

Anonymous Arguments

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Abstract Anonymous argumentation has recently been the focus of public controversy: flash points include the outing of pseudonymous bloggers by newspapers and the launch of an academic journal that expressly permits pseudonymous authorship. However, the controversy is not just a recent one—similar debates took place in the nineteenth century over the then common practice of anonymous journalism. Amongst the arguments advanced by advocates of anonymous argumentation in either era is the contention that it is essential if the widest range of voices are to be heard; amongst the counterarguments of its critics, that it weakens the credibility of individual arguments and irresponsibly cheapens the standard of public discourse. This paper explores some implications of the controversy for the ethics of argumentation in general and virtue theories of argumentation in particular.

Keywords anonymous argument; ethics of argument; vices of argument; virtues of argument

1 Introduction

Anonymity and pseudonymity give rise to many ethical issues. This paper explores how they impact argumentation theory and, specifically, virtue theories of argumentation. Section 2 surveys some recent controversies provoked by the anonymity of arguers, including debates over the appropriate treatment of pseudonymous bloggers by newspapers and the role of anonymity in academic authorship. However, disputes over the pros and cons of anonymous argument are not new. These recent issues echo earlier but strikingly similar debates dating back at least to the middle years of the 19th century. In both eras, anonymous argumentation has been treated with suspicion for a variety of reasons but the alleged irresponsibility of anonymous arguers is perhaps chief amongst them. I conclude the section by discussing this charge from

the perspective of a virtue theory of argumentation and sketch a potential remedy in those terms.

With these debates in view, in Section 3 I aim to bring some of their central aspects into sharper focus by providing anonymity and adjacent concepts with definitions drawn from recent scholarship (notably Véliz 2019; Paterson 2020; Habgood-Cooté 2024). As becomes clear, not all forms of anonymity give rise to the same problems: there are several importantly distinct types of anonymous arguer. The remainder of the paper addresses two issues anonymity raises specifically for argumentation theory. Section 4 first considers a problem that anonymity presents for the evaluation of arguments: since classic accounts of argument appraisal effectively treat all arguments as if they were anonymous, they transmit whatever difficulties anonymous arguments may present to arguments in general. Virtue theories of argumentation do not have that problem, as they do not divorce arguments from their arguers. But anonymous arguments present a different challenge for virtue theories of argumentation: if arguers' characters are relevant to the evaluation of arguments, how is it possible to fairly assess anonymous arguments? This challenge is most acute for the least identifiable of the types of anonymous arguer distinguished in Section 3. Yet, as we shall see, even arguments of this kind present enough information for a virtue theory of argumentation to work. Finally, I consider and reject the potential objection that this remedy sets up a loophole that could be exploited by bad faith arguers.

2 Arguing About Anonymity

In 2020 the psychiatrist and blogger Scott Alexander had an unhappy encounter with *The New York Times*. Since Alexander was a prolific writer with a growing audience, the *Times* wanted to publish a profile. However, they refused his request not to use his full name—"Scott Alexander" is a pseudonym comprised of his first and middle names. Since he uses the surname in his medical practice, a *Times* profile under his full name would inevitably dominate the search results of prospective patients, defeating his attempts to keep his two professions distinct. One of Alexander's strengths as a blogger is that he is argumentative: he doesn't just assert things; he argues to conclusions. This was the quality which attracted the attention of the *Times*: they were not planning to use him as a source for otherwise uncorroborated claims. Thus the dispute between Alexander and the *Times* hinges on the status of anonymous arguments: must we know the identity of the arguers in order to properly evaluate their arguments?

When Alexander learned that the *Times* was planning to use his full name, he took his blog offline, complaining that the *Times* was trying to dox him: widespread online drama ensued. Eventually Alexander came back to blogging after some significant life changes: he resigned from his group psychiatry practice to become a sole practitioner and moved the blog to a platform where he could make an income from it. He may even have benefitted from the incident overall, but only after much stress and inconvenience, at least in part caused by the *Times*'s unwillingness to accept his anonymity. In his new blog, Alexander has given an account of these events (Alexander 2021). Information from various sources, including several people at the *Times*, reveals an internal debate.

The New York Times had given anonymity to many other people, but they were reluctant to do so in his case. As Alexander puts it,

In the *New York Times*' worldview, they start with the right to dox me, and I had to earn the right to remain anonymous by proving I'm the perfect sympathetic victim who satisfies all their criteria of victimhood. But in my worldview, I start with the right to anonymity, and they need to make an affirmative case for doxxing me. I admit I am not the perfect victim (Alexander 2021).

Exposés of malefactors' identities are routine journalistic practice, but this was not what the *Times* said they were doing. They claimed to find Alexander interesting, not villainous: so why include his full name if he did not want them to? Alexander's main contention is that he should have a presumptive right to his own anonymity. Arguments for such a right have been considered and rejected by, for example, the English courts (*Author of a Blog v Times Newspapers Ltd*, 2009). In a somewhat analogous earlier case, the unrelated (London) *Times* exposed the identity of a serving British police officer who had been the author of the blog *Night Jack* (Barendt 2016, 92). The blog had been praised for forthright criticism of policing decisions made by senior officers and the government of the day. After the author's exposure he was required to delete his blog by his superiors. This incident appears to have had a chilling effect on police blogs throughout the UK (Pedersen et al. 2014). But, crucially, the value of a police blog lies principally in the author's presumptive status as an authoritative source, not on the author's status as an arguer. While prospects for a legal right of anonymity may seem slim, that still leaves room for an ethical prescription against revealing anonymous identities without consent or good cause.

Will Wilkinson has challenged Alexander's central idea of "a basic right to pseudonymity" (Wilkinson 2021). Such a right, Wilkinson contends, would "practically guarantee an increasing supply of speech corrosive to the basic conditions of a liberal order". He concludes that, at least in democratic societies, it is "warranted to regard pseudonymous authors with suspicion, unless the content of their speech makes it clear why secrecy is a legitimate need for them". Wilkinson's chief concern is for the societal consequences of widespread anonymous discourse. But he also makes one point that Alexander might accept: treat pseudonymous arguments with suspicion. You might reasonably assign less credence to some of Alexander's conclusions because you don't know who he is. That seems like a trade-off that Alexander should be happy to make: be taken less seriously as a blogger in return for less disruption to his practice as a psychiatrist. Wilkinson has an additional, stronger proposal: "when the content of their speech suggests that [anonymous speakers] know they're defying norms of acceptable speech and *that's* why they've sought anonymity, it's fair to be *extra* suspicious" (ibid.). This goes beyond lowering the credence assigned to anonymous speech, because we cannot ascribe an ethos to the speaker, to the assignment of a negative ethos, and thereby even lower credence, because we suspect the arguer of ill intent.

Anonymous argumentation was central to another recent controversy concerning the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, which published its first issue in 2021. The executive editors include two well-known philosophers, Peter Singer and Jeff McMahan, but the inspiration came from the third editor, Francesca Minerva, who had received death threats (and lost employment opportunities) as a result of a controversial signed

article. The most controversial feature of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* is one that she proposed as a remedy: it permits pseudonymous authorship (Minerva 2014a,b). Similar proposals have been made in other fields where publication can attract adverse attention, for example conservation biology (Letnic 2000; Calver 2021). Modern journals do occasionally permit pseudonymous papers: David Lewis published an article under the pseudonym Bruce Le Catt, Bruce being the name of his cat, in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. But this may be a service that journal only extends to David Lewis; the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* makes this a part of their mission statement: “By permitting publication under a pseudonym, we hope to enable authors to fulfil their duty to pursue the truth without putting their careers or physical or mental security at risk. Intellectual and moral progress should not require heroes or martyrs” (McMahan et al. 2021, 3). Nonetheless, they still prefer signed articles: out of twenty-six articles and replies in the first two volumes, only six are pseudonymous.

In her original proposal, Minerva acknowledges the concern that authors “may feel less bound by responsibility for their writings, and may be tempted to write offensive, irrational, racist or sexist papers”. She argues that “the blind peer-review process should be an adequate filter for such unnecessarily offensive work, and a sufficient guarantee of its quality” (Minerva 2014a, 161). In addition, she observes that the name of the author would always be known to the editor and suggests the authorship might be disclosed to the author’s head of department or made public after any controversy died down. In one of several replies, Robert Baker objects that the system could still be exploited by an unscrupulous editor and that conflicts of interest can come to light after publication, but only because the author is identifiable (Baker 2014, 168). The former objection would seem to tell against almost any system of publication; the latter can perhaps be read as further support for the idea that anonymous speech should carry less credence, in this case because we can be less confident that there is no conflict of interest. This prescription might also be effective against another criticism of Minerva’s proposal, that the public may attach undue credence to anonymous articles (Dawson and Herington 2014, 176).

The pseudonymity policy of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* attracted renewed controversy upon the journal’s publication. Patrick Stokes proffers the now familiar criticism that such publication is irresponsible:

Speaking, writing, and publishing are actions, and therefore subject to moral evaluation like any other action. Research is something we do – and as such, something we are ethically responsible for. We’re agents, not mere conduits. Few people, perhaps, pay attention to academic publishing. Yet to push a finding through the brutal gamut of peer review grants it authority. And that has downstream consequences. It can feed, for instance, into the ways issues of race and gender are discussed in broader society. It is entirely reasonable to point out that the practice of research, however innocently it might be intended, has effects that researchers cannot simply shrug off. Using a pseudonym might protect you from being blamed for those effects. But it does not change your responsibility for them (Stokes 2021).

Stokes ascribes a significant role to peer review. He appears to endorse two theses: that peer review grants considerable authority to research, presumably because its

successful completion gives good grounds for supposing the results of the research to be true; and that the resulting widespread social effects of publication can be such that some papers that pass peer review should nevertheless not be published, or at least, they should not be published anonymously, even if the authors are deterred from publication from fear of reputational (or, indeed, physical) harm. There are good reasons to be sceptical of both theses. Firstly, peer review has a demonstrably poor track record in identifying true results (Ioannidis 2005). Undue reverence for results solely on the grounds that they have been peer reviewed is indeed a problem, but not one restricted to anonymous publications. Secondly, that a result has been arrived at by sound arguments is an excellent epistemic reason for desiring its wider dissemination. Discussions in broader society should be grounded in the best science and the best arguments, and not just the science and arguments that are safest to publish. Calibration of the credence proper to anonymous arguments should help to remedy both concerns: if anonymous peer reviewed articles are taken less seriously, any detrimental effects they may have on society would be diminished. Social sanctions which might silence an unpopular view if signature is mandatory would instead reduce the credence with which it is received.

Peer review is also, of course, itself dependent on anonymous argumentation. Reviewers are (usually) anonymous to the authors and authors are (often) anonymous to the reviewers, at least until publication. Hence, in so far as the paper under review is argumentative, the reviewers are likely to evaluate its arguments as anonymous; and, in so far as the reviewers' comments make arguments for the revisions they propose, the authors will also be engaging with anonymous arguments. This makes peer review a double-edged weapon against anonymous authorship, since it characteristically depends on authorship that is, at least initially, anonymous. (The author's anonymity may be a temporary expedient, but the reviewers' is usually permanent.) Moreover, any critique of anonymous argument would seem to affect the institution of peer review. Of course, that institution is not above reproach: peer review has been criticized as unfit for purpose on other grounds (Heesen and Bright 2021). Indeed, anonymous peer review is a recent enough innovation that Einstein could complain to the editor of the *Physical Review* in 1936 that he and his coauthor "had sent you our manuscript for publication and had not authorized you to show it to specialists before it is printed. I see no reason to address the—in any case erroneous—comments of your anonymous expert. On the basis of this incident I prefer to publish the paper elsewhere" (quoted in Kennefick 2005, 43). As it happens, the anonymous expert, now identified as Howard P. Robertson, was right and Einstein wrong: when the paper appeared with another journal, it was with a substantially revised conclusion. For better or worse, anonymous peer review, and thereby anonymous argument, is now fundamentally entwined with academic publication.

Some of the controversies concerning anonymous argument have a much longer history. As the modern press emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, it became the convention that journalism (and much scholarly publication) was anonymous or pseudonymous (Maurer 1948, 2). This convention was sometimes challenged. One example is provided by a letter to the editor of *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1833 complaining of anonymous publication:

In no science as much as in that of medicine, should innovations be more cautiously admitted. The promulgator of new *doctrines*, or even of new *facts*, calculated to ameliorate the condition of his fellow creatures, should therefore, in justice to his cause, not shrink from giving them at least the sanction of his name, however humble he may conceive its authority with the profession. The last volume alone of your Journal contains no less than one and twenty articles, which, instead of being perhaps greatly useful, will, because of their anonymous character, necessarily be overlooked by the majority of your readers (Dugas 1833, 161).

The editors published the letter with a note echoing these concerns: “However much of valuable fact or philosophical reasoning they may contain, the facts, reflections, and arguments, are received with less confidence by the profession, than if sanctioned by the authority of a name, although that name may be new to the reader”. They also encouraged authors to permit their names to be used and offered the reassurance that they had undertaken to publish “no article where *authority* is absolutely required to give it weight or confidence, unless we are ourselves apprised who is the author; and our readers may all be assured that the writer of every such anonymous paper is known to *us*, and known, too, to be good authority, before the paper is offered to their perusal” (ibid.). Although pseudonymous publication remained common in medical journals for decades after this exchange, it became less common by the end of the century, not least because of an 1895 scandal involving the founding editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, Nathan Smith Davis (Baker 2014, 167). After criticism that he had breached the AMA’s ethics code by accepting advertisements for patent medicines with undisclosed ingredients, *JAMA* published multiple pseudonymous arguments in Davis’s defence, many of which it transpired he had written himself. Davis was obliged to resign and his successors discontinued the practice of anonymous publication.

Journalistic anonymity was the subject of protracted debate in the Victorian press. Dallas Liddle suggests this debate may be understood in terms of competing metaphors for journalism as schoolroom vs. marketplace or playing field (Liddle 1997, 58). Advocates of anonymity saw it as fostering a learned collective elite who might provide mentorship and moral leadership in the corporate personae of their respective publications. Supporters of signature framed journalism either as an intellectual marketplace in which the reading public deserved to know what they were buying or a rough-and-tumble playing field which required courage and sportsmanship to function well, qualities only identifiable individuals could express. In either case, critics of anonymity stressed its irresponsibility. Thus John Morley, editor of *The Fortnightly Review*, in repudiating anonymous journalism for his own publication, frames this as a “gigantic objection”, that it “entrusts the most important of social influences at this moment to what is, as far as the public is concerned, a secret society. The immeasurably momentous task of forming national opinion is entrusted to men who are, as a body, wholly irresponsible. Secrecy, whether partial or entire, demoralises” (Morley 1867, 292). Half a century later the issue was still a matter of controversy. George Binney Dibblee was a senior figure at the *Manchester Guardian*, as it then was, and also an economist who eventually became a fellow of All Souls. In a popular book about newspaper work

he defended anonymous journalism decades after Morley had rejected it: “Anonymous journalism has been found in the end to be a more powerful political weapon, partly because reverence attaches itself more easily to the unknown and also because the shelter of corporate responsibility adds somewhat to the freedom of writing and very much to the fertility of invention” (Dibblee 1913, 88 f.). As he expands on the last point, “there is a further advantage for the journalist in anonymity; it is a very effective shelter under which he can do his daily round of ordinary work without the natural slackening and the painful fits and starts which pursue inevitably the responsible writer, who has to put his own name to everything he produces” (Dibblee 1913, 103). In other words, it is easier to write if you do not need to worry about being held to account for it afterwards; if all else fails you can blame your colleagues for your worst columns! This is an ironic reinforcement of the view that anonymity breeds irresponsibility and lessens credence, here turned to the advantage of the author. Even in the 21st century, some publications, such as *The Economist* and *Private Eye*, are still anonymous (Arrese 2021, 2022). It is not difficult to work out who most of their writers are and enduring pseudonyms are used for some columns, but articles are unsigned. The chief defence that *The Economist* offers for this policy is editorial consistency: “the corporate signature of the magazine avoids the vices, limitations and temptations that can be derived from personal bylines” (Arrese 2021, 478).

We have seen a diversity of arguments both for and against anonymous argumentation. One theme that recurs in multiple contexts is that of responsibility: authors are reproached as irresponsible for seeking to argue anonymously; conversely, it has been suggested that corporate responsibility can exceed personal responsibility or that arguers freed from the responsibility of authorship can be more creative or less inhibited. Responsibility is not a factor in most theories of argument. However, virtue theories of argument are characteristically grounded, at least in part, in a responsibilist virtue epistemology (Aberdein 2010; Gascón 2018). Virtue approaches pay particular attention to the arguer and any other participants in an argument as individuals whose actions reflect their dispositions of character, or virtues and vices. Specifically, “character” refers to argumentative character, not the full richness of biographical character: it is not necessary to know someone’s life story in order to evaluate their arguments. I have proposed responsibility to be a virtue of argument, specifically as a subtype of the virtue of intellectual integrity, which in turn falls under a broader heading of willingness to modify one’s own position (Aberdein 2010, 175). As the examples discussed above suggest, the irresponsible arguer is more likely to arrive at obnoxious conclusions by careless or fallacious reasoning. Thus argumentative irresponsibility is unlikely to occur as a single vice, but as part of a more complex pattern in which several distinct argumentative vices could be present. I have also sought to situate virtues of argument between corresponding vices of deficiency and excess, so that intellectual integrity, for example, falls between vices of intransigence and acquiescence (Aberdein 2016, 416). These vices could plausibly ground the misalignment of credence noted above as affecting the reception of anonymous argumentation. Thus an intellectually acquiescent respondent would be disposed to give more credit to arguments than they deserve, specifically being insufficiently sceptical of anonymous arguments. Conversely, dismissing all anonymous arguments out of hand might be diagnosed as intellectual intransigence. Thus, in this context, to assign appropriately

calibrated credence to anonymous argumentation would be an exercise of the virtue of intellectual integrity.

3 Defining Anonymity

Having surveyed some of the debates that have arisen over the nature and status of anonymous argument, let us now consider whether progress can be made towards their resolution by the clarification of some key concepts. I will follow Grace Paterson in defining an anonymized speech act as follows:

Anonymized speech act A speech act is *anonymized* when the audience is intentionally blocked from identifying the speaker (Paterson 2020, 168).

Two terms in this definition require clarification:

Identification One has identified an agent of a particular action A when either (a) one knows that specific facts hold of the agent of A which are not directly related to A, or (b) one can be reasonably expected to come to know such facts in the future.

Block to identification A block to identification is anything that makes the identification of the agent of a particular action more difficult (Paterson 2020, 170).

Anonymity is thereby defined in terms that permit gradability (see also Wallace 1999). You may learn *some* specific facts about the agent, or be reasonably expected to come to know those facts, but not others; and a block makes identification more difficult, but not necessarily impossible. For example, it was always possible for the sufficiently determined to work out Scott Alexander's full name, but not on the first page of a web search. There was a block to identification but the block was permeable. Understanding anonymity as gradable forestalls the introduction of a spurious distinction between anonymity and *true* anonymity, wherein only the latter deserves protection. Instead, anonymity is characteristically a matter of degree: some disguises are more readily penetrated than others. Arguably, if any forms of anonymity deserve protection, it is the weaker forms, since these are more vulnerable to exposure.

Paterson's account also specifically identifies speech that is known to be anonymized:

Communicatively anonymized speech act A speech act is communicatively anonymized when:

1. The audience is intentionally blocked from identifying the speaker by way of information available to any reasonable, attentive, and linguistically competent audience member in virtue only of being in the audience.
2. The intention to block the speaker's identification is intended to be recognized as such by the audience.
3. All of this is out in the open, such that all conversational participants can reasonably expect all other conversational participants to know (1), (2), and (3) (Paterson 2020, 172).

So the pseudonymous articles in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* are communicatively anonymized since "pseudonym" is written next to the authors' names. A casual reader of Alexander's work might not notice that he was not using his full name, but he made no secret of it, so it is still an instance of communicative anonymity.

Another special case of anonymity is the enduring pseudonym. Consider, for example, a US lawsuit appealing a conviction on the grounds that a witness testified under a pseudonym. The appeal was rejected since the witness had used a name by which he was generally known, although not his legal name. As Bruce Selya, the appellate judge, rather grandiloquently puts it,

the name under which the witness testified . . . was not some passing cognominal fancy assumed solely for the purpose of the judicial proceeding and bearing no relation to the witness's life outside the courthouse. To the contrary, this was a name the witness had clasped to his bosom and made his own . . . not some incorporeal apparition . . . but a flesh-and-blood human being easily placed within his relevant context (Siegfried v. Fair 1992).

Enduring pseudonyms are typically communicatively anonymous, as in the case of the adult actress Lorelei Lee who, when summoned to appear as a witness in an obscenity case, petitioned to testify under her stage name rather than publicly reveal her birth name (Hernandez 2010). Although the judge appears to have been sceptical, the case was dropped before she was called to testify, so her pseudonymity was preserved. Carissa Véliz has argued that a regulated system of enduring pseudonyms could make “the expression of unpopular views a costly affair, but not so costly that people do not have a reasonable option to speak up” (Véliz 2019, 655). On her proposal, adverse consequences for unpopular speech would attach to the pseudonym, not directly to the speaker, thereby providing a buffer against threats to personal safety. Extreme cases could result in loss of access to the pseudonym or, for criminal activity, identification to the relevant authorities. The specifics of this proposal are open to criticism—and something similar has arguably been implemented in an uncoordinated manner by individual social media platforms, with mixed success. But Véliz is correct that ethos can attach to enduring pseudonyms. Many people are better known by such pseudonyms, as is common with pen names and stage names, but also for some political figures and online personalities. These enduring names can have strong enough associations for a character to attach.

To fully understand anonymous argumentation, we must consider not only anonymity but also authorship. Joshua Habgood-Coote notes that there are multiple aspects to authorship. He distinguishes “five functions played by authorship attributions:”

1. Allocating intellectual credit;
2. Constructing a speaker;
3. Enabling credibility judgements;
4. Supporting accountability;
5. Creating an intellectual market (Habgood-Coote 2024, 4 f.).

In consequence, he proposes disaggregating the author into four separate roles: contributor, writer, spokesperson, and guarantor (Habgood-Coote 2024, 18). Anyone whose work deserves to be credited would be a contributor, whether or not literally a writer; a spokesperson coordinates reaction to any criticisms up to, if necessary, retraction; and guarantors places their reputation behind the work. Thus the credit function is primarily distributed amongst the contributors; the speaker function is assigned to the writer, at least with regard to the work as written, whereas subsequent interactions with the

audience are the responsibility of the spokesperson; the credibility and accountability functions are chiefly attached to the guarantors, and perhaps to a more limited degree to the contributors; and the market function, of properly assigning potentially valuable social credit, is at least assigned to the contributors, but to some degree to all four roles. Questions about the responsibility (or irresponsibility) of arguers naturally fall under the accountability function.

Similar proposals have been raised before. For example, George Bernard Shaw addresses the argument that anonymous authorship can be necessary when an editor commissions a work from a writer who does not agree with its conclusion by suggesting that “when the editor means the article but doesn’t write it, and a professional journalist writes it but doesn’t mean it, it could be signed ‘Brown *inv.*: Jones *scrip.*’” (quoted in Hopkins 1890, 275). In Habgood-Coote’s terms, Brown would be the guarantor and perhaps the spokesperson; Jones the writer, and presumably both of them contributors. However, Shaw concludes that “since a man who writes without conviction in the third person is generally a pest and a bore, and seldom gets really important work to do, his signature is uncalled for” (ibid.). (For a different view on writing without conviction, see Plakias 2019.) Other proposals offer distinctions that are even more fine-grained, if narrower in scope (Brand et al. 2015).

With these definitions in place, we may usefully distinguish four types of anonymous arguer (without exhausting the range of possibilities):

- Fully anonymous arguer** a nameless arguer whose block to identification is practically absolute, such as an unsigned argument arising from an untraceable source;
- Broadly anonymous arguer** a similar case, except that some trusted third party, such as an editor, knows the arguer’s identity (this is the status of peer reviewers);
- Strongly pseudonymous arguer** an arguer with an enduring pseudonym but a practically absolute block to identification (this is the status sought by Lorelei Lee);
- Weakly pseudonymous arguer** an arguer with a weak block to identification, such that their identity could be ascertained with modest effort (this is the status achieved by Scott Alexander).

To what degree could these four individuals discharge Habgood-Coote’s functions of authorship or author roles? A fully anonymous arguer can fulfil few of the functions: they have presumably renounced any hope of credit or of reward in the market of ideas and there is little or no basis for credibility or accountability. However, such an arguer would still be able to construct a speaker, at least to a limited degree, through the dialectical choices made in putting together the argument. Likewise, a fully anonymous arguer would minimally occupy the contributor and writer roles, but not at all the spokesperson or guarantor roles. A similar story could be told of a broadly anonymous arguer, except that the trusted third party would function as guarantor, and perhaps spokesperson. This could be seen as providing at least partial satisfaction of the credibility function but perhaps not the accountability function. The strongly pseudonymous arguer’s enduring pseudonym provides a mechanism by which all five functions could be discharged, subject to limits. In certain situations, the arguer may not be fully able to exercise the credit or market functions without jeopardizing their block to identification. The speaker and credibility functions would grow with the arguer’s productivity but, at least initially, would be less adequately discharged

than if the arguer had signed their work. Most significantly, the absolute block to identification places an upper bound on the accountability function: if the block holds, then at most they could trash their alter ego's reputation, but not their own. Similarly, a strongly pseudonymous arguer could occupy all four author roles, although they may be seen as an imperfect guarantor. Lastly, a weakly pseudonymous arguer could also fulfil all five functions, and thereby all four roles, but in a manner closer to that of a signing author. Notably, the permeability of their block to identification would permit a much less restricted accountability function.

A virtue-based evaluation of the arguments of these four types of arguer could assign substantially lower credence to fully anonymous arguers than might be the case if their arguments were signed, and similarly for broadly anonymous arguers, unless there were very good reasons to trust their guarantors (as, for example, with peer reviewers), but the credence due strongly or weakly pseudonymous arguers might be close to that they would have received if identifiable, especially if their pseudonyms had established a sufficient track record. On the specific question of responsibility, a fully anonymous arguer could (but need not) be wholly irresponsible without consequence. This might also be true of a broadly anonymous arguer, depending on the precise role of the guarantor. But a strongly or weakly pseudonymous arguer could suffer adverse consequences for irresponsible behaviour, so their argumentation should not be expected to be wholly irresponsible.

4 Anonymity and Evaluation

It is a commonplace of many accounts of how arguments should be evaluated that we must set aside the character and personality of the parties involved in the argument. In particular, appealing to an arguer's character in the evaluation of their arguments is often said to commit the ad hominem fallacy. It is an essential preliminary to any adequate virtue theory of argumentation to reject this diagnosis (see, for example, Aberdein 2010, 170 f.). Reflection on the status of anonymous arguments provides a further reason to reject the commonplace view. If we must strip away all the identifying details of an argument in order to evaluate it fairly, we are in effect treating all arguments as anonymous. But if arguing anonymously is bad and all arguments should be treated as though they were anonymous, then all arguments should be treated as though they were bad, and that doesn't seem good.¹ We must either concede that anonymous arguments are not all bad or evaluate arguments in a way that acknowledges their authorship. Better yet, we can do both of these things.

A different, complementary problem for virtue theorists of argumentation is that they treat arguments as intimately connected to their arguers. That seems to leave a hole in the virtue approach: what to do with anonymous arguments, where the arguer

¹ If the sole reason for mistrusting anonymous arguments was the author's decision not to reveal their identity, taken as presumptive evidence of their irresponsibility or worse, then arguments anonymized independently of the author, including for the purposes of argument evaluation, would carry no such stigma. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making (and exemplifying) this point. However, as we saw in Section 2, irresponsibility is not the only factor that justifies lowering the credence we assign to anonymous arguments. Other factors would remain, such as the block to spotting conflicts of interest and other biases, perhaps innocently overlooked by the arguer.

is unknown. Here we may usefully recall a distinction drawn by Aristotle between an ethos manifested in the actual speech or argument and a broader prior ethos that the arguer brings to the conversation. Rhetorical ethos, as far as Aristotle is concerned, is just that which is manifest in what is said on that occasion. Aristotle regards all other factors influencing ethos, such as social position or past actions, as extrinsic to the art of rhetoric (Žmavc 2012, 184). Ruth Amossy frames this distinction as between a pragmatist ethos “constructed within verbal interaction . . . purely internal to discourse” and a sociological ethos “governed by social mechanisms and external institutional positions” that encompasses the prior ethos (Amossy 2001, 5). These can be differently weighted in different circumstances: in some cases, the speaker may have to do little more than direct the audience’s attention to their prior ethos; in others, they may have to expend much time and effort establishing a relevant ethos—or overcoming an adverse prior ethos (Amossy 2001, 20). Thus the rhetorical or pragmatist ethos corresponds to that aspect of the authorial function that even a fully anonymous arguer could discharge. One possible response to the concern outlined above would be to focus exclusively on this minimal aspect of ethos and ignore any track record of prior ethos. This would permit extrapolating the character of the arguer from their arguments on this occasion, without looking at their past character. However, when prior ethos is available, it can contribute effectively to argument evaluation, which counts against adopting this austere approach as a general strategy. (For further discussion of the no track record approach, see Aberdein 2021b, 223.) And, as we have seen, less extreme degrees of anonymity, such as enduring pseudonyms, have much greater scope to establish a track record, and thereby much more for a virtue theory of argumentation to work on.

These concerns connect to a general criticism of virtue theories of argumentation concerning bad arguers who make good arguments (see, for example, Gascón 2018, 168). We might expect most good arguments to be made by good arguers, but even bad arguers can make good arguments from time to time. When they do so, they are arguing as a virtuous arguer would argue. So a virtue theory should still support the evaluation of such arguments as good. However, the evaluator would have to discount much of what they knew about the track record of the arguer. In some cases, as with anonymous arguments (and especially, as Wilkinson suggests, anonymous arguments where there are grounds to suspect an ulterior motive behind the arguer’s anonymity), the argument might receive a lower credence than it would have if it had been made by an arguer with a good track record. These considerations particularly apply to ampliative or abductive reasoning in conditions of uncertainty; a deductively sound inference should receive a very high credence irrespective of the character of who puts it forward, or whether the arguer is even identifiable.

It might be objected that the proposals made above are too permissive and could potentially be exploited. In particular, one might fear the possibility of “reputational laundering”, whereby arguers with bad track records could benefit from anonymity, if anonymous arguments are to be accepted, even with reduced credence. My contention is that this should not be a significant concern, for two reasons. Firstly, if these arguers really are incorrigible, we should expect their bad reputation to reassert itself: sooner or later, out pops the cloven hoof. In that case, the arguer’s new bad arguments could be recognized as bad in the same manner as their old bad arguments. Secondly, if they

succeed in turning over a new leaf and arguing well, we should welcome that. In this situation, anonymity would function by making other participants in the argument respond more virtuously: not knowing who the arguer is, we treat their arguments more charitably, and we benefit from so doing by recognizing a good argument we might otherwise have missed. This brings us back to a central question raised in Section 2: are anonymous arguments irresponsible? Certainly, arguing anonymously might give some arguers an advantage in apparent cogency, but that is not necessarily blameworthy in itself. A blameworthy arguer can still be blamed, whether they are fully anonymous, pseudonymous, or fully identifiable. The anonymity does not block the blame, it blocks it from being associated with the arguer's independent reputation. If nobody knows who you are, you are not staking your reputation on this particular argument. The arguer's reputation is shielded from whatever negative effects this particular argument may produce but, under whatever persona, they can still receive any blame they deserve. Anonymity may protect an arguer from the ability of others to impose some sort of punishment. Yet such protection may be a reasonable outcome. If participating in argument exposes one to whatever punishment others see fit to impose, argumentation becomes a risky endeavour, requiring substantial moral courage. (On the role of moral courage in argument, see Aberdeen 2021a.) We should not expect such moral courage from all arguers on all topics. A requirement that people engaging with certain topics need exceptional levels of moral courage to present certain positions, can only impoverish the range of positions being presented. This is epistemically harmful to the community as a whole, for reasons addressed long ago by John Stuart Mill (1977).

5 Conclusions

We have seen that disputes over the pros and cons of anonymous argument go back centuries. Not all forms of anonymity give rise to the same problems. In particular, an enduring pseudonym can build up an ethos of its own; much of the time that is more than enough for a virtue approach to argument appraisal to get to work. However, there is an ostensible problem for accounts of argument appraisal that divorce arguments from arguers: if anonymous arguments have problems then so do these accounts, because they effectively treat all arguments as if they were anonymous. Virtue theories of argument solve that problem, but then they seem to have a different problem, that perhaps they cannot evaluate genuinely anonymous arguments. I have suggested that this is a challenge which can be met: even the most austere forms of anonymity provide minimal indications of argumentative character. Virtue theories of argument also show us that we can distinguish good from bad uses of anonymous arguing, and thereby counter the charge of irresponsibility against such arguments.

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