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On the Question of Epistemic Norms in Argumentation

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces a Wittgensteinian framework for epistemic norms in argumentation, challenging the notion of their objectivity and universality. It accommodates rational practices across socio-cultural contexts without succumbing to scepticism. Contrasting with Harvey Siegel's model presented at ECA Rome 2022, the paper concludes that Wittgensteinian epistemological contextualism provides a more nuanced and culturally inclusive understanding of epistemic norms in argumentation.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, culture, epistemology, Harvey Siegel, relativism, scepticism, Wittgenstein

In his keynote address at ECA Rome 2022, Harvey Siegel elaborated on his well-known objective epistemic approach to argumentation theory, emphasizing the objectivity and universality of epistemic norms. Siegel's approach can be considered the most developed and coherent version of this perspective in the context of argumentation and critical thinking. This paper has two main objectives:

First, it highlights the socio-cultural biases underlying Siegel's reasoning. Specifically, it critiques his assumption of a universal and objective notion of epistemic rationality, which overlooks the diversity and complexity of human reasoning practices across different cultures and contexts. Additionally, it critically assesses Siegel's concept of epistemic reasons, contending that no evaluative criteria are immune to the challenges of relativism, as opposed to skepticism, with a particular focus on cultural factors. Second, acknowledging the cultural embeddedness of epistemic norms, this paper proposes adopting a Wittgensteinian relativistic framework based on his work "On Certainty" (1966). This perspective offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding and justifying the role of epistemic standards in argumentation. It fully recognizes the inherent socio-cultural dimensions of argumentation while maintaining the essential functions of epistemic norms and justifications in the pursuit of knowledge and rational discourse.

1. SIEGEL'S OBJECTIVE EPISTEMIC THEORY AND ITS CRITIQUE

Two principles constitute Harvey Siegel's epistemic approach to argumentation. First, Siegel posits that the quality of an argument is determined by its ability to render belief rational. Second, he argues that the quality of an argument is not about its persuasive effect on an audience but rather its ability to produce knowledge or reasonable belief supported by good reasons. He emphasizes that epistemic rationality is a necessary condition for critical thinking. This theory has evolved through a series of studies, including works by

Biro & Siegel (1992), (2006a), (2006b) and (2015), Siegel & Biro (1997), (2006), (2008), and (2021), and Siegel (2000), (2011) and (2023).

One criticism of this approach originates from arguing-based accounts of argumentation, which address contextual limitations. Siegel acknowledges the role of context in argumentation but criticizes arguing-based accounts that assess an argument's quality based on its ability to advance the arguer's position. He contends that such accounts neglect to consider normative facts about arguments. The basis for this critique lies in the distinction between objective and intersubjective accounts of argumentation. Siegel's theory focuses on the objective 'Type' rather than the human 'Token,' emphasizing the norm of Truth-Aimingness as the essential property of arguments. He argues against relativist or contextualist criteria, which rely on the characteristics of the arguers. The controversy between objective and intersubjective perspectives involves evaluating the epistemic status of an argument's premises, rather than considering the sociocultural aspects or the psychosocial states of the arguers (Bandura, 1986; Payne & Barbera, 2013).

In other words, the issue is whether the cultural and social dimensions of epistemology should have a more prominent place. From both philosophical and anthropological standpoints, epistemological theories are deeply embedded in personal and cultural contexts (Khine, 2008). Studies like that of Kwok Chan and Robert Elliott (2004) highlight the necessity of incorporating cultural dimensions into any analysis of epistemological beliefs. Traditional Western epistemology has long neglected the socio-cultural dimensions affecting rationality, and the current debate is whether this state should be maintained (Khine, 2008). For example, Kwok Chan and Robert Elliott's study (2004) provides a comprehensive review of studies that explore the structure of epistemological beliefs across diverse cultural settings. Their analysis highlights several methodological shortcomings in the existing literature, including but not limited to, a lack of theoretical underpinning, inconsistent factor structures, and an inadequate consideration of cultural variances. Furthermore, they underscore the necessity of incorporating cultural dimensions into any analysis of epistemological beliefs. It is thus required that future discussions should assimilate socio-cultural factors to achieve a comprehensive understanding of epistemology in argumentation theory.

These considerations receive clear expression in the specific discussion regarding epistemic norms in argumentation. It is important here to state the obvious, as fundamental empirical evidence concerning norms, specifically that norms are culturally embedded, is occasionally overlooked. Norms are shaped by various factors, including historical, economic, political, and religious influences, leaving them far from objectivity or universality. They are the cornerstone of sociology and anthropology: for instance, Émile Durkheim's 'The Division of Labor in Society' (1893), Max Weber's 'The Theory of Social and Economic Organization' (1947), Talcott Parsons' 'The Social System' (1951), Clifford Geertz's 'The Interpretation of Cultures' (1973), and Bronisław Malinowski's 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific' (2014).

Yet, norms guide what we ought to do and thus play a critical role in argumentation (Corner & Hahn, 2013). Ralph Johnson's (2000) pragmatic theory of argument, or Benjamin Eva and Stephan Hartmann's (2018) Bayesian approach, try to provide the normative principles for rationality in argumentation theory, to mention just a few. Siegel's epistemic norms focus on the processes of acquiring, maintaining, and changing beliefs and knowledge. However, his epistemic norms are not subject to the same principles that

govern other norms; they are fundamentally different due to their specific focus on knowledge and belief.

Many, like Siegel, argue that epistemic norms are universal, either because they are based on mathematical or logical principles (Goldman, 2003) or because they are driven by the universal human goal of truth-seeking (Karaslaan, Hohenberger, Demir, Hall, & Oaksford, 2018). However, these claims are challenged by views that question the universality and objectivity of mathematical truths, logic, and the goal of truth-seeking (Krausz, 2011; Miller & Ahluwalia, 2021; Russell, 2021; Tinland, 2017). These counterarguments highlight the complexity of the human goal of truth-seeking and the ongoing debates surrounding it, which mark the point where a more relativistic approach will be needed.

2. THE CULTURAL BIAS OF SCIENTIFIC NORMS

The prevailing notion that epistemic norms in argumentation and scientific norms in general are universal and objective has been increasingly scrutinized. This paper assumes that epistemic norms, as part of the scientific method, are culturally and historically situated, particularly within Western contexts. But this assumption is certainly not obvious. Even the historical development of the scientific method is not undisputable. The scientific method, as it is understood today, has its roots in Western intellectual history. Originating in ancient Greece and Rome, it was further developed during the European Enlightenment. Yet, while other cultures, such as the Islamic Golden Age, have contributed to the scientific method and discoveries, it can be argued that these contributions were facilitated only because of the presence of certain key Western cultural values (Grant, 1996; Huff, 2017).

The scientific method is not a neutral tool but reflects Western cultural values. These include individualism, which emphasizes individual rights over collective ones; naturalism, which insists that these components be natural rather than supernatural; and objectivity, which posits an objective reality knowable through empirical observation, to name only some of the more political ones. Along with the cultural bias inherent in the scientific method, there are also the epistemological considerations. Western science prioritizes empirical evidence and rational thought as the primary means of gaining knowledge. This contrasts with other cultural epistemologies, such as Indigenous systems, which may value ancestral knowledge. The Western focus on empirical evidence often dismisses or devalues these alternative forms of knowledge. An important part of these epistemological considerations, there is the democratic-liberal influence. Western scientific thought also incorporates a deep scepticism towards authority, whether it be charismatic individuals or institutions. This scepticism is aligned with democratic-liberal principles that emphasize procedural fairness and the limitation of governmental power.

This cultural bias inherent in the scientific method has provoked various criticisms, and in the present context the postcolonial ones are of importance. Postcolonial scholars have criticized the supposed neutrality and universality of the scientific method (Prakash, 1995). They argue that it is a product of Western colonialism and imperialism, used to dominate and exploit non-Western cultures. This critique highlights the limitations of the scientific method when it comes to incorporating non-Western forms of knowledge. However, while the epistemic norms of Western science are neither neutral nor universal,

they are not necessarily invalid. They have their own strengths and limitations, and recognizing this is crucial for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of knowledge.

3. THE RELATIVITY OF EPISTEMIC NORMS: KNOWLEDGE, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

The objectivity, neutrality, and universality of epistemic norms are compromised by the intricate interplay of knowledge, language, and culture. How these factors contribute to a nuanced understanding of epistemic norms, particularly in the context of argumentation?

Michel Foucault's concept of the "episteme" serves as a foundational idea, challenging the notion of universal epistemic norms. According to Foucault, knowledge is not static but evolves over time, implying that no universal norms can apply across all cultures and historical periods (Foucault, 2002). This should point at why cultural relativism significantly influences the evaluation of arguments and evidence. Different cultures have unique epistemic norms, leading to varied criteria for assessing arguments. For example, while Western culture prioritizes empirical evidence, other cultures may have different norms that are contextually appropriate (Laudan, 1990).

One of the most controversial theorems in anthropology provides the context for the problematic presented here. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language shapes thought and, and, by derivation, also the norms used in argumentation. Non-Latin languages like Hebrew may favour associative reasoning over linear logic, challenging traditional epistemological models that separate the knowing subject from the object of knowledge (Lakoff, 2008). This constitutive role of language renders the idea of an autonomous subject that knows itself problematic when considering that the subject is constituted through discursive practices, language, and socio-cultural circumstances. This challenges traditional epistemological models that assume a clear distinction between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. Power dynamics further complicate the relationship between knowledge and epistemic norms. The influence of power challenges the notion that knowledge is neutral and objective. Norms may be skewed to favour those in power, necessitating a critical examination of existing norms and the development of more equitable alternatives (Said, 1979).

These considerations receive a more inclusive expression in Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigms, which supports the main argument that epistemic norms are shaped by historical, cultural, and power dynamics. Paradigms, as systems of thought specific to a time and place, determine discourses and what is considered true or false. Kuhn's concept of paradigm explains a more general problem, the problematics of de-contextualization. Context is indispensable since it provides the necessary framework for understanding an argument. Without it, the argument's meaning can be lost or misinterpreted.

Language is inherently contextualized as by its very nature, is contextual. This makes a de-contextualized evaluation of arguments extremely challenging. Furthermore, the norms of individual cultures and societies heavily influence our understanding and interpretation of arguments. These norms are not universal and can vary greatly across different societies. Thus, the elusiveness of objectivity. Even scientific research, which aims for objectivity, is influenced by the paradigms under which it operates, as well as by researchers' own biases and preconceptions.

An alternative approach will be to adopt contextualism in epistemology. According to this idea, every knowledge claim depends on the context in which it is made (Greco, 2008; DeRose, 2017). This has implications for what counts as knowledge in different contexts and communities. One of the strengths of this approach is that at the price of adopting relativism, significant philosophical tools are provided to deal with skepticism. One of the main motivations is not only to provide a solution to the problem of skepticism, but to reconcile it with the practicalities of ordinary life (Hume, 1748, 1777, pp. 161-2).

In summary, epistemic norms are far from being objective, neutral, or universal. They are shaped by a complex interplay of factors including knowledge, language, culture, and power dynamics. Recognizing and understanding this complexity is crucial for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of argumentation and knowledge.

4. A WITTGENSTEINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON EPISTEMIC NORMS AND ARGUMENTATION

The Wittgensteinian perspective offers a nuanced lens through which to examine the complexities of epistemic norms in argumentation. This perspective is grounded in two key ideas: the *linguistic turn* and Wittgenstein's own version of contextualism as outlined in his work "On Certainty" (1966). First, Wittgenstein's concepts of language games and forms of life posit that understanding language transcends mere word definitions and semantics. It encompasses the practices, customs, and ways of life of the language users. This perspective aligns with a form of contextualism, suggesting that meaning is context-dependent and relative to specific language games and forms of life (Williams, 2007). Second, in "On Certainty," Wittgenstein introduces a form of contextualism that focuses on "hinge propositions," which are fundamental beliefs that serve as the basis for our knowledge. These hinge propositions are context-specific and are not universally applicable, thus challenging the notion of epistemological scepticism (Dame, 2010; Hanfling, 1975; McDougall, 2021).

This Wittgensteinian perspective resonates with the broader contextualism in epistemology, emphasizing that what qualifies as knowledge is contingent upon the specific context or language game. This perspective enriches our understanding of how knowledge and understanding are intricately linked with forms of life and language games (Mantere, 2015). One criticism is that Wittgenstein's perspective might lead to scepticism. However, this criticism often stems from an absolutist view of knowledge, which Wittgenstein challenges at the outset. Another criticism is that Wittgenstein's perspective leads to radical relativism. This is a misunderstanding, as Wittgenstein argues that the validity of beliefs depends on their use within specific language games and forms of life. Yet another criticism is that Wittgenstein reduces knowledge to mere social or cultural conventions. However, Wittgenstein shows that our conventions are not arbitrary but are shaped by our ongoing engagement with the world.

Thus, adopting a Wittgensteinian Perspective has some advantages not only to epistemology in general, but to argumentation theory in particular. First, Wittgenstein emphasizes that language and arguments are deeply embedded within socio-cultural contexts, offering a departure from traditional, abstract views of argumentation. Second, this perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how knowledge is socially and

culturally constructed, evaluated based on both logical and socio-cultural criteria. Finally, Wittgenstein does not dismiss the importance of epistemic norms but contextualizes them within specific socio-cultural settings.

To summarize: the Wittgensteinian perspective offers a balanced approach to understanding epistemic norms in argumentation. It allows for a form of contextualism that navigates the tension between the need for epistemic standards and the recognition of socio-cultural diversity. This perspective is particularly useful for comprehending the socio-cultural dimensions of argumentation while maintaining the roles of epistemic norms and justifications in various forms of life and language games. By adopting a Wittgensteinian lens, we can better understand the complexities of argumentation and epistemic norms, offering a more exhaustive approach to comprehending and justifying the significance of epistemic standards in argumentation. This perspective equips us with the tools to address the inherent socio-cultural dimensions of argumentation, while acknowledging the indispensable roles of epistemic norms and justifications in the quest for knowledge and rational discourse.

DISCLOSURE: GPT-4 was utilized solely for language editing and background research in the preparation of this paper. The intellectual and ethical responsibilities for the content and arguments presented in this paper rest exclusively with the author.

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