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A Case for Different Standards of Argumentative Rationality

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ABSTRACT: I argue for different standards of argumentative rationality from considerations concerning Biro and Siegel's criticism of van Eemeren and Grootendorst's conception of argumentative rationality associated with their pragmatic-dialectic theory of argumentation. I claim that this criticism assumes a univocal standard of rationality associated with argumentation. I then argue against this assumption, which makes sense of how an argument judged bad by the lights of a given theory of argument may nevertheless rationalize believing its conclusion.

KEY WORDS: argumentative rationality, conventional and problem validity, epistemic seriousness, objective epistemic theory, pragma-dialectic theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Willard remarks that, "[n]ot all rationality theories include argument in their definitions, but virtually all argument theories include rationality in theirs" (1989, p. 152; by way of Godden 2015). The idea that rationality is in some way central to argumentation is widely held (e.g., Biro and Siegel 1992, Blair 2012, Habermas 1981, Johnson 2000, Siegel 1988). Biro and Siegel claim that, "[r]ationality is ... at the heart of argumentation, and argumentation theory should be understood as being concerned with the ability of arguments to render beliefs rational" (1992, p. 97). Taking rationality to be at the heart of argumentation, makes it "a fundamental task of any theory of argument... to supply, by manufacture or import, some theory of rationality" (Godden 2015, p. 136). Following Godden, I will call these theories of argumentative rationality.

Argumentative rationality concerns the rationality of believing the conclusion of an argument in light of believing its premises. A theory of argumentative rationality tells us when a reason-giving use of argument rationalizes one's believing the conclusion. That is, it tells us what must obtain for your reason-giving use of an argument to rationalize your believing the conclusion in light of the premises. In this paper, I consider a first-step response, which I label Argumentative rationality (AR): your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises if and only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments.

In what follows, I first discuss two facets of (AR). Next, I sketch what I take to be epistemic and pragma-dialectic approaches to argumentative rationality, each uniquely instantiating (AR). With these illustrations of the import of (AR) in hand, I make a simple case for different standards of argumentative rationality. Finally, I conclude by considering a univocal standard of argumentative rationality, which appeals to what I call

a reasons-first conception of rationality. This motivates a picture of argumentative rationality that is incompatible with (AR).

2. THE CENTRALITY OF RATIONALITY TO ARGUMENTATION

Plausibly, one way that rationality is central to argumentation is that rationality of belief is an outcome of good argumentation and good argumentation is a determinant of the rationality of belief. I take (AR) to capture this. Again, (AR): your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises if and only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments. I now highlight two facets of (AR).

First, by (AR) a distinguishing feature of argumentative rationality is that it concerns believing the conclusion of an argument used in a reason-giving way in light of the argument's premises. The question of whether it is argumentatively rational for one to believe a proposition *p* only makes sense given that *p* is a conclusion of an argument used in a reason-giving way. Accordingly, it is a category mistake to think that one's believing *p* is or isn't argumentatively rational divorced from an associated reason-giving use of argument whose conclusion is *p*. This highlights a pragmatic dimension of argumentative rationality. Relatedly, an argument itself doesn't rationalize believing its conclusion. Rather, it is only an argument in use that does so. Specifically, it is only the use of an argument whose premises are advanced or considered as reasons for a person *S*'s believing its conclusion.

Second, from (AR) it follows that your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments. Accordingly, by the lights of (AR) a theory of what makes arguments good is prior to a theory of argumentative rationality. To spell this out, consider the following.

[1] Your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if the premises are good reasons you possess for believing the conclusion.

[2] If the premises are good reasons you possess for believing the conclusion, then your argument is good.

[3] If your argument is good, then it has the good-making feature(s) of arguments.

So, [4] your use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if it possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments.

Theories of argumentation identify the good making features of arguments. Given [4], a theory of good argumentation is conceptually prior to a theory of argumentative rationality.

In sum, one way rationality is central to argumentation is that the rationality of belief is an outcome of good argumentation and good argumentation is a determinant of the rationality of belief. Understanding this in terms of (AR) motivates thinking that argumentative rationality has what I'll label pragmatic and good-argumentation dimensions. Given the the pragmatic dimension of argumentative rationality, the question of whether it is rational in an argumentative sense for one to believe a proposition only makes sense given that the proposition is a conclusion of an argument used in a reason- giving way. According to the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality, good argumentation is conceptually prior to argumentative rationality.

In order to drill down with respect to the good argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality, I replay the above argument as follows.

- (1) An argument used in a reason-giving way is good if and only if (iff) the argument possesses good-making feature F.
- (2) Your reason giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion iff the argument so used is good (i.e., it possesses F).
- So, (3) your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if your argument is F.

The variable F is the conjunction of features an argument must possess in order for a reason-giving use of it to qualify as good. I don't take (1) to be controversial. Proposition (2) reflects (AR). Proposition (3) reflects the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality: what makes an argument good is conceptually prior to argumentative rationality.

That good argumentation is conceptionally prior to argumentative rationality explains why different accounts of good argumentation are associated with different accounts of argumentative rationality. For example, on the epistemic approach to good argumentation advanced by Biro and Siegel (e.g., in 1992, 1997, 2006a, 2006b), F is epistemic seriousness. This determines the notion of epistemic argumentative rationality. On the pragma-dialectic approach to good argumentation of van Eemeren and Grootendorst (e.g., 2004, 1995, 1988), F is problem validity and conventional (intersubjective) validity. This determines pragma-dialectic argumentative rationality. I now briefly describe how epistemic and pragma-dialectic argumentative rationality are so engendered, starting with the first.

3. THE EPISTEMIC AND PRAGMA-DIALECTIC APPROACHES TO ARGUMENTATIVE RATIONALITY

The focus of Biro and Siegel's (objective) epistemic approach to good argumentation is arguments that aim at the achievement of knowledge or justified belief (Siegel and Biro 1997, p. 278; Biro and Siegel 2006a, p. 94). The point of giving such arguments is, generally speaking, to show that knowing or being justified in believing the premises warrants knowing or being justified in believing the conclusion (1997, p. 286). This motivates their claim that an argument is bad if its premises taken together fail to provide adequate support for its conclusion.

An argument is an epistemically unsuccessful one if it fails to warrant belief in its conclusion. This reflects that "the condition both necessary and sufficient for success in argumentation is that of rendering the conclusion warranted. An argument is epistemically successful to the extent that it provides warrant for its conclusion, and epistemically unsuccessful to the extent that it does not (Biro and Siegel 1992, pp. 96-7). An argument is epistemically serious to the extent that it is epistemically successful. An argument that aims at the achievement of knowledge or justified belief is good only if it is epistemically serious. It is hard to quibble with this intuitively plausible claim.

With (AR) in hand, this conception of argument goodness motivates epistemic argumentative rationality (EPIST AR): your reason giving use of an argument makes your believing the conclusion argumentatively rational just in case the premises constitute

justification you have for believing the conclusion. Note how the good argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality is in play here. As a theory of good argumentation is conceptually prior to a theory of argumentative rationality, what counts as a good argument on the epistemic approach grounds the associated notion of argumentative rationality, i.e., grounds (EPIST AR). I now turn to the pragma-dialectic approach to good argumentation.

Here the focus is on argumentation construed as a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint (2004, p. 1). “The primary function of argumentation is to be a

rational instrument for convincing other people” (2004, p.15), by means of “expressions jointly used in an attempt to justify or refute a proposition” (2004, p.3). I understand rational persuasion on this approach as follows. A critical interlocuter C is rationally persuaded to accept the standpoint you argue for only if it is reasonable for C to be persuaded by your argument for it. It is so reasonable just in case your argument is both problem valid and conventionally valid.

Your argument is problem valid if you and your interlocuter C correctly take the conclusion to follow from the premises and it is conventionally valid if the premises are acceptable to you and C. An argument that aims at rational persuasion is good only if it is problem and conventionally valid. Even with first-step characterizations of problem and conventional validity, this claim is plausible. With (AR) in hand, this conception of argument goodness motivates pragma-dialectic argumentative rationality (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR): a reason giving use of an argument makes your believing the conclusion argumentatively rational (i.e., reasonable) just in case the premises are acceptable to the interlocuters (e.g., protagonist and antagonist) and this acceptability transfers to the conclusion.

Of course, there is much more to explain in order to give full-blown treatments of the epistemic and pragma-dialectic theories of good argumentation. Here I have aimed only to show how (AR), in particular the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality, is a means of generating (EPIST AR) and (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR). To summarize, again (AR) is: your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises if and only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments.

The epistemic approach’s story about the good-making features of arguments motivates (EPIST AR): your reason giving use of an argument makes your believing the conclusion argumentatively rational just in case the premises constitute justification you have for believing the conclusion. By the lights of (EPIST AR), argumentative rationality is a type of epistemic rationality according to which it is not rational for you to believe something unless your believing it is epistemically justified. To develop (EPIST AR), we need an account of epistemic justification.

The Pragma-dialectic approach’s story about the good-making features of arguments motivates (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR): a reason giving use of an argument makes your believing the conclusion argumentatively rational (i.e., reasonable) just in case the premises are acceptable to the interlocuters (e.g., protagonist and antagonist) and this acceptability transfers to the conclusion. By the lights of (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR), argumentative rationality is a type of procedural rationality (for discussion, see Corner A.

and Hahn, U. 2013) according to which it is not rational for you to believe something that is incompatible with previously accepted starting points or that doesn't follow from such starting points by criteria/norms that you are committed to.

I hope that it is obvious that both the epistemic and pragma-dialectic approaches to good argumentation are compatible with the (AR)-centric understanding of the centrality of rationality to argumentation. To quickly illustrate, simply instantiate (AR) with the relevant conceptions of good argument and argumentative rationality, which deliver conceptual truths about the two approaches. For example, if an argument is good (epistemic serious/prob & conv valid), then a reason giving use of it rationalizes (EPIST AR/PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR, respectively) believing its conclusion. Also, if a reason- giving use of an argument rationalizes (EPIST AR/PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR) believing the conclusion, then the argument is good (epistemic serious/prob & conv valid, respectively).

4. A CASE FOR DIFFERENT STANDARDS OF ARGUMENTATIVE RATIONALITY

Towards making this case, consider again the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality, which says, in effect, that good argumentation is conceptually prior to argumentative rationality. This dimension of argumentative rationality problematizes the use of an account of argumentative rationality associated with one theory of argumentation to generate criticism of another theory of argumentation. To illustrate, I draw on criticism of the pragma-dialectic theory of argumentation advanced by Siegel and Biro (Siegel and Biro 2008, pp.194-195; Biro and Siegel 2006b, 6-7).

Simplifying, there is a scenario according to which the following argument is problem valid and conventionally valid.

The Candidate's race is X

No person of race X should be elected to public office The
candidate should not be elected to public office

The second premise is not justifiable. So, [1] it is not epistemically rational to believe the conclusion in light of the premises. What is the force of [1] as a criticism of the pragma-dialectic theory of argumentation? From [1], the argument in the scenario doesn't suffice for rationalizing believing the conclusion in light of the premises. Given (AR), problem validity and conventional validity are not good-making features of arguments. However, this begs the question against the pragma-dialectic theory of argument since it presupposes the epistemic account of good argument on which the epistemic approach to argumentative rationality is based.

What this suggests is that the centrality of rationality to argumentation understood in terms of (AR) does not problematize the pragma-dialectic approach (or the epistemic approach) to good argumentation. I am doubtful that it is correct to think otherwise. Accordingly, I don't see how to plausibly use (AR) to criticize the pragma-dialectic approach to good argumentation. For example, consider the following attempt.

[1] The problem validity and conventional validity of an argument do not make a reason-giving use of it good, because [2] an argument's possession of these features do not

rationalize believing the conclusion. This is a non-sequitur. [2] doesn't follow. These features of arguments do engender rationality, i.e., PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR. Here's another attempt.

[1] The problem validity and conventional validity of an argument do not make a reason-giving use of it good, because [2] an argument's possession of these features do not rationalize believing the conclusion in an epistemic sense. This is question-begging by the lights of the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality. Asserting proposition [2] assumes that problem and conventional validity are not good-making features of arguments.

Let's pause and focus on the central question of the paper. You use an argument to advances its premises in support of the conclusion. What must obtain for your use of the argument to rationalize your believing the conclusion in light of the premises? Plausibly, there are different ways your reason-giving use of an argument may rationalize your believing the conclusion, e.g., EPIST AR, PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR (these are independent senses of rationality) Which standard of rationality is in play depends on the aim of the reason-giving use of argument.

If its rational persuasion, then the standard is PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR, which doesn't require epistemic success. If it's the achievement of knowledge/justified belief, then the standard is EPIST AR, which **does** require epistemic success. Given (AR), this motivates thinking that there are different normative standards for reason-giving uses of arguments and so different corresponding accounts of the good-making features of arguments. Accordingly, given (AR), this motivates thinking that there are different standards of argumentative rationality. I encapsulate this in the form of the following argument.

[1] There are different ways the premises of an argument used in a reason-giving way may rationalize your believing the conclusion.

[2] Selecting just one of them as genuine argumentative rationality is unmotivated.

So, there are different standards of argumentative rationality.

I now consider push back against [2]. There is just one correct account of good argumentation and so by (AR), this motivates making the associated notion of argumentative rationality the correct understanding of argumentative rationality. I am skeptical of this criticism of [2] because the typical theory of good argumentation has a focus.

For example, as highlighted above, Biro and Siegel (1992) begin their sketch of the epistemic account of good argumentation and fallacies by claiming that it, "founds itself on the claim that it is a conceptual truth about arguments that their central (not, of course, only) purpose is to provide a bridge from known truths or justified beliefs to as yet unknown (or at least unrecognized truths or as yet unjustified beliefs)" (1992 p. 92, italics are theirs).

I take their claim to provide a rationale for their account of good argument. However, other purposes arguments may serve motivate rationales for alternative theories of good argumentation (e.g., the pragma-dialectic theory).

A second response to this pushback is to abandon (AR). Specifically, reject that a reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments. This amounts to abandoning the good-argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality according to which good argumentation is a necessary requirement of

argumentative rationality. By abandoning (AR), we may grant that there is just one correct account of good argumentation and reject that the associated notion of rationality is argumentative rationality. Of course, this response essentially abandons the above case for different standards of argumentative rationality. To spell this out, consider the following.

Recall the argument for the good argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality, which I repeat here for convenience.

[1] Your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if the premises are good reasons you possess for believing the conclusion.

[2] If the premises are good reasons you possess for believing the conclusion, then your argument is good.

[3] If your argument is good, then it has the good-making feature(s) of arguments.

So, [4] your use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if it possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments

Abandoning (AR) and the associated good argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality in effect commits one to the rejection of [4]. Since [2] and [3] seem obviously true, [1] is the place to poke. Consider replacing it with [1']: your reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion only if the premises are reasons (rather than good reasons) you possess for believing the conclusion. Claim [1'] motivates a reasons-first conception of rationality. It is rational—in this sense—for you to believe something just in case you possess reasons for believing it, good or otherwise.

Recall that an account of (EPIST-AR) calls for an account of epistemic justification and that an account of (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR) calls for an account of the operative starting points and procedural rules operative in the relevant dialectical context. A reasons-first conception of rationality calls for an account of reasons for belief (e.g., for helpful introductions see Alvarez (2009, 2008), Audi (1993), Ginsborg (2006)). Such an account will uncover the normative oomph of reason-first rationality. Unfortunately, space restrictions prevent me from giving such an account (I do so in my forthcoming book) and so I can only be suggestive here.

Understanding argumentative rationality in terms of reasons-first rationality takes the standard of argumentative rationality to be achieved merely by one successfully advancing one's premises as reasons for believing one's conclusion. Your reason-giving use of an argument that rationalizes your conclusion belief so understood succeeds in placing your conclusion-belief in the space of reasons and thereby indicates your being responsive to reasons as such in the way that allows for reflectively stepping back and raising critical questions. For example, is your believing the conclusion epistemically rational? Is it pragma-dialectically rational? These two different rationality standards are in play depending on the operative account of good argumentation.

Note that argumentative rationality à la reasons-first rationality is prior to both (EPIST-AR) and (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR) in the sense that an argument used to advance reasons for believing its conclusion satisfies either only if it satisfies the standard of reasons-first rationality. To be clear, aligning argumentative rationality with reasons-first rationality does not rule out the normative relevance of (EPIST-AR) and (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR) to argumentation. Again, which are in play depends on the operative "sense" of good that guides an instance of argumentation.

To summarize, an argument for the claim that there are different standards of argumentative rationality may be put as follows.

[1] There are different ways the premises of an argument used in a reason-giving way may rationalize your believing the conclusion.

[2] Selecting just one of them as genuine argumentative rationality is unmotivated.

So, there are different standards of argumentative rationality.

I find don't find criticism of [2] based on (AR) and the claim that there is just one way that argumentation is good persuasive for the reasons given above. However, considering the pros and cons for adopting [2] is heuristically valuable as a means of thinking about why (AR) should be maintained. How, exactly, is rationality central to argumentation? As I have tried to illustrate above, different instantiations of (AR) (e.g., (EPIST-AR), (PRAGMA-DIALECTIC AR)) generate unique responses. So too does abandoning (AR) as I quickly illustrated with taking argumentative rationality as reasons-first rationality.

Of course, the pushback on [2] that I consider assumes the priority of good argumentation vis-à-vis rational argumentation. I confess that I am simply unable to conceive of a plausible case for prioritizing one standard of argumentative rationality over all others that is independent of considerations pertaining to what counts as a good argument. Hence, my rationale for considering the pushback in terms of arguing that there is just one correct account of good argumentation, which allegedly delivers a univocal standard of argumentative rationality.

To illustrate, grant that to use an argument in a reason-giving way is to advance the premises as (good) reasons for believing the conclusion whether for the purposes of rational persuasion or otherwise. I don't see how this motivates (EPIST-AR) independently of understanding the success of such uses of argument in terms of epistemic success. For example, your advancing the premises of your argument as (good) reasons for you to believe the conclusion brings into play reasons-first rationality. After all, if your premises are not reasons you possess for believing the conclusion, they certainly are not good reasons as understood on the epistemic approach adopted by Biro and Siegel. Suppose that arguing is essentially reason-giving and only contingently done to persuade. How does this alone conceptually prioritize epistemic rationality over, say, reasons-first rationality?

5. CONCLUSION

What must obtain for a reason-giving use of an argument to rationalize your believing the conclusion in light of the premises? The responses considered here have been developed in relation to Argumentative rationality (AR): a reason-giving use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion in light of the premises if and only if the argument so used possesses the good-making feature(s) of arguments. (AR) speaks to the centrality of rationality to argumentation. A good argument must in some way make rational believing the conclusion in light of the premises. This is intuitively plausible. An account of good argumentation owes us a story about how using a good argument in a reason-giving way rationalizes believing the conclusion in light of premises.

Also, by the lights of (AR) if your use of an argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion, then the argument so used is good. Note that this makes argumentative rationality a thick concept.¹ To put this in general terms, a use of an argument rationalizes

¹ Thanks to Paula Olmos for input that suggested to me this formulation of an outcome of what I have called the good argumentation dimension of argumentative rationality.

believing the conclusion only if the user takes the premises to be reasons for believing the conclusion (descriptive) and, moreover, they are good reasons for believing the conclusion (normative). We may take the premises of an argument used in a reason-giving way to be good reasons for believing the conclusion only if the argument as used is good. We make argumentative rationality more restrictive by insisting that there is just one correct account of good argumentation. We make it somewhat less restrictive by being more pluralistic with respect to what counts as good argumentation. A pluralistic approach to good argumentation motivates the simple case given above for different standards of argumentative rationality.

However, perhaps we go wrong taking argumentative rationality to be a thick concept in this way. That is, perhaps we shouldn't make it a requirement for argumentative rationality that one's premises be good reasons for believing the conclusion. Instead, a use of an argument rationalizes believing the conclusion if the premises are reasons for believing the conclusion. This, in effect, construes argumentative rationality in terms of reasons-first rationality.

This move creates conceptual space for thinking that your reason-giving use of an argument can (argumentatively) rationalize your believing the conclusion even though the argument you use is a bad argument—by the lights of the operative account of good argumentation—and so your reasons for believing the conclusion aren't good reasons for believing it. On this way of looking at things, your argument's premises may be reasons that you possess for believing the conclusion and so your reason-giving use of the argument rationalizes your believing the conclusion, but your reasons are bad because, say, they do not justify your believing the conclusion. Or perhaps they are bad because they are incompatible with agreed-upon starting points or they don't deliver the conclusion by agreed-upon procedural rules. On this view, argumentative rationality does not suffice for good argumentation. This accords with Foley's observation that we can criticize others "as being unimaginative, or hypocritical or self-pitying or cowardly or even unintelligent without implying that they are thereby irrational" (1993, p. 7).

I end on an autobiographical note. I used to favor the idea for having different standards of argumentative rationality basically for the reasons given in my above case for this idea. I now wonder about the advantages of adopting a thinner concept of argumentative rationality according to which it is understood in terms of reasons-first rationality. This makes argumentative rationality univocal across different theories of good argumentation. To get at argumentative rationality so construed, we need an account of reasons for belief instead of an account of epistemic justification or dialectical procedural rules. In other work, I clarify the needed notion of reasons for belief towards developing a conception of argumentative rationality understood in terms of reasons-first rationality. This will enable an appraisal of its advantageous over other conceptions of argumentative rationality.

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