and should only be judged “good” or “bad” in light of consideration of the entire argumentative situation... (*ibid.*, pp. 124-125, see also p. 129).

The suggestion here is that we must choose between these two senses of ‘argument’ and treat them dynamically *rather than* statically. Tindale is surely right that the ‘dynamic’ sense he champions is important and well worth the attention of argumentation theorists. But we needn’t and shouldn’t choose; the ‘static’ sense is equally important and worthy. Here too, AA sees the rhetorical dimension of argumentation as the most important (if not the only) worthwhile approach to the study of arguments and arguing. But, again, this is not and cannot be the whole story. In this respect, AA errs in a way similar to PD and VAT: it treats and evaluates argumentation as if it were centrally rhetorical, just as PD treats it as solely or centrally dialectical and VAT treats it as solely or centrally a matter of virtue. All three valorize the dialectical, virtuosic, or rhetorical dimensions of argument analysis and evaluation unduly.

I hasten to qualify the last remark: Tindale, presuming the Aristotelian logos/ethos/pathos picture of the *Rhetoric*, does not dismiss either the logical or the dialectical perspectives on argumentation, so it is inaccurate to charge him with ignoring or denying the relevance of the abstract propositional sense of ‘argument,’ and the logical and epistemic evaluative criteria it employs, to the study of argumentation. His mistake, if indeed it is one, is not to dismiss the epistemic but rather to downplay its importance. But he is clear that on his view, while all three perspectives are legitimate, it is the rhetorical that is ‘foundational.’ As he says, while

a complete theory of argument will accommodate the three [i.e., the logical, the dialectical, and the rhetorical]...it is the rhetorical that must provide the foundations for that theory... [the rhetorical is] best suited to form the foundation of any comprehensive model of argument (Tindale 2004, pp. 7, 26).

As will become clear (if it isn't already), I too embrace the legitimacy of all three perspectives, and agree that arguments can be evaluated in all three ways (and more still, such as the virtuosic), but that it is the logical—or more accurately, the epistemic—that is fundamental.<sup>41</sup>

*AA and the senses of 'argument'*

Though Tindale explicitly recognizes the abstract propositional sense of 'argument,' he clearly seeks to de-emphasize and even overcome that sense of the term in argumentation theory and focus theorists' attention on the social-communicative sense of the term. In this he risks erring in the same way that PD and VAT do, explained earlier, by extending one sense of the term—the social, communicative, dialectical sense—to cover other legitimate senses of the term, including the abstract propositional sense, and to extend that preferred sense to encompass the entire domain of argumentation theory. To be fair, as just noted, he explicitly acknowledges the abstract propositional sense, even though, as we've seen, he wants to downplay or overcome it. Still, it plays for him at most a minor role in argument evaluation, both because his focus is on argument's role in communication and meaning, and because he comes close, in his emphasis on cultural incommensurability, to rejecting the possibility of transcultural evaluation of any given culture's arguments. I will not here rehearse my earlier arguments to the effect that there must, as a matter of logical necessity, be the possibility of such evaluation, because denying that possibility commits the deniers to that very possibility, thereby undermining their case, which requires the very sort of transculturality their argument seeks to reject.<sup>42</sup> Setting incommensurability to one side, the more basic point is that, insofar as arguments are what arguers traffic in when arguing, argumentation theory cannot and should not deemphasize the abstract propositional

---

<sup>41</sup> Thanks here to Chris Tindale, whose helpful comments enabled me to avoid several errors of interpretation.

<sup>42</sup> See Siegel 1999a, 1999b, 2007. Tindale seems to agree, although with some caveats, cf. Tindale 2014.

sense of ‘argument’, for that is the most fundamental sense of the term and the sense from which all the others flow.

This completes my survey of the strengths and weaknesses of PD, VAT, and AA and in particular their common defect of treating the social, communicative sense of ‘argument’ as the only one, or the central one, or the only one worthy of argumentation theorists’ attention.<sup>43</sup> Before concluding, however, I next take up issues concerning *criteria of argument evaluation* and *norms governing argumentative interactions*. This will put us in a better position to appreciate the strengths of the epistemic theory.

### **Criteria of argument evaluation, norms of argumentation, and priorities among norms<sup>44</sup>**

---

<sup>43</sup> Christoph Lumer (personal communication) forcefully reminds me that epistemic theories do not address only the epistemic strengths/weaknesses of arguments construed as abstract objects; they also offer alternative views of dialectical and rhetorical argumentative moves and procedures, and, as such, they constitute rivals to PD and AA. In principle they could do this for VAT as well. My position might therefore be unduly conciliatory to the three theories treated thus far: Even on their own terms, they are inferior to their epistemic rivals. (For example, Feldman 1994 and Lumer 2005b develop accounts of epistemically rational persuasion, and Lumer 1988 and Goldman 1999 develop accounts of epistemically rational argumentative discussion rules.)

I happily concede Lumer’s point. My conciliatory attitude is meant only to acknowledge the obvious point that arguments (in the speech act and social communicative senses) can be studied and evaluated independently of their epistemic strengths/weaknesses, for example in terms of their abilities to foster agreement/consensus and to persuade, independently of their specifically epistemic qualities. As Lumer insists, and as argued above and below, insofar as such approaches ignore the epistemic, they do not, strictly speaking, address *arguments*, since arguments fundamentally involve case-making and are thus, first and foremost, epistemic objects. While Lumer and I do not agree on everything, his contributions to epistemic argumentation theory have been fundamental, and I gratefully acknowledge them here.

<sup>44</sup> This section was developed in response to an invitation to speak at a workshop in Siena in April 2022 on ‘Norms of public argumentation: Select theoretical perspectives and applications,’ organized as part of the EU research network project ‘APPLY: European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis.’ I am grateful to the workshop organizers, Jan Albert van Laar, Christoph Lumer, and Frank Zenker, for their invitation and to them and the other participants for their instructive comments and suggestions.

By what criteria should arguments and argumentative exchanges—episodes of argumentation—be evaluated? Which norms rightly govern argumentative moves or episodes? With respect to both these related but distinct questions, we face a plethora of candidates that can be proposed for either arguments or argumentative exchanges, episodes, or moves. Arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) can be evaluated in terms of logical validity, logical soundness, epistemological cogency, and more generally in terms of their ability to increase the *belief-worthiness*<sup>45</sup> of their conclusions. Arguments (in the social communicative sense)—argumentative episodes, exchanges, and moves—can likewise be evaluated in such epistemic terms since the epistemic view of argumentation complements the epistemic view of arguments: High quality argumentative practices can promote epistemic improvement, for example, more justified beliefs.<sup>46</sup> But those practices can also be evaluated in terms of dialectical propriety, rhetorical force, persuasive power, persuasive effect, dispute resolution, arguers’ virtues, arguers’ goals/purposes,<sup>47</sup> etc., and also in terms of their aesthetic properties, for example, beauty or elegance,<sup>48</sup> and in terms of the psychological upshots of such exchanges, including their evocation of particular responses.<sup>49</sup> How should we best navigate these many proposed criteria and norms?

In pursuing this question, we should acknowledge a preliminary point: ‘What makes an argument (in the abstract propositional sense) good?’ is a quite different question from several other similar-sounding questions: ‘What makes an argument (in either the speech act or the social/dialectical/communicative sense) good’?, ‘How should one argue’?, ‘How should argumentative exchanges, episodes, or moves be conducted’?, and ‘How should

---

<sup>45</sup> What Biro and I have earlier called *epistemic seriousness*. See Biro and Siegel (1992, p. 92); Siegel and Biro (1997, p. 278).

<sup>46</sup> See here Dutilh Novaes 2021, pp 19-22, both for a clear articulation of the idea that argumentative practices can further epistemically worthy ends, and for reservations concerning their impact on ‘real-life’ exchanges.

<sup>47</sup> See here especially the pioneering work of Douglas Walton and his co-authors. For references and discussion, see Siegel and Biro 2021.

<sup>48</sup> As in ‘That’s a beautiful (or elegant) argument.’ Thanks here to Dan Cohen.

<sup>49</sup> As in ‘That was an engaging (or satisfying) argument.’ Thanks here too to Dan Cohen.

argumentative exchanges, episodes, or moves be evaluated'? Many theories, including PD, VAT, and coalescent, multi-modal theories<sup>50</sup> speak to one or more of the latter questions, while the epistemic theory, which addresses all these questions, first and foremost targets the first. The distinction between the first question and the latter set of questions—in effect, the distinction between argument (in the abstract propositional sense) evaluation and argument (in the social, communicative, dialectical sense) evaluation—is fundamental but not always acknowledged. Acknowledging it allows us to resolve outstanding debates concerning both criteria of argument evaluation and norms of argumentative interaction because evaluating arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) is related to but distinct from evaluating argumentative practices in their social, communicative contexts.

The two sorts of evaluation are connected since, as urged above, arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) are what arguers traffic in when arguing. Whatever else an arguer is doing or trying to do when arguing—persuading her interlocutor (or a broader audience) of the acceptability or otherwise of a belief/conclusion/standpoint, trying to score a debate victory, demonstrating their intelligence, amusing their audience, or whatever—if they are (sincerely) arguing, they are offering reasons for the conclusion or standpoint that they believe, hope, and intend will provide justificatory support for it. Given this, the standard epistemic criteria of argument quality noted above remain in play. But they needn't be the only criteria in play since, depending on the argument (in the social communicative sense) and its context, other criteria, such as dialectical appropriateness, persuasive effect, or the virtuousness of the arguers may also be appropriate.

We might, for example, rightly praise or criticize an argument for its persuasive effect: 'Extending the child tax credit in the USA is so important for struggling families and their children. Thank goodness its Democratic defenders' arguments succeeded in persuading enough Republicans to secure its passage, thereby bring-

---

<sup>50</sup> In addition to Tindale (2021), see the pioneering work of the 'father' of coalescent, multi-modal argumentation theory Michael Gilbert (1994, 1995, 1997, 2007, 2011).

ing the USA more in line with its more socially responsible and civilized European peers.’ If we’re recalcitrant Republicans, we might view that passage negatively, thereby ruining the persuasive effect of those arguments, but we’d still give them high marks for persuasive effect if they indeed persuaded a sufficient number of Republicans to secure the legislation’s passage. So persuasive effect is one criterion by which arguments (in the social, communicative sense) can be evaluated.

Similar remarks apply to the other purported criteria of argument quality just mentioned. For example, we might evaluate arguments (in the latter sense) in terms of *dialectical propriety*, as PD does. We might also evaluate argumentative exchanges, or the individual moves within them, in terms of the *virtues* displayed by the arguers during the exchange, or, more deeply, in terms of the virtuousness or viciousness of their *characters*, as VAT does. Here argumentative virtue serves as a criterion by which such exchanges can be evaluated. Other dimensions of quality already mentioned, for example, the elegance of an argument or the degree to which the participants find it satisfying, are also legitimate. All are sensible criteria by which arguments (in the social communicative sense) can be assessed.<sup>51</sup>

### *Criteria versus norms*

*Criteria* are those considerations that we consider when evaluating finished products: in the cases of interest here, either arguments or argumentative exchanges. They are *product-oriented*, purporting to tell us how to judge or evaluate a given case. *Norms*, on the other hand, are procedural guidelines, intended to guide or govern ongoing activities. Argumentative norms are *process-oriented*: they purport to guide our argumentative behavior, in holding us to account for violations of argumentative propriety.<sup>52</sup> So they are

---

<sup>51</sup> Michael Gilbert puts the point well, in his discussion of flaws of typical critical reasoning courses: “... the tools that have been used by Informal Logic” should not “be abandoned,” but rather “put into perspective as *one* way of examining *one* aspect of an argument” (1995, p. 134, emphasizes Gilbert’s; see also Gilbert 1994, 1997).

<sup>52</sup> I utilize the familiar product/process distinction for convenience here, but the distinction, as it applies to ‘argument,’ is problematic, as Geoff Goddu (2011) argues. The crucial thing, as Goddu notes, is “to distinguish acts of arguing

especially relevant to argumentative practice. If I insult you during our exchange, for example, I violate the argumentative norm of *civility*.<sup>53</sup> Other norms fall into distinguishable categories (e.g., logical, epistemic, linguistic, dialectical, rhetorical) and include items as diverse as *epistemological* advice concerning the justificatory force of candidate reasons and evidence (e.g., offer reasons that you think support the conclusion that you think are themselves belief-worthy; reason cogently in accordance with standard criteria of epistemic quality; consider fairly and open-mindedly counter-evidence and counter-arguments; be on the lookout for confirmation bias and other psychology-of-reasoning flaws), *dialectical* advice (e.g., obey the PD rules/code of conduct), and *rhetorical* advice (e.g., take into account your audience and their existing beliefs and shape your interventions accordingly; be mindful of the background beliefs and attitudes shared by your audience; respond sensitively to their objections, concerns, and interventions).

We must be careful not to insist on too sharp a distinction between evaluating finished argumentative products in terms of criteria and guiding ongoing argumentative practice by way of norms. For one thing, we sometimes use ‘norm’ to refer to what I’m here calling ‘criterion,’ even when we’re evaluating finished products; ‘norm’ is itself ambiguous in this way. Perhaps more importantly, ongoing argumentative activities end, resulting in finished argumentative products, that is, arguments (in the social, communicative sense). And even before they end, we can evaluate slices or segments of them as if they were finished products. Consider again the norm of civility. As an argumentative exchange proceeds, the norm tells us to argue civilly. Once the exchange is completed, or before then if we want to evaluate a specific segment of it, we can evaluate the exchange (in whole or in part) by

---

from arguments-as-objects” (*ibid.*, p. 87), without holding that the latter are necessarily or inevitably the products of the former, before discussing the criteria and norms that govern their respective evaluations. Thanks here to Goddu for helpful comments.

<sup>53</sup> Civility is of course not just an argumentative norm; it governs communicative efforts generally. But it is as applicable in argumentative contexts as it is in other communicative contexts.

checking its civility. So, civility can serve as both a norm and a criterion. Similar remarks apply to other norms. Still, the distinction between the evaluation of finished argumentative products in terms of product-oriented norms or criteria, on the one hand, and guidelines for conducting ongoing argumentative exchanges by way of process-oriented norms, on the other hand, is helpful and illuminates the norms governing public argumentation, to which I briefly turn next.

### *Norms of public argumentation*

The criteria and norms discussed so far concern argumentation generally. Some of them are especially germane when it comes to *public* argumentation, that is, argumentation conducted publicly, usually concerning matters of social or political importance and often involving issues of law and public policy. Because it is public, moral and social/political norms involving interpersonal consideration and interaction loom large, and Rawlsian and Habermasian considerations of freedom, openness, inclusion, reciprocity, diversity, and equality are especially relevant. Moral/social/political requirements concerning the proper treatment of participants, as reflected in discussion rules and procedures, are crucial, as are epistemic requirements concerning the quality of the reasons, evidence, and participant evaluations of them in play. (These norms also appropriately guide ‘private’ argumentation as well.)

The distinction between epistemic and moral norms of public argumentation is important; both epistemic and moral considerations loom large.<sup>54</sup> In arguing publicly on matters of social and political significance, it is essential that all voices are free and able to contribute and to be fairly heard. Participants must not be silenced, marginalized, or unjustly treated, and radically different perspectives must be fairly acknowledged, heard, and considered. Much has been written about these matters, by both argumentation theorists and moral/political theorists, including Habermas and the

---

<sup>54</sup> Some thinkers, most notably Habermas, are often interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as denying the distinction, holding that the moral *is* the epistemic, in some sense. For critical discussion, see Siegel (2018).

critical theory tradition he represents and extends in terms of his well-known account of discourse ethics. I take such strictures on the moral requirements of public discourse generally, and public argumentation more specifically, as given and as constituting crucially important norms, but will not discuss them further here. I will equally refrain from further discussion of the epistemic norms guiding public argumentation. It is worth noting, though, that only the ‘epistemic’ ones are actually epistemic; all the rest—dialectical, rhetorical, virtue, etc.—may govern argumentative practice, but do not inform our judgments of the epistemic worthiness of arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) or the claims or conclusions their premises/reasons purport to support.

*Priorities among compatible norms*

All the sorts of norms considered thus far—epistemic, dialectical, rhetorical, virtue-theoretic, etc. norms—are compatible. All can be utilized and appealed to depending on the type of evaluation in play. We can ask, of a given argument:

Is the abstract propositional structure logically valid? Epistemically strong?

Do its premises/reasons provide probative support to its conclusion?

Is the argumentation dialectically kosher?

Is the argumentation rhetorically effective?

Is the argumentation virtuous?

Is the argumentation beautiful? elegant?

Was the argumentation engaging or satisfying to the participating arguers?

All of these are legitimate avenues of argument evaluation. No doubt there are others.

However, although the norms are complementary, they are not of equal priority. On the epistemic view that Biro and I have defended, epistemic norms are of highest priority. This is because *arguments are what arguers traffic in when arguing*. The other senses of ‘argument’ are derivative of this one. Recall: If I’m arguing (sincerely) with you concerning a candidate belief, propo-

sition, or viewpoint about which we disagree, I'm giving you reasons which I believe, hope and intend will make the case for my preferred attitude (e.g., belief, acceptance, rejection, doubt, hope, etc.) toward that proposition or viewpoint and/or make the case against your preferred attitude. The basic phenomena of arguments and arguing involve *making cases* for/against particular claims or propositions. And this is fundamentally an epistemic matter: If the case is well made, we have good reason, *ceteris paribus*, to embrace the claim, proposition, or attitude in question; if not, we do not. If you're trafficking in arguments, you're engaged in making cases or in challenging or evaluating them. If you're so engaged, the quality of the case under consideration is paramount. If you're not so engaged, the other norms deployed (dialectical, rhetorical, etc.) aren't being applied to *arguments* in any of the senses considered thus far. So, the most fundamental sense of 'argument' is the abstract propositional one, and the most fundamental sort of argument evaluation is epistemic.

What sort of priority is this? There is a case to be made that argumentation is *causally* prior to arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) in the sense that the latter are, as Ralph Johnson puts it, "the distillate of the practice of argumentation" (2000, p. 168). I am happy to grant the plausibility of this causal priority claim, although I think it needs qualification in various ways. My priority claim is not causal, though. It is rather a claim concerning *conceptual* priority, based on my claim, argued for throughout, that arguments are most fundamentally abstract propositional structures that *make cases* for their conclusions. This is why their epistemic evaluation—how strong is the case made?—is the most fundamental sort of argument evaluation. The other sorts of evaluation (dialectical, rhetorical, virtuosic, etc.) are dependent on the case-making nature of arguments since if no case is being made, such evaluations are not evaluations *of arguments*. For an argument to be dialectically, rhetorically, or virtuosically good (or not), it must first of all be an argument in the primary, abstract propositional sense of the term. If so, an evaluation of its case-making

strength (or weakness) is preeminent among the many dimensions along which arguments can be evaluated.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion: The strengths of the epistemic theory**

In some respects, the opening motto from Scheffler captures the core of the epistemic theory of argument/argumentation, emphasizing as it does reasons and rationality, as Biro and I have emphasized from the beginning. In other respects, though, it embodies the ambiguity at the core of argumentation theory I have been belaboring: Is an argument a set of abstract propositions to be evaluated in terms of the logical or epistemic relationships obtaining among its members, or is it rather a social, dialectical, communicative activity to be understood in social terms and evaluated in terms of its dialectical or rhetorical effects or the purposes or virtues of arguers? The answer to this question, of course, is that it rests on a false dichotomy and that ‘argument’ picks out both.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, keeping them separate and clear has proved difficult; as we have seen, some theories have failed to do so, and their theories suffer from the failure. In particular, PD, VAT, and AA run into trouble in this way.<sup>57</sup> Once we draw the distinctions above between the several senses of ‘argument,’ product vs. process, argumentative criteria vs. norms, and epistemic vs. social, communicative, rhetorical, virtuosic, and other evaluations, things fall into place. The three just-mentioned theories treat argumentative practices and their normative evaluations insightfully and well. But their attempted prioritizations of the social, communicative, and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation, and, indeed, their attempts to extend their social, communicative argument evaluations into the epistemic evaluations of arguments generally, fail. In

---

<sup>55</sup> I am indebted to José Gascón and Barbara Stengel for helpful discussion of the sort of priority in play here.

<sup>56</sup> Biro and I have urged this more than once; see esp. Biro and Siegel (2006b).

<sup>57</sup> There are obviously many other theories and approaches than the three I’ve considered here. I have not treated them here for reasons of both space and competence. But I hope these three are sufficiently representative of the field to indicate something true and important about the theoretical space in which argumentation theorists work.

large part this is because they either fail to draw those distinctions, or fail to recognize both their importance and that their own analyses concern only the social, communicative sense of ‘argument.’

I should note for the record that there is not just one epistemic theory. I have emphasized the ‘BS’ version of that theory—the one Biro and I have been articulating and defending—but there are several approaches that fly under the epistemic banner, as noted earlier.<sup>58,59</sup>

The epistemic theory emphasizes the relationships existing (or not) between premises, reasons, and evidence and the conclusions/targets they putatively support, and it conceives of arguments as primarily reason-conclusion complexes. Its strengths are several. It keeps a central focus on arguments (in the abstract propositional sense), while acknowledging and speaking to the other senses of that term. It maintains and clarifies the argument/argumentation distinction, which is central to argumentation theory but is mischaracterized by some theorists. It keeps the several distinct questions concerning normative evaluation clear and answers them in a coordinated way. It clarifies the priority relationships among the several criteria that can be rightfully used to evaluate arguments in the several senses discussed above. But the most important strength of the epistemic theory is that it captures and explains the most fundamental sense of ‘argument’: that an argument, in the hands of an arguer, attempts and purports to offer justificatory support to a conclusion; that a good one suc-

---

<sup>58</sup> Fellow epistemic theorists (albeit with varying emphases, account details, and disagreements) include Scott Aikin (2008), Sharon Bailin (1999), Mark Battersby (1989, 2016), Bailin and Battersby (2016, 2022), J. Anthony Blair (2004, 2012), Blair and Ralph Johnson (1993), Patrick Bondy (2015, 2018, 2021), Tracy Howell and Justine Kingsbury (2013), Richard Feldman (1994, 2005a, 2005b), James Freeman (2005), David Godden (2015, 2016, 2017), Alvin Goldman (1994, 1997, 1999, 2003), Christoph Lumer (1988, 1991, 2005a, 2005b), and Robert Pinto (2001). This is not an exhaustive list; apologies to those I’ve erroneously left out.

<sup>59</sup> Thanks to Michael Gilbert (2007, pp. 157-158) for christening the Biro/Siegel view ‘BS’, thus exploiting its rather more *déclassé* meaning in colloquial American English—‘bullshit’—thereby bringing some welcome humor into argumentation theory.

ceeds and a bad one does not; that it can be evaluated independently of the arguer who advances it, and even in the complete absence of such an arguer as in the case of examples A and B above; that argument evaluation is most fundamentally an epistemic matter; and that the several other senses of the term are derivative of the fundamental one: Arguments are what arguers traffic in when arguing.

**Acknowledgements:** Presented as a keynote lecture at the ECA 4 conference, Rome, September 2022. I am grateful to Fabio Paglieri and the conference organizers for the invitation and to Andrew Aberdein, Mark Battersby, John Biro, Tony Blair, Daniel Cohen, José Gascón, Geoff Goddu, Debra Kerdeman, Christoph Lumer, Barbara Stengel, Christopher Tindale, and John Woods for helpful advice on an earlier draft.

## References

- Aberdein, Andrew. 2010. Virtue in argument. *Argumentation* 24(2): 165-179.
- . 2014. In defence of virtue: The legitimacy of agent-based argument appraisal. *Informal Logic* 34(1): 77-93.
- . 2018a. Inference and virtue. In *Argumentation and inference: Proceedings of the 2nd European conference on argumentation, Fribourg 2017, vol. 2*, eds. S. Oswald and D. Maillat, 1-9. London: College Publications.
- . 2018b. Commentary on Gascón, “Virtuous arguers: Responsible and reliable.” In *Argumentation and inference: Proceedings of the 2nd European conference on argumentation, Fribourg 2017, vol. 1*, eds. S. Oswald and D. Maillat, 123-128. London: College Publications.
- . 2023. The fallacy fallacy: From the Owl of Minerva to the Lark of Arete. *Argumentation* 37(2): 269–280.
- and Daniel H. Cohen. 2016. Introduction: Virtues and arguments. *Topoi* 35(2): 339-343.
- Aikin, Scott F. 2008. Three objections to the epistemic theory of argument rebutted. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 44(3): 130-142.
- Bailin, Sharon. 1999. The trouble with Percy. *Informal Logic* 19(2-3): 161-170.
- and Mark E. Battersby. 2016. *Reason in the balance*, 2e. Indianapolis: Hackett.

- 2022. ‘Inoculating students against conspiracy theories: The case of Covid-19.’ In *The pandemic of argumentation*, Argumentation Library, vol. 43, eds. S. Oswald, M. Lewiński, S. Greco, and S. Villata, 271-289. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Battersby, Mark E. 1989. Critical thinking as applied epistemology: Relocating critical thinking in the philosophical landscape. *Informal Logic* 11(2): 91-100.
- 2016. Enhancing rationality: Heuristics, biases, and the critical thinking project. *Informal Logic* 36(2): 99-120.
- Biro, John and Harvey Siegel. 1992. Normativity, argumentation, and an epistemic theory of fallacies.’ In *Argumentation illuminated: Selected papers from the 1990 international conference on argumentation*, eds. F. H. van Eemeren, Charles A. Willard, Rob Grootendorst, and J. Anthony Blair, 85-103. Dordrecht: Foris.
- 2006a. In defense of the objective epistemic approach to argumentation.’ *Informal Logic* 25(3): 91-101.
- 2006b. Pragma-dialectic versus epistemic theories of arguing and arguments: Rivals or partners?’ In *Considering pragma-dialectics: A festschrift for Frans H. van Eemeren on the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday*, eds. P. Houtlosser and A. van Rees, 1-10. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- 2015. Argument and context. *Cogency* 7(2): 27-41.
- Blair, J. Anthony. 2004. Argument and its uses. *Informal Logic* 24(2): 137-151.
- 2012. *Groundwork in the theory of argumentation: Selected papers of J. Anthony Blair*. Argumentation Library vol 21. Dordrecht: Springer.
- and Ralph H. Johnson. 1993. Dissent in fallacyland, part 1: Problems with van Eemeren and Grootendorst.’ In *Argument and the postmodern challenge: Proceedings of the eighth SCA/AFA Conference on argumentation*, ed. R. E. McKerrow, 188-190. Annandale VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Bondy, Patrick. 2015. Virtues, evidence, and ad hominem arguments. *Informal Logic* 35(4): 450-466.
- 2018. *Epistemic rationality and epistemic normativity*. NY: Routledge.
- 2021. ‘The epistemic norm of inference and non-epistemic reasons for belief. *Synthese* 198(2): 1761-1781.
- Botting, David. 2010. A pragma-dialectical default on the question of truth. *Informal Logic* 30(4): 413-434.
- Bowell, Tracy and Justine Kingsbury. 2013. Virtue and argument: Taking character into account. *Informal Logic* 33(1): 22-32.

- Cohen, Daniel H. 2013. Virtue, in context. *Informal Logic* 33(4): 471-485.
- 2022. You can't judge an argument by its closure. *Informal Logic* 42(4): 669-684.
- Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2021a. Argument and argumentation. *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). URL accessed 5 February 2022: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/argument/>>.
- 2021b. *The dialogical roots of deduction: Historical, cognitive, and philosophical perspectives on reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eemeren, Frans H. van 2012. The pragma-dialectical theory under discussion. *Argumentation* 26(4): 439-457.
- and Rob Grootendorst. 2004. *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- and Peter Houtlosser. 2003. The development of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation. *Argumentation* 17(4): 387-403.
- Feldman, Richard. 1994. Good arguments. In *Socializing epistemology: The social dimensions of knowledge*, ed. F. F. Schmitt, 159-188. NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- 2005a. Deep disagreement, rational resolutions, and critical thinking. *Informal Logic* 25(1): 13-23.
- 2005b. Useful advice and good arguments. *Informal Logic* 25(3): 277-287.
- Fisher, Walter R. 1987. *Human Communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Freeman, James. 2005. *Acceptable premises: An epistemic approach to an informal logic problem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garsen, Bart and Jan Albert van Laar. 2010. A pragma-dialectical response to objectivist epistemic challenges. *Informal Logic* 30(2): 122-141.
- Gascón, José Ángel. 2016. Virtue and arguers. *Topoi* 35(2): 441-450.
- 2017. Brothers in arms: Virtue and pragma-dialectics. *Argumentation* 31(4): 705-724.
- 2018. Virtuous arguers: Responsible and reliable. *Argumentation* 32(2): 155-173.
- Gilbert, Michael A. 1994. Multi-modal argumentation. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 24(2): 159-177.
- 1995. Arguments & arguers. *Teaching Philosophy* 18(2): 125-138.

- 1997. *Coalescent argumentation*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- 2007. Natural normativity: Argumentation theory as an engaged discipline. *Informal Logic* 27(2): 149-161.
- 2011. The kisceral: Reason and intuition in argumentation. *Argumentation* 25(2): 163-170.
- Godden, David. 2015. Argumentation, rationality, and psychology of reasoning. *Informal Logic* 35(2): 135-166.
- 2016. On the priority of agent-based argumentative norms. *Topoi* 35(2): 345-357.
- 2017. On the norms of visual argument: A case for normative non-revisionism. *Argumentation* 31(2): 395-431.
- Goddu, G. C. 2011. Is 'argument' subject to the product/process ambiguity? *Informal Logic* 31(2): 75-88.
- 2015. Towards a foundation for argumentation theory. In *Reflections on theoretical issues in argumentation theory*, Argumentation Library 28, eds. F. H. van Eemeren and B. Garssen, 43-51. Dordrecht: Springer.
- 2016. What (the hell) Is virtue argumentation? In *Argumentation and reasoned action: Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> European conference on argumentation, Lisbon, 2015, Vol. II*, eds. D. Mohammed and M. Lewiński, 439-448. London: College Publications.
- Goldman, Alvin I. 1994. Argumentation and social epistemology. *Journal of Philosophy* 91(1): 27-49.
- 1997. Argumentation and interpersonal justification. *Argumentation* 11(2): 155-164.
- 1999. *Knowledge in a social world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2003. An epistemological approach to argumentation. *Informal Logic* 23(1): 51-63.
- Goody, Jack. 2006. *The theft of history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Groarke, Leo. 2015. Going multimodal: What is a mode of arguing and why does it matter? *Argumentation* 29(2): 133-155.
- 2019. Matching schemes of argument: Verbal, visual, multimodal. In *Proceedings of the ninth conference of the international society for the study of argumentation*, eds., Bart Garssen, David Godden, Gordon R. Mitchell, and Jean H. M. Wagemans, 443-457. Amsterdam: Sic Sat.
- 2021. Informal logic. *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), ed., Edward N. Zalta. URL accessed 18 May 2022: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/logic-informal/>>.

- Johnson, Ralph H. 2000. *Manifest rationality: A pragmatic theory of argument*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kišiček, Gabrijela. 2018. Can we translate sounds into words? *Informal Logic* 38(3): 346-361.
- Lloyd, Geoffrey E. R. 2018. *The ambivalences of rationality: Ancient and modern cross-cultural explorations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lumer, Christoph. 1988. The disputation – a special type of cooperative argumentative dialogue.’ *Argumentation* 2(4): 441-464.
- 1991. Structure and function of argumentations – An epistemological approach to determining criteria for the validity and adequacy of argumentations. In *Proceedings of the second international conference on argumentation*, vol. 1A, eds. F. H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair, and C. Willard, 98-107. Amsterdam, SICSAT.
- 2005a. Introduction: The epistemological approach to argumentation – A map. *Informal Logic* 25(3): 189-212.
- 2005b. The epistemological theory of argument: How and why?’ *Informal Logic* 25(3): 213-243.
- 2012. The epistemic inferiority of pragma-dialectics – A reply to Botting. *Informal Logic* 32(1): 51-82.
- O’Keefe, Daniel. 1977. Two concepts of argument. *The Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13:121-128.
- Pagliari, Fabio. 2015. Bogency and goodacies: On argument quality in virtue argumentation theory. *Informal Logic* 35(1): 65-87.
- Pinto, Robert C. 2001. *Argument, inference and dialectic: Collected papers on informal logic*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Popa, Eugen Octav 2016. Criticism without fundamental principles. *Informal Logic* 36(2): 192-216.
- Reed, Christopher A., and T. J. Norman. 2004. *Argumentation machines: New frontiers in argument and computation*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Scheffler, Israel. 1989. *Reason and teaching*. Indianapolis: Hackett. First published 1973.
- Siegel, Harvey. 1988. *Educating reason: Rationality, critical thinking, and education*. London: Routledge.
- 1997. *Rationality redeemed?: Further dialogues on an educational ideal*. New York: Routledge.
- 1998. Knowledge, truth and education. In *Education, knowledge, and truth: Beyond the postmodern impasse*, ed. D. Carr, 19-36. London: Routledge.

- 1999a. Argument quality and cultural difference. *Argumentation* 13(2): 183-201.
- 1999b. Multiculturalism and the possibility of Transcultural educational and philosophical ideals. *Philosophy* 74: 387-409.
- 2001. 'Incommensurability, rationality and relativism: In science, culture and science education. In *Incommensurability and related matters*, eds. P. Hoyningen-Huene and H. Sankey, 207-224. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- 2004. Relativism. In *Handbook of epistemology*, eds. I. Niiniluoto, M. Sintonen, and J. Woleński, 747-780. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- 2007. Multiculturalism and rationality. *Theory and research in education* 5(2): 203-223.
- 2013. Argumentation and the epistemology of disagreement. *Cogency* 5(1): 135-170.
- 2017. *Education's epistemology: Rationality, diversity and critical thinking*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2018. Justice and justification. *Theory and Research in Education* 16(3): 308-329.
- and John Biro. 1997. Epistemic normativity, argumentation, and fallacies. *Argumentation* 11(3): 277-292.
- and John Biro. 2008. Rationality, reasonableness, and critical rationalism: Problems with the pragma-dialectical view. *Argumentation* 22(2): 191-203.
- and John Biro. 2010. The pragma-dialectician's dilemma: Reply to Garssen and van Laar. *Informal Logic* 30(4): 457-480.
- and John Biro. 2021. Walton on argument, arguments, and argumentation. *Journal of Applied Logics* 8(1): 183-194.
- Tindale, Christopher W. 1999. *Acts of arguing: A rhetorical model of argument*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- 2004. *Rhetorical argumentation: Principles of theory and practice*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- 2014. Global governance, argumentation, and diversity. In *Arguing global governance: Agency, lifeworld, and shared reasoning*, eds. C. Bjola and M. Kornprobst, 141-156. London: Routledge.
- 2021. *The anthropology of argument: Cultural foundations of rhetoric and reason*. NY: Routledge.
- Walton, Douglas. 1990. What Is reasoning? What is an argument? *Journal of Philosophy* 87(8): 399-419.
- Reed, Christopher and Fabrizio Macagno. 2008. *Argumentation schemes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willard, Charles A. 1983. *Argumentation and the social grounds of knowledge*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Žagar, Igor. 2021. *Four critical essays on argumentation*. Ljubljana: Pedagoški Inštitut.