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Abstract: In this paper we defend a particular version of the epistemic approach to argumentation. We advance some general considerations in favor of the approach and then examine the ways in which different versions of it play out with respect to the theory of fallacies, which we see as central to an understanding of argumentation. Epistemic theories divide into objective and subjective versions. We argue in favor of the objective version, showing that it provides a better account than its subjectivist rival of the central fallacy of begging the question. We suggest that the strengths of the objective epistemic theory of fallacies provide support for the epistemic approach to argumentation more generally.

Résumé: Dans cet article nous défendons une version particulière de l'approche épistémique sur l'argumentation. Nous y apportons un appui général et ensuite examinons les façons dont différentes versions s'appliquent à la théorie des sophismes, ce qui est pour nous essentiel à la compréhension de l'argumentation. Les théories épistémiques se divisent en versions objective et subjective. Nous argumentons en faveur de la version objective en montrant qu'elle explique mieux le sophisme de la pétition de principe que la version subjective. Nous suggérons que les avantages de la théorie épistémique objective des sophismes appuie en général une approche épistémique sur l'argumentation.

Introduction

In this paper we defend a particular version of the epistemic approach to argumentation. We do so by advancing some general considerations in its favor and then seeing how different versions of it play out with respect to the theory of fallacies, which we see as central to an understanding of argumentation. Epistemic theorists divide into objective and subjective camps. We argue in favor of the objective version, showing that it provides a better account than its subjectivist rival of the central fallacy of begging the question. We go on to suggest that the strengths of the objective epistemic theory of fallacies provide support for the epistemic approach to argumentation more generally.

1. Two Preliminary Distinctions

(*i*) In any discussion of argumentation, it is important to distinguish between arguments as abstract objects and arguments as sequences of events. The former consist of other abstract objects, on most accounts, propositions; the latter of acts of arguing, usually by people.[1] Arguing consists in asserting propositions, and when the propositions asserted comprise an argument (the abstract object[2]), their asserter can be said to be using that argument. Typically, though not always, the arguer's aim is to persuade some audience to accept some claim it does not already endorse.

This basic distinction between arguments and arguing is relatively uncontroversial among philosophers, though there has been debate over which of these two things, arguments or arguing, is the proper object of study for the theory of argumentation (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). Elsewhere we have urged that the answer is, both, as long as they are clearly distinguished and their relation is properly understood (Biro and Siegel, 2006).

The distinction between arguments as abstract objects and arguments in use, as we may say, is also widely accepted among writers on argumentation and fallacies (e.g., Blair 2004, Goldman 1994, 1999, Hitchcock 2006, Sinnott-Armstrong, 1999). There is, however, as we will see, considerable disagreement about how the notion of an argument in use ('as used,' 'on a use,' etc.) should be spelled out. One dimension of the notion we have already touched on: to what purpose is the argument being put by its user? There are, obviously, many possible goals one may have in arguing and, correspondingly, many possible uses of a given argument. Epistemic theories, in maintaining that it is a conceptual truth that the central aim of arguments is to yield knowledge or reasonable belief (Biro and Siegel, 1997), need not deny that they are typically used also with the aim of persuading an audience.[3] What they emphasize is that when the latter aim is pursued, as it obviously can be, in a way that does not make use of the argument's ability to yield knowledge or reasonable belief, success or failure with respect to that aim is irrelevant to whether the argument used is a good one.

(*ii*) In speaking of an argument's ability to yield knowledge or reasonable belief, we are not speaking of arguments as abstract objects. All epistemic theories agree that only when it is used in a certain situation or context does it make sense to say of an argument that it does, or can, do this. Here we have another notion of the use of an argument, to be distinguished from use in the sense of the kind of purpose to which it is put. Assume that the goal is an epistemic one. A given argument (in the abstract sense) may accomplish that goal in one situation or context—*on one use*—but not in another. As we will see, the main issue that divides epistemic theorists is how such contexts or uses are to be specified. Some think that their description must make reference to the arguer's (and, perhaps, the audience's) beliefs; others deny this. In the next section, we will characterize these rival positions

more precisely and will test them with respect to a well-known and controversial example.

First, however, we return to the matter of how the relations among arguments, their use, and acts of arguing should be understood. Some theories hold that whether an argument is a good one depends on non-epistemic features of the acts of arguing in which their use consists. Among these theories we count dialectical, pragma-dialectical, dialogical, and rhetorical approaches.

We begin by showing that all such accounts are bound to fail. The main reason for this is straightforward. On such a view, the only way to decide whether an argument is a good one or a bad one is to ask whether it advances the arguer's position (assuming, as in the core case, that his goal is winning, in the sense of winning over, that is, persuading, his opponent). To answer such a question, we must look to the audience's psychological states, in particular, its beliefs before and after being given the argument. (There is a version of the epistemic theory, the so-called subjective version, that shares this requirement, indeed, makes a virtue of doing so. We demur below.) Given this requirement, not even validity, let alone soundness, is necessary for an argument to be good. Nor is it sufficient. One can succeed in persuading with a bad argument and fail to persuade with a good one. The former is obvious. As for the latter, there can be different reasons. Obviously, obtuseness on the part of one's interlocutor is one reason why a good argument can fail to persuade. More interestingly, an interlocutor may think that the argument is irrelevant or question-begging. His doing so reveals that what he expects of the argument is that it give him a reason for believing something he does not already believe. This is an expectation to which only an epistemic theory can do justice.

Arguing-based accounts thus leave no room for criticizing an argument if it succeeds in persuading (something it may do with one audience and fail to do with another). This would render 'He succeeded in persuading by using a bad argument' meaningless, which it is not. So, too, with 'He argued well, but unsuccessfully' (something that, alas, happens to us a lot!).

No matter what their details, accounts in terms of how people actually argue face a dilemma. They may be purely descriptive, in which case they are unable to make sense of certain normative facts we take to be indisputable. (One such fact is that often many, sometimes most, and possibly all, people make fallacious inferences of certain types. One could not say this on a purely descriptive theory.[4]) They may, on the other hand, explicitly or implicitly deploy a standard for what actual arguments are to be counted for the purposes of some idealization, in which case they are committed to the normativity we claim is essential to the concept of a fallacy.

One may try to give an account of an argument's quality in terms of the inferences it licenses.[5] Here it is essential to distinguish between inference types and tokens. If the account is in terms of the latter, our assessment of the argument's

quality will have to turn on the inferrer's beliefs. (What one infers depends on what other beliefs one has.) But then we have not escaped the difficulty noted above: what someone infers is not always what he is justified in inferring, and evaluating arguments based on the former mirrors the mistake of doing so in terms of persuasiveness. For this reason, the focus of our analysis must be inference types, rather than tokens. That will enable us to say that a given argument licenses certain inferences, whether or not anyone actually makes them. On this understanding of it, an account in terms of inferences licensed is equivalent to the objective epistemic account we will defend.

Even if it is conceded that we need a normative criterion for assessing the quality of arguments, why must that criterion be epistemic? Are there not other candidates, suitably normative but not centering on epistemic considerations? There are not. One can say that effectiveness (persuasiveness, etc.) can yield a normative criterion: an argument is fallacious if it fails to persuade in certain specific ways or due to certain specific features. But this cannot be right. An argument I fail to hear against the noise will fail to persuade me, but not for a reason having anything to do with its intrinsic merit. Try, however, to spell out what it is for a reason to fail to persuade to have something to do with the argument's intrinsic merit, and guess what you get: an epistemic account! The reason is that the intrinsic merit of an argument must be judged relative to the intrinsic goal, the *raison d'etre*, of arguments: to provide (good[6]) reasons for belief.

As noted above, arguments can be put to other uses, persuasion and dispute-resolution chief among them. These uses of arguments bear an interesting relation to the belief-justifying use we take to be central. They presuppose the latter, since to try to persuade *is* to give reasons for adopting a belief, and to try to resolve a dispute *is* to look for reasons to agree on one belief rather than another.[7] Yet as we have just noted, whether an argument put to such uses achieves its goal is independent of its adequacy as a belief-justifier.

Since the intrinsic goal of arguments is to provide reasons for belief, their quality must be judged by their success in providing such reasons. But a good argument, i.e., one that provides reasons for belief, provides reasons for believing that its conclusion is *true*. This follows directly from the truism that to believe something is to believe it to be true: if I believe that p, I believe that p is true; conversely, if I don't believe that p is true, I don't believe that p.[8] From this, in turn, it follows that aiming at the truth is an essential property of arguments.

One must, of course, distinguish truth-*aimingness* from truth-*conduciveness*. Whether or not an argument conduces to truth depends on more than its quality: arguments are hostage to fortune in that an excellent one may still have a false conclusion. This can happen when a premise one has good reason to believe is, nevertheless, false. One's argument is still truth-aiming, even if not truth-conducive. It is the former we take to be necessary for understanding the intrinsic goal of arguments; they must, then, be evaluated relative to that understanding of their goal.

2. Epistemic accounts: Objective and Subjective

We turn now to examining an issue in the theory of fallacy, which we think will serve to provide support for the objective version of the epistemic approach.

A number of writers who accept the need for an epistemic approach to argumentation nevertheless disagree with us on some fundamental features of such an approach. The most important disagreement centers on whether we should pay attention to the beliefs of the users of the argument we are evaluating. The disagreement shows up in a sharp way in the theory of fallacies and has come to be known as one between defenders of the objective epistemic theory (OET) and champions of the subjective epistemic theory (SET)[9]:

> *OET*: Fallaciousness is a property of arguments in a context and is independent of the beliefs of their users.

> *SET*: Fallaciousness is a property of arguments in a context and (at least sometimes) depends upon the beliefs of their users.

A much-discussed example concerns the fallacy of begging the question (a paradigmatically non-formal fallacy). The example, invented by David Sanford (1988), has played a pivotal role in driving a wedge between the two theories:

> (A1) All the members of the club attended the University of Texas
> Twardowski is a member of the club
> Twardowski attended the University of Texas

Sanford claims that we can describe two situations in which (A1) is used, differing only in how the arguer acquires his belief in the major premise. It is worth quoting his description of the two situations in full:

> Situation 1: …there is a bylaw that restricts club membership to those who have attended the University of Texas. Moreover, this bylaw is operative; it explains why the club has no members who did not attend the University of Texas. None of this is kept secret. You could discover it easily if you tried. But you have not tried and no one has told you. You are ignorant of the bylaw. You have, however, chatted with each club member from time to time over the years. You know who all the club members are. You have learned, from each of them, that he attended the University of Texas. Your belief that all club members attended the University of Texas is based on your belief that Twardowski attended the University of Texas. When you advance the argument, you beg the question, or so I claim.

> S2: …there is no relevant bylaw and nothing about club purpose or function that restricts its interest to those who have attended the University of Texas. It is still possible for you to acquire a reasonable belief that all members of the club attended the University of Texas without first believing anything about Twardowski. One way would be for you to accept it on someone else's reliable testimony…. You [do so ...] and draw the inference. Does your argument beg the question? I say no. (Sanford 1988, p. 35)

Sanford's verdict is that the arguer in the first of these situations begs the question, while his counterpart in the second does not. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong concurs: "These situations do differ in other inessential ways, but the difference between the beliefs of the arguers in these situations provides the best explanation of the difference in whether these uses of [the argument] beg the question. Objective approaches deny that such differences in belief can make a difference to begging the question. Therefore, no objective approach to begging the question can work" (1999, p. 180).

Note, first, that Sanford is concerned with whether the *arguer* begs the question, rather than with whether the *argument* does. (He does ask about S2, "Does your argument beg the question?"—but it is clear that what he means to be asking, in parallel with his question about S1, is whether the arguer begs the question.) It is, of course, part of his position that arguments qua abstract objects cannot be said to do so. As already noted, with that part of the position we agree; what we are asking is whether the argument *as used in this situation* begs the question. Our claim is that in order to be able to make that judgment, we have to ask about the epistemic status of the premises, not about the psychological states of the participants. Are the premises knowable, or at least reasonably believable, independently of (that is to say, without relying on or appealing to) the conclusion? In Sanford's example, we say that the answer in S1 is, yes. We say this because in S1 there is a bylaw, making it possible for an arguer to acquire reasonable belief in the major premise independently of believing the conclusion. Sanford thinks that even if there is a bylaw, a *user* of A1 who bases his belief in the major premise not on the bylaw but on his prior belief that Twardowski attended the University of Texas, does beg the question. Perhaps so. But even if he does, this has no bearing on whether the *argument* he is using does so in this context.

Sanford's verdict about S2 is that in that situation the arguer does not beg the question. He says this because in that situation the arguer acquires a reasonable belief in the major premise without relying on the conclusion: "It is… possible for you to acquire a reasonable belief [in the major premise]…[by accepting it] on someone else's reliable testimony ... [and] you do so…" (*ibid.*). In effect, Sanford is offering as part of the reason for his verdict in situation S2 the same thing as we do for our verdict in S1: the availability of an epistemic route to the premises that does not go through the conclusion. He thinks, however, that because the arguer in S1 does not avail himself of the independent route available to him but chooses a route that goes through the conclusion, he begs the question, whereas the arguer in S2, who does rely on independent evidence, does not. We say that which route the arguer adopts has no bearing on whether the *argument* begs the question. The presence of an independent route in both S1 and S2 is enough for saying that it does not do so in either.

Here we see a gap opening up for different verdicts about arguers and arguments: the arguer may beg the question, even if the argument he is using does not.[10] OET

says that, since it is possible to use the argument, in the situation described, in a non-question-begging way, it does not beg the question. And it says that, since whether it is possible to use the argument in that way depends on the epistemic facts in the situation and not on what the arguer (or his audience) believes, whether the argument begs the question is an objective matter. Sanford insists, however, (and Sinnott-Armstrong agrees) that what makes the difference is how the arguer in fact acquires the belief.[11] However, while the condition that the belief be acquired in a certain way may be relevant to whether the arguer begs the question, we fail to see its relevance to the question of whether the argument does so. It seems to us that as long as one *could* use the argument in a non-question-begging way— and, surely, as long as the testimony is available, one could (for reasons exactly parallel to those we gave concerning S1)—nothing else is needed for the argument to be non-question-begging.

Clearly, (A1) could be used in a non-question-begging way in both S1 and S2, so that in both the necessary condition for its being non-question-begging is satisfied, and satisfied for the same reason: the argument can be used to gain knowledge or, at least, reasonable belief.

Sanford, it seems to us, must concede these points if his descriptions of the situations he distinguishes are to make sense. What could be the point of including the existence of the bylaw in the description of the first situation, if not to make room for the possibility of a non-question-begging use? After all, Sanford's imagined arguer in S1 is described as not relying on the bylaw in forming his belief in the major premise when he could have done so and, *for that reason*, as begging the question. Surely, the point of stipulating the existence of the bylaw is to make room for the possibility of the arguer not relying on it when he could, and his not doing so is the reason he begs the question. But, once again, that implies nothing about whether the *argument* is question-begging: that depends on whether there is a bylaw on which he could rely, even if he does not.

The important difference, then, is not really between S1 and S2 but between S1 (with bylaw) and what we might call S1A (*sans* bylaw) and, similarly, between S2 (with reliable testimony) and S2A (*sans* reliable testimony). But these differences are as objective as differences come and do not depend on anyone's actual beliefs.

Sanford introduces the two situations to show that it is the actual beliefs of the respective arguers that determine whether (A1) is question-begging. In fact, what the examples, properly analyzed, show is the opposite. It is the existence of the bylaw and the reliable testimony, respectively, that render (A1) in these two contexts non-question-begging, whatever its user may believe and however he may come to believe the premises.

While Sanford focuses exclusively on the beliefs of the arguer, Sinnott-Armstrong urges that whether a particular use of an argument begs the question can also depend on the beliefs of its target.[12] He gives the following example. Consider two uses of the argument:

> (A2) Ohio is the Buckeye State
>
> Mary lives in Ohio
>
> Mary lives in the Buckeye State

In one, the arguer is trying to persuade someone who believes the second premise but has no belief concerning the first. (He has never heard of the Buckeye State.) In the other, he is trying to persuade someone who, again, believes the second premise, but explicitly denies the first. Sinnott-Armstrong claims that while the first use does not beg the question, the second does.[13] Sinnott-Armstrong's reason for thinking this is that in the second case, "the [arguer's] use of this argument does *not* show that [his target] has any reason to believe [his] conclusion" (Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, p. 177, emphasis in original).

We have two worries about this. First, it is one thing to show *that* the target has reason to believe something, another to show *the target* that he has reason to believe that thing. Inability to do the latter does not entail inability to do the former. Further, to grant that one cannot do the latter just by using this argument is not to grant that one cannot do it by showing him that there is some other reason to believe the premise he denies. Whether there is such a reason is the question the objective epistemic account takes to be the key to whether the argument begs the question. If there is (making for one epistemic context), it does not, if there is not (making for another), it does.

The second worry is that it is quite unclear how one could decide whether to use (A2), not knowing, as one generally does not, what one's target believes. Sinnott-Armstrong's claim depends on the target's explicit denial of the first premise. He is, of course, right that it would be inappropriate to use (A2), given that denial. But is that because to do so would be to beg the question? What question? The reason why it would be inappropriate to use (A2) in such a situation has nothing to do with begging the question. Using (A2) would be inappropriate, because while it can be used to give someone reason to believe the conclusion, it obviously cannot be used to give someone reason to believe the first premise. Contrary to Sinnott-Armstrong's claim, a target of (A2) *is* being given a reason to believe its conclusion (assuming, as we think is obvious, that the first premise *is* knowable—or reasonably believable—independently of the conclusion). That the target does not recognize that he is being given a reason, because he does not accept (A2)'s first premise, makes for a difficult situation, but one that (A2) cannot be used to remedy. An arguer who fails to appreciate that it cannot is making a mistake, but he is not begging the question.

The more general worry is this. In the vast majority of cases, one has to decide whether to use an argument without knowing what one's target believes or is prepared to grant. One begins by making certain assumptions about this and finds these borne out or not as one proceeds. One may ask one's interlocutor whether he accepts one's first premise; if one learns that that he does not, one does not continue in the way planned, as one may with someone else. This does not mean

that one changes one's mind about whether the argument one planned to use is a good argument, coming to view it as a bad argument. (One certainly does not come to view it as question-begging!) One comes to view using it as pointless, a good enough reason for abandoning one's plan to do so.

A good argument can fail to persuade. One thing its ability to persuade can depend on what its target believes. But whether it is good cannot depend on that. If it did, its goodness could not be discernible by a would-be user in advance of any knowledge about his target's beliefs. Then it would be impossible to follow the injunction we are surely supposed to: use only good arguments!

Conclusion

While what makes an argument a good argument has to do with its being such that it can be used to justify belief in its conclusion, whether it has this property or not cannot depend on whether it is actually deployed to that end by some actual user of it. A good argument (or, indeed, a bad one) in the sense just explained may be put to other uses, ones to which its goodness is irrelevant: for example, to impress, to confuse, to bore, etc. More interestingly, someone can attempt to use a bad argument with the aim of justifying belief in its conclusion. What we have then is a fallacy. Whether an argument, in whichever of these ways it is used, is good or bad has nothing to do with what some arbitrary individual user believes, nor on the reasons for such belief.

Of course, there are other ways for an argument to be said to be bad. Most important among these, as noted earlier, is the inability to persuade. A good argument may be bad in this sense, and a bad one, good. Which of these an argument is can be, and often is, a function of the beliefs held by those to whom it is addressed. But being good or bad in this way (or in some others—over-complexity, inelegance, etc.) implies nothing about the epistemic quality of the argument. (As we all know, alas, prejudice can make people deaf to reason and bad arguments can persuade.)

Can it be doubted that what philosophers (as opposed to rhetoricians, linguists, psychologists, sociologists and politicians) have always been interested in is the epistemic goodness of arguments? And that in asking what a fallacy is we are asking about ways in which a bad argument can masquerade as a good one? Can we not recognize this as the traditional philosophical question about fallacies?

Notes

[1] Other kinds of entities, arguably abstract in some sense—countries, parties, corporations and the like—can be said to have disputes, hence to be engaged in arguments in the second sense. Even in such cases, the acts of arguing involved are events.

[2] We do not attempt to characterize precisely what properties a set of propositions must have to count as an argument in this sense.

[3] They need not be: one looks for an argument to support a belief one already has, one can present an argument to an audience who already believes the conclusion but needs to be shown that there is justification for it, one can even argue to annoy or bore others, and so on. We will not attempt here to investigate the relation of such uses of arguments to what we claim is its central use.

[4] At least, allegedly. See, e.g., Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky 1982. Since these authors may be wrong, the point should be put conditionally: if they are right, descriptive theories are in trouble.

[5] E.g., Pinto 2001.

[6] This qualifier is presupposed from here on.

[7] Of course, one can "persuade" by wielding the bigger stick, and opponents can resolve a dispute by compromise or by agreeing to disagree. In such cases, assessing the intrinsic, epistemic, merit of the argument has no role to play.

[8] On deflationary theories, these are equivalent. See Horwich 1990. But we need not get involved in disputes concerning theories of truth here.

[9] Beside us, advocates of OET include Feldman 1994 and Lumer 1991, 2000. Advocates of SET include Sanford 1988, Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, Ritola 2004, Walton 1994, Adler 1993, 1994, and Sorensen 1996 (we think). Those who seem to lean towards OET, but whose positions we feel unable to classify with confidence, include Johnson and Blair 1996, Blair 2004, Pinto 2001, and Weinstein 1994.

[10] On this distinction see also Lumer 2000, pp. 417-418.

[11] See also Ritola 2004, pp. 50-51. This is the most thorough discussion of theories of begging the question to date.

[12] Compare Sorensen 1996, p. 52: "To beg the question is to beg it against someone." This emphasis on the role of the interlocutor is in the spirit of Robinson's depiction of begging the question as an illegitimate move in *elenchus* (Robinson 1971).

[13] We take Sinnott-Armstrong's "the arguer's use of the argument begs the question" to mean "the argument on this use (that is, in this epistemic context) begs the question."

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