Virtue Argumentation and Bias

Andrew Aberdein

School of Arts and Communication,
Florida Institute of Technology,
150 West University Blvd,
Melbourne, Florida 32901-6975, U.S.A.

aberdein@fit.edu
my.fit.edu/~aberdein
twitter.com/andrewaberdein
fit.academia.edu/AndrewAberdein

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Nine Types of Virtue Argumentation

Reliabilist

Mixed

Responsibilist
Our ordinary manner is to follow the inclination of our appetite this way and that way; on the left and on the right hand; upward and downe-ward, according as the winde of occasions doth transport us: we never thinke on what we would have, but at the instant we would have it: and change as that beast that takes the colour of the place wherein it is laid. What we even now purposed we alter by and by, and presently returne to our former biase: all is but changing, motion and inconstancy.

Situationists say that there is no such thing as stable and consistent states of virtues and vices, making up character; rather, all human behaviour (‘moral’ or otherwise) has now been shown in psychological experiments, such as the famous Milgram experiments, to be completely situation dependent.

Psychologists distinguish between two kinds of judgemental and inferential illusions: *motivational* (or “hot”) illusions, on the one hand, which stem from the influence of emotions and interests upon cognitive processes, and *cognitive* (or “cold”) illusions, on the other hand, which stem from inferential errors due to cognitive malfunctioning. ... [C]ognitive illusions may ... lead to irrational responses, such as risk mismanagement, wishful thinking, self-deception, prejudice, scapegoating, rationalization, ... biases also seem to aggravate the phenomenon of “attitude polarization,” ... biases increase people’s vulnerability to manipulative strategies of persuasion ... biases seem to widen the gap between normative models of argumentation and real-life debates

Responding to the Challenge

- Deny the validity of the empirical studies.
Responding to the Challenge

Deny the validity of the empirical studies

**Argument 1** Linda is more likely to be a bank teller than she is to be a feminist bank teller, because every feminist bank teller is a bank teller, but some women bank tellers are not feminists, and Linda could be one of them.

**Argument 2** Linda is more likely to be a feminist bank teller than she is likely to be a bank teller, because she resembles an active feminist more than she resembles a bank teller.

The majority of subjects (65%, n = 58) chose the invalid resemblance argument (argument 2) over the valid extensional argument (argument 1).

Responding to the Challenge

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- Dispute the applicability of the empirical studies.
Responding to the Challenge
Dispute the applicability of the empirical studies

Typically, situationists deliberately choose to focus on situations that are not only broad but also passive (the agent is a victim rather than a creator of the situation), extraordinary (the situations presents features that the agent has never experienced before and is never even likely to experience in real life) and/or involve strong social expectations of compliance (for instance, being subjected to orders from an authority-figure). After tilting evidence in their favour in this way, it is no surprise that situationist experiments yield the findings that they do.

Responding to the Challenge
Dispute the applicability of the empirical studies

Syntax first  Start with a law of logic or probability.

Add semantics and pragmatics  Replace the logical terms (e.g., material conditional, mathematical probability) by English terms (e.g., if... then; probable), add content, and define the problem to be solved.

Content-blind norm  Use the syntax to define the “rational” answer to the problem. Ignore semantics and pragmatics.

Cognitive illusion  If people’s judgments deviate from the “rational” answer, call the discrepancy a cognitive illusion. Attribute it to some deficit in the human mind (not to your norms).

Responding to the Challenge

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- Dispute the applicability of the empirical studies.
- Strict activity VTA.
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- Virtuous heuristics.
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- Dispute the applicability of the empirical studies.
- Strict activity VTA.
- Elite virtues.
- Local virtues.
- Virtuous heuristics.
- Virtues $\neq$ behaviourist traits.
Responding to the Challenge

Virtues ≠ behaviourist traits

Aristotle makes it abundantly clear that the kinds of traits that he recommends as virtuous are certainly not dispositions to behave in a certain kind of way whenever or almost whenever a certain kind of situational feature is present.

Responding to the Challenge

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When we engage in situated judgment, we make decisions drawn from our own perspectives—from our experiences, our emotions, and even our prejudices. . . . Aristotle aimed to turn rhetoric into a skill of engaging this sort of judgment.

The humble regulation or calibration of confidence has several features that are relevant to the topic of argumentation, to which I shortly turn. The first is that it is an active process rather than a one-off act of rainy-day cognitive housekeeping—an ideal rather different from the Cartesian ideal. The second is that it is a fallible process that is as vulnerable to error, failure, and akrasia as any other intellectual or ethical practice. The third and final feature is that it is necessarily an intersubjective process that relies crucially upon engagement with other people—critics, peers, interlocutors, and others who may humble or humiliate us.

What the attitude strength and moral choice blindness experiments suggest, however, is that those of our explicit moral judgments that express firmly held attitudes are thereby consistent across situations, whereas others are constructed when needed from resources that vary across situations. Moreover, the strong attitudes that manifest in consistent judgments also manifest in consistent behaviour. So the moral task these experiments pose is neither one of bringing behavioural dispositions into line with evaluative beliefs nor one of undertaking strategies to ensure careful deliberation in morally important situations. It is to ensure that one holds the right moral attitudes sufficiently strongly that one’s judgments and actions will express them consistently.

A VTA Response to Bias

Debiasing

[T]here is a seeming dilemma for those who wish to teach debiasing as part of critical thinking. The things that are most easily teachable and open to long-term retention by learners—what biases are and how they work; and that their distortive influences are to be avoided—are not in themselves very effective at debiasing people’s judgments; while the things that are rather effective at debiasing judgments—counterfactual or opposite-scenario consideration—are not very teachable as individual skills to be recalled and applied when needed, nor to be implemented easily even when attempted.

A VTA Response to Bias
Debiasing

Developing these higher-level virtues in students is worthwhile in its own right—... they are characteristics that we want citizens to have, and a critical thinking course seems a likely venue in which to try to develop them. But independently of this, we suggest that a focus on developing motivational and regulatory virtues might increase the likelihood that students will deploy their reasoning skills outside the classroom.

Conclusions

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- VTA has the resources to respond to the challenge.
- The virtues of argument are consistent with the empirical evidence that might be taken to show their nonexistence.
- The virtues of argument appear better placed to facilitate the avoidance of bias than other, non-virtue theoretic accounts of argumentation.