

# Introduction: Virtues and Arguments

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## 1 Roots

It has been a decade since the phrase virtue argumentation was introduced,<sup>1</sup> and while it would be an exaggeration to say that it burst onto the scene, it would be just as much of an understatement to say that it has gone unnoticed. Trying to strike the virtuous mean between the extremes of hyperbole and litotes, then, we can fairly characterize it as a way of thinking about arguments and argumentation that has steadily attracted more and more attention from argumentation theorists. The online bibliography (Aberdein 2015) gives evidence that the gathering momentum of papers, workshops, themed conferences, and, self-referentially, special issues of journals has long since passed the critical mass needed to sustain a vital programme. We hope it is neither too late for an introduction to the field nor too soon for some retrospective assessment of where things stand.

Virtue argumentation theory, VAT, emerged from the confluence of several developments in philosophy and brings a myriad of interdisciplinary perspectives on argumentation to bear. Its most immediate and salient predecessor is virtue epistemology with its emphasis on how the role of intellectual character in the production of beliefs is relevant for the justification of beliefs. In order to take the same “Aretaic Turn” in argumentation theory, the insight that an agent-based approach provides had to be transplanted into the soil of argumentation theory (Cohen 2007;

Aberdein 2010). The result has been far more fruitful than was foreseen. The seed took root because the conceptual environment of argumentation theory proved especially hospitable. Argumentation theory is actually more congenial to a virtues approach than epistemology in significant ways. For starters, arguments’ status as dynamic events contrasts with the comparatively static state of beliefs, so reference to character traits as dispositions is meet. In addition, the shadow of voluntarism, the dubious idea that we choose our beliefs, is much less of a problem when dealing with arguments because of the manifest agency of arguers. And since arguing typically includes multiple agents, the Aristotelian model of the virtues for ethics has a natural application to argumentation. Arguments are dynamic, multi-agent events; beliefs are not.

Virtue theories of argumentation have more distant precursors in argumentation theory itself. Indeed, Aristotle’s focus on virtue permeated much of his work; in his work on argumentation it may be most conspicuous in the *Rhetoric* (Aristotle 1991). Modern writers on rhetoric have also paid attention to virtue. While some of this work is grounded in the exegesis of Aristotle (Johnstone 1980; Rowland and Womack 1985) or other ancient traditions (Ding 2007; Cohen 2013a), many studies are contemporary in focus (Herrick 1992; Katz 1992). More indirectly, some of the pioneers of the study of argument in communication theory were well aware of the importance of agents to the normative evaluation of arguments (Ehninger 1968; Brockriede 1972). Virtue argumentation has a more direct relationship to critical thinking, which has long recognized the centrality of dispositions; since virtues are a type of disposition, this is clearly at least a parallel development to virtue argumentation, as the similarities

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<sup>1</sup> Aberdein replying to (Cohen 2005) at OSSA, and then in print as (Aberdein 2007, 2010).

between lists of argumentational virtues and critical thinking virtues attests (Ennis 1996; Siegel 1999; Facione 2000; Nieto and Valenzuela 2012). More explicit treatments of the connection between critical thinking and virtue epistemology also antedate the inception of VAT (Paul 2000; Bailin 2003; Hyslop-Margison 2003). Critical thinking also addresses an important question for any virtue theory: the nature of the difference between a virtue and a skill—indeed, whether there is a distinction, or whether skills are not themselves virtues (Missimer 1990; Siegel 1993; Hample 2003). There are several other fields closely related to, or intersecting with, argumentation theory in which virtue-based accounts have been defended. Thus several authors have analysed the virtues of deliberation (Tiberius 2002; Weiss and Shanteau 2003; Aikin and Clanton 2010); of debate (Strait and Wallace 2008); of semantics (Tsai 2008); and, within the broader context of virtue jurisprudence, of advocates or of judges (Duff 2003; Solum 2003; Cassidy 2006). More broadly, the avoidance of bias and the mitigation of existing biases, or ‘debiasing’, are significant goals for any practical account of reasoning. This reflects a wider interest in recognizing and responding to argumentative injustice, or the role of epistemic privilege within argument (Bondy 2010; Kotzee 2010; Linker 2011, 2014; Yap 2013, 2015). A virtue approach has been applied to these questions too (Correia 2012).

A distinctive feature of the aretaic turn in the study of argumentation is its focus on agents: arguers, rather than (just) arguments. This was a perspective on the field that had been widely, but not entirely ignored (Brockriede 1972; Hample 2007). It also explains the close focus on the ad hominem fallacy, which is conspicuous in many accounts of the relation of the virtues to argumentation theory, as discussed further below (Johnson 2009; Battaly 2010; Jason 2011; Howell and Kingsbury 2013; Aberdein 2014; Bondy 2015; Leibowitz 2016). More recently, it has been suggested that an undue focus on ad hominem may distract from virtue argumentation theory’s strengths—and from some of its other problems (Paglieri 2015). The latter include the ‘incompleteness problem’, of explaining why virtues are worthwhile (MacPherson 2014); the question of whether there are virtues specific to argumentation (Goddu 2015); and the issue of how (or whether) the conflict of virtues may be resolved. One solution to the last issue is to subordinate all other virtues to one central virtue, for example willingness to inquire (Hamby 2015; see also Watson 2015). Determining which virtues are salient and how they are related are important issues for any virtue theory, hence virtue argumentation theory can benefit from earlier studies of the structure of the intellectual virtues (McCloskey 1998; Morin 2014; Howell and Kingsbury 2015). In particular, most virtue argumentation theorists recognize open-mindedness as an important virtue (Cohen 2009), thereby building on a substantial body of recent work in virtue epistemology (Riggs 2010; Baehr 2011; Tiberius 2012) and the philosophy

of education (Hare 1985, 2003, 2009; Hare and McLaughlin 1998; Higgins 2009; Siegel 2009). Lastly, the virtue argumentation programme is now sufficiently mature to have produced overviews, whether positive (Cohen 2013b; Aberdein 2014), negative (Howell and Kingsbury 2013; Bondy 2015), or studiously even-handed (Paglieri 2015).

## 2 Fruits

The papers in this volume are organized along three research branches sharing a root in virtue theory:

- (1) The idea of an argumentative virtue provides impetus for research programmes on such questions as what a virtue is, what the virtues are, and how they relate to one another as well as to moral, intellectual, and other families of virtues.
- (2) How are argumentative virtues, as standing dispositional character traits of arguers, related to the sequences of propositions of speech acts that constitute individual arguments? Why and how are properties of arguers relevant to the project of evaluating their arguments?
- (3) More generally, how is the theory of argumentation informed by practice? What does that tell us about how what we learn about arguments can be used to form or reform how we argue? The practice and pedagogy of logic and critical thinking are intertwined with its theory in ways that distinguish it from other academic endeavours. The Aretaic Turn has opened whole new vistas.

These three branches have flourished in large measure because they share the common root in virtue theory.

While we have organized the papers in this volume along these three branches, they also provide glimpses into the relevance of VAT for a much broader range of issues in argumentation theory. They run the gamut from highly abstract theoretical considerations to nuts-and-bolts practical applications. Along the way, these papers demonstrate, in both theory and practice, that theory and practice are intimately intertwined. We begin with the third branch where this is most acutely evident. David Godden gets us started by raising two serious problems about, appropriately enough, getting started. Getting started, he concludes, is something that a “pure” virtue theory cannot do! Virtue theories, he argues, cannot satisfactorily sort out questions of conceptual priority and cannot deliver on the promise of using virtues to build a sufficient basis for defining the full array of evaluative concepts that argumentation theory needs. In sum, his archeological search for the conceptual foundations of virtues-based approaches to argumentation concludes that it is a castle built on shifting sands.

Ultimately, the problem may be with the insistent demand for an account of the theory's foundations, rather than, say, for an account of its coherence or practicality. Even if our concepts of argumentative virtues and virtuous arguers must cede some kind of priority to the concepts of good argument and rationality, that priority arguably cannot entail either a one-way dependence or complete independence. None of the relevant concepts can be treated in isolation. They have to be understood, Juli Thorson argues, as "thick" concepts whose descriptive and normative components are inextricably intertwined. The pursuit of a virtuous character is not irrelevant to the project of trying to act virtuously. In order to become a more virtuous arguer, in the sense of someone who argues virtuously, one needs insights into what it is to be a virtuous arguer. Theory is no more separable from practice than practical wisdom is from knowledge-that.

In the section's closing contribution, Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby pose a pedagogically informed challenge to virtue argumentation theory. Considerations from both the theory and practice of teaching critical thinking lead them to suggest that virtue argumentation might be aiming at the wrong target. Argumentation needs to be understood in the context of the larger project of inquiry. Thus, students are better served by acquiring general "virtues of inquiry" which requires active participation in the practice. The ideal classroom for fostering the virtues, then, needs to be a "community of inquiry." It is only by modelling inquiry in the classroom, rather than trying to teach discrete skills that the "transfer problem" can be overcome because theory is no more separable from practice than learning is from doing.

According to the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, that remarkable collection of writings attributed to a 5th–6th century mystic theologian now known as the Pseudo-Dionysius, Virtues are to be found at the exact centre of the Celestial Hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> On Earth as it is in Heaven, so we have given over the centre section of this issue to the chorus of virtues themselves, as species within the genus Virtue.

But what insures that when the virtues are brought together, the chorus does not create cacophony? How is it that arguers can be genuinely open to opposing viewpoints while both aggressively criticizing those views and tenaciously defending their own views? Katharina Stevens argues that the apparent conflicts between argumentative virtues can be explained by reference to the different roles that arguers have in arguments. Stevens' explanation emphasizes the dynamic dimension to argumentation, the

plurality of roles that arguers have to fill, the different virtues and skill sets appropriate for those different roles, and the need for arguers to move into different roles in different stages of an argument—all brought together under the single overarching telos of argumentation: bettering our belief systems.

Can argumentative virtues also be brought into harmony with other virtues? Beginning with Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, Iovan Drehe explores how these sets of virtues intersect, diverge, and complement one another. Argumentative virtues are more like intellectual virtues in their instrumental value but more like moral virtues in their normative efficacy. He reaches the further, intriguing conclusion that the specific concept of incontinence, which plays an especially important role in Aristotle's moral psychology, can be fruitfully adapted for use by VAT, and that "argumentational incontinence" is the key notion for understanding a range of fallacies.

The final two articles in this section address the centrality of specific virtues in relation to the others. Ian Kidd focuses on the value of intellectual humility in the narrow context of argumentation, as well as in the broader context of all of our intellectual projects, and even in the all-encompassing context of our lives as moral agents. The contexts, Kidd argues, are not independent: notably, the humility that enables an arguer to participate well in and benefit from philosophical argumentation can (but, alas, does not always) make us better as moral agents, too. Humility, then, is a *sine qua non* for certain kinds of argumentative success; but confidence is a *sine qua non* for others.

No discussion of argumentative virtues would be complete without a discussion of open-mindedness. There is, as noted above, a healthy body of literature on the topic. Inevitably, there is also a lot of confusion. Jack Kwong's aim is to sort things out regarding this essential virtue. In particular Kwong takes Cohen (2009), Hare (1985), Riggs (2010), and other authors to task for being insufficiently sensitive to the different ways that open-mindedness plays out as a virtue in arguments and as a virtue in the pursuit of knowledge. There is a single virtue at work, so any conflict has to result from vagueness, inconsistency, or ambiguity in the operative understanding of what it is to have an open mind. The solution: focus more selectively on the aspect of open-mindedness that impacts how we initially receive ideas in order to explain the subsequent unfolding of its various manifestations.

The final grouping of articles enters the labyrinth of argument evaluation. The opportunities for VAT to contribute to the field are almost limitless, as is the potential for those contributions to be game-changing in their significance. The first foray into fallacy theory from the perspective of virtue argumentation theory comes from Andrew Aberdein. His painstaking attention to specifics

<sup>2</sup> According to the Pseudo-Dionysius, whom we take to be an Authoritative Source on the subject, the Celestial Hierarchy is constituted by this Trinity of Trinities: {<Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones>, <Dominations, Virtues, Powers>, <Principalities, Archangels, Angels>}.

might mask the ambition behind his project: he begins with a blueprint for a programmatic account of arguments' failings in terms of vices; he follows that up by laying down a foundation for building such a theoretical edifice; and then he puts the first beams into place by putting it all to the test in a case study of ad misericordiam argumentation. This paper opens the door to an entire research programme.

But why are some arguments fallacious? That is the question Andrew Ball asks. It requires a nuanced answer because not all errors in argumentation are intentional, as Aberdein had noted with reference to the classic distinction between sophisms and paralogisms. Vices are commonly understood as something more than the absence of a virtue; and virtues can be attributed to arguers, their arguments, or to the acts of arguing. Ball effectively stresses the motivational component in virtues (and vices), bringing out resonances between VAT accounts and, say, Zagzebski's (1996) understanding of virtues in virtue epistemology. The research programme on virtues and fallacies is already under way!

Scott Aikin and John Casey showcase the value of thinking in terms of virtues to unravel some conceptual knots in our thinking about straw man fallacies. Aikin and Casey deftly distinguish several kinds of straw man arguments, noting that as is the case with other arguments traditionally classified as fallacies, there are both fallacious and cogent instances of each. Moreover, the same possibilities for fallacious and non-fallacious instances appear in what they call "iron man" arguments: distortions of an opponent's position to strengthen it. However, unlike many other fallacies, neither the straw man nor the iron man fits comfortably into standard argument schemes. Bringing in arguers' virtues allows them to identify and explain what goes wrong in the fallacious instances within a common schema.

As remarked above, a charge that has been levelled against VAT, e.g., by Adler (2007) and more recently by Howell and Kingsbury (2013), is that by focusing on arguers rather than on the content of their arguments, virtue theorists are themselves guilty of ad hominem argumentation, rendering the entire exploration of arguers' virtues irrelevant. While other authors have provided VAT with a vigorous defence by parsing the kinds, contexts, and scopes for legitimate ad hominem reasoning (Aberdein 2014), José Ángel Gascón responds by accepting the premise but denying the conclusion: even apart from any role in argument appraisal, VAT's role in argumentation theory is secured by what it contributes to appraising arguers and arguing. Understanding what it is to be a good arguer arguing well cannot but help us become worthy of that description.

The final essay starts down the main road of fallacy theory by asking what can go wrong in arguments. But

Daniel Cohen and George Miller make two idiosyncratic turns. First, making the aretaic turn, they conclude that sometimes it is the arguer's fault when an argument goes bad—but sometimes it is the arguers' fault. (Read that carefully!) Because argumentation is a cooperative endeavour that includes contributions (and harms) from multiple parties, its value is not always simply the sum of its parts. The second turn is to flip the initial question around, asking now what can go right in arguments. The target is identifying the arguers' virtues, both individually and collectively, that enable arguments to be more than the sum of their parts. They nominate "compathy" as the special kind of harmony in argumentation that makes it possible.

Tradition bids us ask: Where do we go from here? The authors have certainly done sterling work in providing directions for future scholarship, questions to answer, and, of course, provocative theses with which to argue. But we can also ask a different question: What can go right in virtue argumentation theory? On the basis of the papers here, we are confident that all the requisite virtues are in place for some very productive arguments.

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