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Metaphors for Argumentation

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Introduction

- There has been much recent discussion on the (presumed) combative nature of philosophy.
- Overly adversarial interaction in seminars, lectures etc., as well as in writing.
- Combativeness presented as related to the low percentage of women among philosophers.
- Many deplore the tendency towards aggressive argumentation and plea for a more cooperative model.
- Others argue that combativeness is at the essence of philosophy.

Introduction

- Some feminist philosophers in particular have criticized the ‘Adversary Method’ in philosophy (Moulton 1983).
- Others have pointed out the liberating value of gender transgression when women appropriate aggressiveness (Antony 2003).
- It remains a point of both theoretical and practical disagreement among feminists what the parameters for respectful disagreement should be (Garry 2001).

Argumentation

- Ultimately, it all hinges on how we are to understand (the concept and practice of) *argumentation*.
- Is argumentation inherently coercive? Is any intent to persuade an act of violence?
- Or are there alternative ways to think more positively of argumentation?
- “What we need are not new definitions, but new metaphors.” (Cohen 1995)

Plan of the Talk

1. Argument as truth-conducive
2. Argument as war
3. Argument as therapy
4. Argument as epistemic social exchange

Argument as truth-conducive



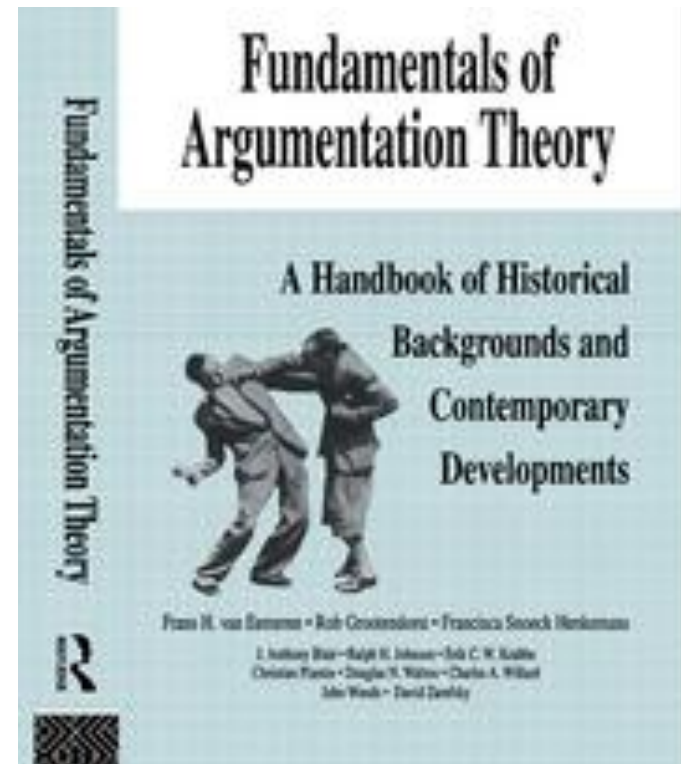
Argumentation as truth-conducive

- One of the primary functions of an argument is to enhance the acceptability of the speech act for which it is an argument.
- The proponent of an argument offers epistemic justification for the conclusion.
- The process of exchanging justifications for claims should lead to more accuracy, if defective justification is weeded out in the process.
- Empirical (Mercier) as well as formal (Betz) evidence that argumentation can be truth-conducive.
- Is the practice inherently adversarial?

Mill and the value of dissent

“[I]t was John Stuart Mill who crystallised the importance of having your ideas challenged through engagement with others who disagree with you. In the second chapter of *On Liberty* (1859), he argued for the immense value of dissenting voices. It is the dissenters who force us to think, who challenge received opinion, who nudge us away from dead dogma to beliefs that have survived critical challenge, the best that we can hope for. Dissenters are of great value even when they are largely or even totally mistaken in their beliefs.” (Warburton, *Aeon*, 2014)

Argument as War



Disagreement and adversariality

- Argumentation presumably starts with a situation of disagreement, or at least of epistemic differences.
- Arguer wants to defend claim P and offers reasons supporting the acceptability of P.
- Addressee does not *prima facie* accept P and may want to resist being forced to accept P.
- The process of argumentation then becomes a *competition* between the interlocutors, one where only one side can win.

Nozick on argumentation as coercive

“Wouldn't it be better if philosophical arguments left the person no possible answer at all, reducing him to impotent silence? Even then, he might sit there silently, smiling, Buddhalike: Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he dies. How's that for a powerful argument?” (Nozick 1981, 4)

Belligerent vocabulary

- Philosophers are trained to find objections, counterexamples, rebuttals etc. to what their interlocutors say – the *opponents*.
- Argumentation is a duel between opponents, and only one of them can win; scorekeeping.
- The winning person is the one who crushes the opponent and sticks to their guns.
- Lines of attack; counterattacks.
- Defensible positions; winning strategies.

Argument as therapy



Socrates the midwife

“My art of midwifery is in general like theirs [real midwives]; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. [...]The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine.” (*Theaetetus* , 150 b-c)

Argumentation as therapy

- Some amount of unease and pain will typically be associated with the ‘treatment’, just as it befits genuine medical treatment.
- The therapeutic metaphor for argumentation has a number of advantages.
- But: paternalistic component.
- Inherent *asymmetry* between the person administering the treatment and the person receiving it.

Argument as epistemic social exchange



Transferability in mathematical proof

“... the basic idea is that a proof must be such that a relevant expert will become convinced of the truth of the conclusion of the proof just by consideration of each of the steps in the proof. With non-transferable proofs, something extra beyond just the steps in the proof is needed—in the case of probabilistic proofs, this extra component is a knowledge of the process by which the proof was generated, and in particular that the supposedly random steps really were random.” (Easwaran 2009, 343)

Social exchange theory



- A framework within sociology and social psychology that explains patterns of interaction as processes of negotiated exchanges, involving costs and rewards.
- While humans have to protect their own interests to thrive, they are also highly dependent on others: interplay between self-interest and interdependence.

Social exchange theory



- Successful exchanges consists in giving others something more valuable to them than it is costly for the giver to give.
- Different kinds of resources can be exchanged: goods, status, affection, services, and information.

Argumentation as epistemic exchange

- In argumentation, epistemic resources such as knowledge, evidence, justification, critical objections, defeaters, can be exchanged.
- Ideally, it is more rewarding for receiver to receive the resources than it is costly for giver to give.
- Arguer offers Addressee the epistemic grounds needed to support the conclusion.
- If Addressee suitably challenges Arguer's claims, this may lead to an epistemic gain for both parties, as they scrutinize the reliability of these claims together.
- Argumentation can lead to the coproduction of new epistemically valuable items; 'proofs and refutations'.

Argumentative virtues

- The likelihood of fruitful argumentation increases if the parties adopt specific behaviors and attitudes.
- Arguer must look for reasons that are likely to be compelling to Addressee.
- Addressee should be willing to receive the epistemic resources offered in the spirit of openness, even if they prima facie clash with her entrenched beliefs.
- This is especially important in situations of scarce common ground.
- **Trust** is a fundamental component.

Issues

- Can epistemic resources be transferred through argumentation across different standpoints, i.e. between interlocutors who hold significantly different worldviews due to their different social and personal experiences?
- Are there forms of epistemic injustice pertaining specifically to argumentation – *argumentative injustice* – hindering the exchange of epistemic resources through argumentation?

Conclusions

- The war metaphor is problematic for a number of reasons, both moral and epistemic.
- The therapy metaphor has advantages, but it does not attribute the right kind of agency to all participants (asymmetry).
- The epistemic exchange approach emphasizes the potential epistemic gains (truth-conduciveness *light*), but also stresses the inherent social component of argumentation.

Thanks!

