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**Exploring epistemological approaches to argumentation:
From evaluation standards to the practice of argumentation**

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Abstract

The paper distinguishes, in its first part, different epistemological approaches to argumentation theory and criticizes those who focus on non-relative criteria of argument evaluation. The second part describes the basic idea of an alternative epistemological approach that focuses on improving the practice of argumentation by a representational tool called Logical Argument Mapping (LAM).

Introduction

In 1987, the following argument was published by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

From the moment of conception, the life of every human being is to be respected in an absolute way because man is the only creature on earth that God has "wished for himself" and the spiritual soul of each man is "immediately created" by God; his whole being bears the image of the Creator. Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves "the creative action of God" and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being. (Vatican, 1987, Introduction)

"Donum Vitae," the "Instruction on Respect for Human Life In its Origin and the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day," from which this argument is cited, has been formulated as the Vatican's reaction to the then new technologies of in vitro fertilization and embryo transfer. The argument is part of a 2000 year old practice of argumentation, and it is to this day highly influential within public discourse of Western societies, for example with regard to questions like human stem cell research and genetic engineering. But is it a "good" argument or a "bad" one?

Reflecting the quality of arguments is one of the questions that unites what has been called "the epistemological approach to argumentation" (see the call for papers for this special issue). Another question concerns the relation between argumentation and knowledge, or true belief. Both of these vague orientations, however, seem to be all

that is shared in those philosophical writings about argumentation in which we find explicit references to the notions “epistemic” or “epistemological.” Besides that, there are huge differences. Thus, it is more appropriate to start with assuming a *multitude* of epistemological approaches in argumentation theory rather than looking for *the* epistemological approach.

The goal of this paper is, in its first part, to discuss some of those epistemological approaches critically and, in the second, to describe the basic idea of a further one. It is a new approach, as far as I can see, which is not reducible to the approaches discussed in the first part of this paper. What distinguishes it from the rest of the bunch is, first, that it is not an approach to argumentation *theory* but to the *practice* of argumentation; second, that epistemology is not used to describe things like knowing and accepting premises or producing knowledge, but as a means to reflect on *conditions of understanding*; understanding is a crucial problem for human communication and interaction, and my thesis is that a certain standardized form of argument representation – called Logical Argument Mapping (LAM) – can be used as a tool to make conditions of understanding visible and also changeable; and the third difference to other epistemological approaches is that the question “what is a good argument?” has a very short answer: A good argument is an argument that can be represented as *modus ponens*.

Some epistemological approaches to argumentation

All of the epistemological approaches I want to discuss in this paper say something about the normative question: what is a “good” argument? Thus, we can take simply any argument like the one quoted above and ask ourselves how the various authors would evaluate its quality – based on their respective theoretical instruments. This way, we can learn something about their differences and about what it can mean to use epistemology in research on argumentation. For the sake of clarity, we might represent the Vatican’s argument as follow:

- (1) From the moment of conception, the life of every human being is sacred (i.e., no one has the right to destroy it) because
 - a) it is what God has “wished for himself”;
 - b) its spiritual soul is “immediately created” by God;

- c) its whole being bears the image of the Creator;
- d) from its beginning it involves “the creative action of God” and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end; and
- e) God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end.

Most of the authors I want to discuss here specify their epistemological approach by the idea that the main goal of argumentation is to “promote,” “produce,” or “acquire” true belief or knowledge. Within this group again, I will begin with a paper written by Alvin Goldman’s which connects argumentation with social epistemology. The other authors in this group do not restrict their references to epistemology in any way. But they again can be divided into those who claim the possibility of non-relative argument evaluation and those who don’t.

Goldman introduces, first of all, a useful distinction between “argument” and “argumentation”:

“In formal logic, an argument is a set of sentences or propositions, one designated as conclusion and the remainder as premises. On this conception of argument, there are two kinds of goodness. An argument is good in a weak sense if the conclusion either follows deductively from the premises or receives strong evidential support from them. An argument is good in a strong sense if, in addition to this, it has only true premises.” (Goldman, 1994, 27)

What he calls “argumentation,” by contrast, is a complex, social speech act in which either only one speaker presents a thesis to an audience and defends it or more speakers do so “dialectically.” In this article, only “argumentation” has an epistemological component (cf., by contrast, Goldman, 1997 where he reacts to Feldman, 1994 whom we will discuss below). He identifies a certain “epistemic situation” – namely a “quest for true belief and error avoidance” that is essential for social interaction – which forms the foundation to generate a list of seven “norms of good argumentation.” This situation is “epistemic,” and is based on a conception of “social epistemology,” since the point of this social situation is “to promote true belief” (28).

However, what could Goldman say about our Vatican argument, or “argumentation.” This indeed is the first question. It is not really clear whether our example is an “argument” or an “argumentation” according to Goldman. As formulated in (1), it seems to be an “argument” – a conclusion and a set of premises – but remember: the whole “Instruction” is written as “Replies to Certain Questions of the Day,” and in the original text there are some additional footnotes to some of the premises (deleted in

my quote) which show that these propositions are themselves part of a longer discussion. Even if it is surely not a “dialectical” speech act, we might at least interpret it as a “monolectical” speech act “in which a speaker presents a thesis to a listener or audience, and defends this thesis with reasons or premises” (27).

Another question would be whether it is a “good” argument or argumentation. Unfortunately, this question also cannot clearly be answered. Interpreting it as an argument, we can only take it for granted that the conclusion does not follow “deductively” from the premises. But do the premises provide “strong evidential support” for the conclusion so that we have at least a good argument “in a weak sense”? Goldman’s “strong evidential support” refers of course to inductive arguments and to “evidence” in an empirical sense; but the Sacred Congregation could well argue that “evidence” is provided by the fact that the argument and its premises have not been questioned by millions and millions of people in the greatest part of the church’s long history. Based on a coherence theory of truth it might even be possible to defend the argument as “good in a strong sense” since within the catholic belief system as a whole, we can assume, “it has only true premises” – “true” meaning here that these premises can be maintained without producing any contradictions within this system. Who decides who is right regarding what counts as “evidence,” and how could any decision be justified?

More difficult to answer is, however, the question whether the Vatican presented a “good” argumentation. Goodness means here to follow the rules Goldman derives from his basic “social quest for true belief and error avoidance.” The first two rules are no problem. Even if it is absolutely clear that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith consists only of *men*, we can indeed say that this “speaker” did what “she” was supposed to do: “(1) ... assert a conclusion only if she believes it. (2) ... assert a premise only if she believes it” (34). But what about the “objective duty” (3) and the “subjective duty” (3’) “A speaker should assert a premise only if she is justified in believing it,” and “A speaker should assert a premise only if she thinks she is justified in believing it” (35)? What kind of “justification” – be it subjective or objective – should we expect with regard to any of the premises in our example? And: Do we have any right to measure “justification” for different groups in highly diverse societies by the same standard? Justification is a highly problematic concept, especially when it comes to fields that are contentious.

Epistemological approaches in a broader sense of the term have been developed by Lumer, 1991, Biro and Siegel, 1992, Feldman, 1994, and Siegel and Biro, 1997. Only Feldman argues for a relativist position while the others claim it should be possible to evaluate the quality of arguments based on non-relative standards. Before entering this debate, however, we should reflect a bit on what it could mean to say that argumentation aims at “the acquisition of knowledge” (Lumer, 1991; cf. Biro and Siegel, 1992, Siegel and Biro, 1997, 278), or that “a good argument is one that provides good reasons for its conclusion, one that makes belief in its conclusion justified” (Feldman, 1994, 176).

There seems to arise a certain paradox when we combine the normative question of “justifying” good arguments with the thesis that the goal of argumentation is to “advance the knowledge of the arguer or her audience” (Biro and Siegel, 1992, 96). It is not really clear what kind of knowledge, or true belief, arguments can “produce,” but if we assume that arguments can be more or less justified – more in case of deductively valid arguments and less in cases of inductive reasoning and what Peirce called “abductive” hypotheses generation (cf. Hoffmann, 1999) – there seems to be a tension between an argument’s productiveness regarding knowledge and what Peirce called its “security” (Peirce, CP 8.385 ff.). In case of deductions, there is not much knowledge to produce since what is interesting is already formulated in the premises. There is no really new information provided when we learn that Socrates is mortal because the premises “all human beings are mortal” and “Socrates is a human being” are both true. By contrast, questionable hypotheses as we formulate them when we try to explain a surprising phenomenon can be very fruitful for the development of knowledge. Thus, it might be difficult to find arguments that both “produce knowledge” *and* are “good,” as Siegel and Biro demand (1997, 278). The better an argument is justified, the less knowledge it produces, and the less justified it is, the more fruitful it can be.

The essential difference within this broader group of epistemological approaches becomes visible when, on the one hand, Biro and Siegel are looking for an “intrinsic property” that makes an argument a good argument (93) while Feldman, on the other, thinks that a “more plausible view ... is one that relativizes argument goodness to individuals or groups. Thus, an argument may be good for one person or group, but not

for another person or group. On this view, there is no such thing as a simple quality of an argument” (Feldman, 1994, 172).

Given the fact that Siegel and Biro so strongly emphasize the necessity of “warranting” a conclusion, it is quite surprising that they do not offer a really convincing idea what that is supposed to mean. There is no discussion of this question at all in their 1997 article, and in the older paper we find only the following:

What is it for a conclusion to be warranted by an argument? The short answer is: a conclusion is warranted by an argument if the argument renders belief in the conclusion rational, if the premises of the argument provide good reasons for and so warrant its conclusion. ... When does an argument render a conclusion rationally justified; belief in its conclusion (on its basis) rational? Here we enter into contentious epistemological territory and must proceed with caution. In general, an argument renders belief in a claim (on its basis) rational when the reasons provided by the argument for the claim meet criteria concerning the goodness of reasons. ... When are reasons ‘good enough’? Here we reach the heart of epistemology ... There are a wide variety of principles of reason assessment, ranging from the subject-neutral principles of logic to the subject-specific principles governing reason assessment in the special fields. ... Moreover, the diverse epistemological stances available to the argumentation theorist will yield substantively different principles of reason assessment and, with them, different criteria of argument evaluation. (Biro and Siegel, 1992, 97-99)

What started impressively strong with the claim that there are “intrinsic properties” of arguments that allow an evaluation of arguments independently of any relation to anything else ends thus finally in an unspecified variety of “different principles.” In fact, Biro and Siegel do not offer any criteria for evaluating arguments. Thus, there is no answer whether our Vatican argument is a good argument – warranted – according to their approach or a bad argument. Since they criticize vehemently, in their 1997 paper, the “pragma-dialectical approach” developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (cf. now van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004) in not specifying when an argument is “reasonable” in the eyes of a “reasonable critic” (281ff.), their failure to clarify the concept of “warranting” is quite surprising. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst offer at least – like Goldman – a list of normative rules that can be used to evaluate the quality of arguments from a procedural point of view (123-157), and they define the “reasonableness of procedures” with regard to their “problem-solving effectiveness and their intersubjective acceptability” (132) – what is convincing from a pragmatic point of view.

Siegel and Biro's problems with warrants start at the point where they give up the idea that warranted conclusions are those which are based on formally valid arguments. This becomes clear in their discussion of the formally invalid "affirming the consequent" argument, an invalid modification of the valid *modus ponens*. According to their view there might be cases when affirming the consequent is a "good" argument – good based on their "epistemic account." They present the following example that was originally formulated by van Eemeren and Grootendorst: "If it snows, the roofs turn white; the roofs are white; therefore it has snowed." Siegel and Biro agree with the logician's objection that "such an argument could not *prove*, in the strict sense of 'proof,' that" it snowed (288). Quite right. But in which sense can we say that the proposition "it snowed" is *warranted* when we see white roofs in the morning? It is an *assumption*, a *hypothesis*, that is based on our everyday experience and on the fact that we simply do not have many alternative explanations for snow being on the roof. Charles Peirce called this sort of inference *abduction* (cf. Wreen, 1997, 354), and he was correct in claiming that while the "uberty" (fruitfulness) of abductive hypotheses generation is high – it is "the only logical operation which introduces any new idea" (Peirce, CP 5.171) – "its security is low" (CP 8.388; cf. Aliseda, 2000; Hoffmann, 1999). Abduction "is nothing but guessing" (Peirce, EP II 107), and its "only justification is that if we are ever to understand things at all, it must be in that way" (EP II 205), that is by creating risky hypotheses and testing them afterwards.

Abductive and inductive inferences are "warranted" – if at all – only in relation to our respective knowledge or belief system. What works with regard to snow on roofs does not work with the following "affirming the consequent" argument: "If water is boiling at -10°C (14°F), we will get a great surprise in science; we got a great surprise in science; therefore, water is boiling at -10°C (14°F)." In order to answer the question which of both these "affirming the consequent" arguments is better "warranted" we have to refer inevitably to what we *know* about the world. This, however, means that there cannot be a general answer to the question when an argument "warrants" its conclusion and when it fails to do so. It simply depends on the knowledge available, and since what we know changes in historical dimensions there is no way to escape the conclusion that justification in non-formal arguments must be relative at least with regard to the history of science – not to mention the fact that different people believe different things in different situations.

An example for this latter point has been provided by Biro and Siegel themselves, even if for them it is a non-relative truth that the following argument is a “bad” one since it could persuade only people in South Florida: “(1) Communism is failing all across Eastern Europe. (2) Therefore, the people of Cuba would be better off if Castro were to step down” (Biro and Siegel, 1992, 96). If you know that citizens from Eastern Europe played a crucial role for Cuba’s tourism industry earlier, and if you know that the break down of the European communist regimes cut Cuba off from its most important markets, you might well reconsider the question whether this argument is really as bad as it might look like – especially if you are not living in South Florida.

While Biro and Siegel do not specify evaluation criteria beyond the rather vague claim that there “are a wide variety of principles of reason assessment,” Christoph Lumer offers a highly elaborated distinction of “epistemological principles ... which formulate sufficient conditions for the truth or acceptability of propositions” (Lumer, 1991, 101). He defines the “*standard-function of argumentations*” as “to convince rationally or to show the acceptability of the thesis” (100). This way, being acceptable again means a property of the argument itself that can be checked by using those epistemological principles without observing specific audiences. Lumer calls this property of a functioning argumentation “validity.” Although he claims that this validity “is not the same” as logical validity, his main interest is to define acceptance criteria for arguments either based on truth conditions for the involved propositions or on their probability. Whereas epistemological principles like the “deductive principle” are “*conclusive*” since they always lead to a true belief,

there are also principles which are only *efficient* in the sense that their correct use only leads to acceptable beliefs; these are probably true or verisimil beliefs. Inductive epistemological principles are efficient but not conclusive. Finally, there are epistemological principals which aren’t even efficient and of which only someone believes that they are efficient. Such an inefficient principle e.g. is the principle of revelation according to which everthing [sic] is true what has been revealed in the Bible. It is a task of epistemology to examine and to justify, if and to what degree an epistemological principle is efficient. (Lumer, 1991, 101).

Having said this, it is clear that our Vatican argument should be classified as an “inefficient” argument according to Lumer. However, the important point is indeed what he says in the quote’s last sentence. To formulate it more generally, we can say that a non-relativist approach to argument validity cannot be formulated without an episte-

mology. This means, however, that such an approach will always live – and die – together with those approaches in epistemology that either try to prove the possibility of *knowledge* as true belief or, at least, of *belief* that can be justified based on probability considerations. If there is no way to define non-relative criteria for knowledge or belief, there will be no way to formulate non-relative criteria for good arguments. That means, however, that non-relativist argument epistemologists have a much bigger job than they seem to be aware of: to prove a possibility that has been rejected time and again since the logical positivists' heyday. I cannot see how a non-relativist argument or knowledge justification might be possible after all these debates about the problems of induction, theory-ladenness of observation, meaning of concepts, underdetermination of theories, indeterminacy of reference, holism, realism, naturalized epistemology, and so on. It is without any question that argument justification is facing exactly the same problems that have been discussed in epistemology and philosophy of science since the Greek sophists developed the first skeptical objections against the possibility of knowledge, or “justified true belief.”

This point can be supported by a simple example. Let's say somebody uses as the premise of an argument a statement recently formulated by the United States' secretary of state. “The United States,” she said, “does not permit, tolerate or condone torture under any circumstances” (Brinkley, 2005). Somebody else, however, might hint at an Amnesty International report about prisoners who were held under U.S. custody in Afghanistan “in an underground cell measuring approximately two metres by three metres. There were ten of us in the cell. We spent three months in the cell. There was no room for us to sleep so we had to alternate” (AI, 2005b); or at another case reporting the “disappearance” of three Yemenis who were held in complete isolation: “for over a year they did not know what country they were in, whether it was night or day, whether it was raining or sunny. They spoke to no one but their interrogators, through translators, and no one spoke to them” (AI, 2005a). How could we assess whose statement is “true” or “probable”? Who knows what the secretary of state means by “torture”?

There are of course many cases where we do not have problems with truth or probability. But neither in politics nor in science or in any other field would anybody *argue* about those things. Arguments are interesting just in those cases that are contentious, or where we do not know what to believe. In those cases, however, we are al-

ways confronted with epistemological principles that only some people believe, be it “the principle of revelation” that Lumer mentions, or whatever stakeholders in a conflict believe.

Although those examples and considerations support a more relativist approach, there is another article written by Harvey Siegel in which he continues the earlier argumentation for goodness criteria as “intrinsic properties” from a new vantage point. He argues for an “impersonal, transcultural conception of argument normativity” that “makes no reference either to the attributes of the persons appraising the argument and judging its normative force, or to the characteristics of the culture(s) to which such persons belong or the cultural context in which the appraisal occurs” (Siegel, 1999, 184). The quality of an argument, he claims, “is a feature of the argument itself, rather than of the person(s) assessing its quality” (ibid.).

Here again we have to accept that Siegel, while arguing fiercely for absolute standards of evaluation, does not give any hint whatsoever how those standards might look like and how they could be applied to cases like our Vatican argument. Thus, though he is again assuring us that “the quality of the argument is a feature of the argument itself,” we don’t get any idea whether this exemplary argument is a good one or a bad one.

Since the question of relativism is an important issue for all normative approaches, we should take a closer look at Siegel’s four arguments for “impersonal, transcultural conception of argument normativity.” His strategy is an indirect one. Instead of arguing *for* absolute standards, he tries to demonstrate the weakness of four arguments that proponents of culture- and perspective-relativity might formulate. Therefore, his argumentation is limited, it cannot say anything about *further* objections against the possibility of absolute standards.

In his first argument, Siegel accepts that there is no “perspectiveless perspective,” no “cosmic exile,” and no vantage point beyond any “conceptual scheme” (191). But, he says, we are not “trapped” forever in any specific perspective, we are able to learn and, thus, to transcend any perspective. So far so good, although I cannot imagine any relativist who would doubt the possibility of developing and transcending perspectives, and of shifting between different perspectives – rather the opposite. But it remains Siegel’s secret how this observation can contribute anything to his thesis that

there are impersonal and transcultural evaluation standards. A relativist would be happy to admit the *possibility* of absolute standards – as long as it is clear that we as human beings will never be able to *justify* any set of standards as the last word in history. This first argument poses rather a problem for Siegel himself, because it is hard to see how he can claim at the same time “that we inevitably judge from some framework or other” (191) *and* that “the quality of the argument is a feature of the argument itself” (184).

The second argument is similarly structured. Again he is accepting his opponent’s main point while attacking some curious details. We, he says,

are not denying that our principles of argument evaluation and criteria of argument quality are local and particular, in the sense that they are *ours*: articulated and endorsed by us, in our particular historical/cultural context. But acknowledging their particularly [sic] does not preclude us from proclaiming their universality: that is, their legitimate applicability to arguments, considered independently of their location. (193)

Well, it might indeed be possible that the evaluation standards I am using in my particular situation happen to be “universal” standards, but how could I know that? And how could it be possible for anyone to *justify* the claim that her or his standards *are* in fact “the” universal standards? There are many people out there who would claim that our *Donum Vitae* argument is a “good” argument based on their standards of argument evaluation. Others would deny that, saying for example that its premises are not falsifiable in Popper’s sense, and therefore “pseudo-scientific.” The opponent, however, would not have any problem to admit that his argument has nothing to do with science, because it is based on his faith. But what can we learn from this short dispute? It simply shows that it is easier to find agreement on “universal” standards *within* science than in societies in which science is only one approach beside others when it comes to deciding highly controversial issues. Again: How could we justify that “scientific” standards of argument evaluation are “better” than others? And what means of argumentation do we have when opponents simply do not accept our quality standards?

However, the “main difficulty with conceiving of argument quality in culturally relative terms” is, according to Siegel, the following. He maintains that “any advocate of a culturally relative conception of argument quality” who claims rationality for his or her arguments – that is that these arguments are “warranted by the reasons offered in its support” – “must presuppose” just those absolute standards she is trying to get rid

of. This is indeed true. Everyone tries to argue in a way that would convince anybody else. But this, of course, does not justify anything. Even if I try my best to meet the highest standards imaginable, it is simply a waste of time if others do not accept these standards. What Siegel is confusing here is my *hope* to argue according to universal standards and the *insight* that it is hard to justify anything as such a “universal standard.”

Siegel’s fourth and last argument against relativism in argumentation theory attacks an observation that has been an important starting point especially for “postmodern” thinkers (cf. Lyotard, 1984 <1979>; Lyotard, 1993; Vattimo, 1991 <1985>), but earlier also for the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 <1947>) and later for feminist epistemologists (cf. Smith, 1990; Harding, 1996 <1993>; Longino, 1996 <1993>). It is the observation that distinguishing certain arguments based on their “rationality” equals an “exercise of power” (Siegel, 1999, 197). Thus, an “impersonal, transcultural view of argument quality” could be criticized as a “rhetorical, power-laden construct” (197), a trick we use to get an advantage in all these political power games. Siegel’s main objection against this view is that it “plagues culture-relative as well as transcultural views of argument quality” (ibid.). This objection, however, underestimates an essential point that has been brought up by postmodernists. If people can claim that there is only *one* universal standard of correct thinking – of course just the one they are performing – this self-estimation tends to a behavior of “cutting off the incommensurable,” as Horkheimer and Adorno said in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and, thus, to totalitarian world views. One should know that the early Frankfurt School and Lyotard, for instance, were mainly motivated to understand Auschwitz and the devastating power of Nazi ideologies – indeed a case where people established absolute standards of thinking and argumentation and treated minorities accordingly.

However, the problem of power in discourse can also be viewed from the opposite direction. George Boger has recently argued that relativist approaches that are replacing the “truth requirement of a good argument” by “an acceptability requirement” might – given “widely divergent audiences not sharing a common interest but engaged in an ‘argumentative conversation’” – “unfairly favor the stronger of the ‘disputants’ and place the weaker at a decided disadvantage” (Boger, 2005, 189). Thus, he is arguing exactly in the opposite direction: it is not that truth orientation is a

means to *establish* power, but not focusing on truth means, first of all, that we leave a space unoccupied that finally will be structured only by power. This is indeed a good point. It might seem that a relativist approach justifies at the end – implicitly, at least – everything if truth is no longer an absolute standard to control the rationality of human communication. But what are we supposed to do if – as in many cases – we simply do not have access to “the” truth? We cannot simply “secure objective knowledge” (ibid.) if objective knowledge is beyond what we can achieve by our means.

Taking Boger’s objection seriously should lead to a form of relativism, I would argue, that does not abandon the notion of truth altogether. Following the argument developed by Bernard Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness* we should save truth at least as a “value,” that is as an *ethical* standard. Even if we cannot *know* the truth, we can respect truth as an ideal that *ought* to be both the goal of our endeavors and a behavioral guideline that governs the practice of argumentation. In this latter sense, Williams claims “Accuracy and Sincerity” as the “basic virtues of truth”:

you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie. (Williams, 2002, 11)

Truth should be viewed, first of all, as an ethical value that requires accuracy, sincerity, seriousness, and openmindedness in our attempts to understand. Something like this was already the idea behind what Peirce called “the first rule of reason, that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think” (Peirce, CP 1.135; cf. Haack, 1997). This would be authority based on one’s character and values, not on knowledge or belief.

To sum up this discussion about relativism, I cannot see how we could defend the strong claim that there are any non-relative norms of argument evaluation beyond, maybe, formal validity on the one hand and procedural rules on the other. More convincing with regard to this seems to me Richard Feldman’s approach. His point is that “epistemological accounts of good arguments make the status of an argument relative to an individual” (181). Thus, he is claiming as a characteristic feature of an “epistemological approach” exactly the opposite of what Lumer, Siegel, and Biro have in mind with this term, namely epistemic relativity.

His interest in the individual’s point of view is motivated by an idea he shares with these non-relativists: that an argument should promote knowledge. However, such a

knowledge is always the knowledge of a certain person in a certain situation. This becomes clear from his argument against logical validity as a sufficient criterion for being a “good” argument. He presents the following example:

Suppose I’m on a canoe trip deep in an uninhabited wilderness and I’ve been completely out of contact with society. Suppose further that I know that there was an election while I was away and that my neighbor voted. However, I have no information about whether she voted for candidate A or candidate B. Now, consider these two arguments:

Argument 5

- (1) Either my neighbor voted for A or she voted for B.
- (2) She did not vote for A.
- (3) Therefore, she voted for B.

Argument 6

- (1) Either my neighbor voted for A or she voted for B.
- (2) She did not vote for B.
- (3) Therefore, she voted for A. (Feldman, 1994, 165)

Although both these arguments are valid, and one of them is a sound argument since it has true premises, “neither is a good argument” according to Feldman because “neither provides me with any reason to believe its conclusion” (165 f.). We might of course say that one of them must be a good argument since its premises are true; but this goodness is without any relevance: Those who know the truth do not need any argument to produce knowledge, and Feldman in his canoe has no means to evaluate these premises.

The general point is the following: The goal of argumentation to get reasons for a conclusion can only be a goal for those people who *need* those reasons. This means, however, that any epistemological approach that stresses this goal has to evaluate the quality of arguments *in relation* to certain individuals, or groups of individuals, and their specific knowledge. Arguments are “instruments of inquiry” (175) only for those who do not yet have complete knowledge. However, in a situation of incomplete knowledge we cannot know, either, whether our presumed knowledge of non-relative argument evaluation criteria is complete or not.

Whatever we think of Feldman’s epistemological approach, it is so far the first one that provides a clear answer whether our Vatican argument is a good argument or not.

It is, because it fulfills his final criterion for good arguments – at least if we follow him in presupposing that “justification” in the following quote means what Goldman called “subjective” justification (34 f.):

An argument is a good argument for person *S* if and only if (i) *S* is justified in believing the conjunction of all the premises of the argument, (ii) *S* is justified in believing that the premises are “properly connected” to the conclusion, and (iii) the argument is not defeated for *S*. (Feldman, 1994, 179)

The last epistemological approach I would like to discuss here shortly has been developed by Robert C. Pinto over the last 20 years. He shares with Feldman a relativist point of view, but since he is indifferent with regard to specific “goals” of argumentation, he should be discussed separately from the other authors we mentioned so far. Pinto suggested already in 1984

that one ought to hold out, as best and as long as one can, against the idea that there are ‘objective’ standards or ground rules against which it is appropriate to measure and appraise arguments occurring in the context of a dialectical interchange. (Pinto, 2001 <1984>, 2)

Being cautious with regard to “objective standards” does not mean that Pinto has nothing to say with regard to the question of normativity in argumentation. Quite the opposite. He starts by saying that it should be sufficient to define “good arguments in the following way: a good argument is one which requires a respondent either to assent or to counterattack” (3). Based on this criterion, there seem to be only two ways an argument could be “bad”: either it is formulated in a way – let’s say, so confusingly – that no clear pro or contra reaction is imaginable, or the issue in question is without any relevance for anybody. It is interesting that applying this criterion does not require an analysis whether people actually react, but it requires answering the question whether people *should* react. It might have been easier to ask simply: Do people react, or don’t they? This way, there would be no doubt that our Vatican argument is a “good” argument: it is both relevant today and it is formulated in a way that people can either agree with its conclusion, or dispute it.

Pinto, however, looks at the argument itself when he asks whether it “requires” a reaction. At a first glance, this sounds like an “objectivist” approach to argument evaluation. But when he reflects on the “standards” we need to decide whether an argument itself is “imposing obligations to concede or to dispute,” he argues that those standards are “made up by those who engage in argument.” They “get the only force or validity they have from the fact that those who engage in argument choose to en-

dorse them” (4 f.). When he elaborated this point nearly 20 years later, he says explicitly that it is wiser “to cash out talk about ‘objectivity’ in terms of intersubjective validity.” (Pinto, 2001, 135).

This idea of “intersubjective validity,” however, is now enlarged in some important aspects, and also the question to what end we need standards has changed a bit. Instead of focusing on standards we need to decide whether an argument imposes an obligation to react, Pinto is asking now for standards to judge “whether it is reasonable for someone to accept premisses as grounds for a conclusion” (132). Within this framework, his new version of intersubjectively validated standards stresses the following points:

1. Defining standards is no longer only a task of those directly involved in a dialogue, but requires to ask whether it is reasonable to accept an argument “*as a member of an historically contingent cognitive community*. As a member of such a community, a person is always in a *potential* dialectical interchange with other members of that cognitive community” (133). This way, evaluation criteria do not only depend on what happens in a particular dialogue, but on what “is sustainable within the broader cognitive community” (135). There are social and cultural constraints on what can be accepted as standards of argument evaluation.
2. Since it is obvious for Pinto that in “the cognitive community that matters to us, we do not presently have a set of epistemic criteria that is *objectively valid and complete*” (137), we should accept what he calls “sophisticated epistemic relativism”: “There is no set of epistemic standards or criteria of which it can be said that it is uniquely correct or correct *sans phrase*” (136).
3. “The standards for assessing adequacy of arguments and inferences are themselves items that can and often must be addressed in the course of arguing and reasoning” (136). The discourse about standards should be understood as a “self-correcting enterprise” (135).

From my point of view, there are no objections against these considerations. However, with regard to our Vatican argument, the question seems to be open again whether it is a good argument or not. That depends – as we can say now – on the respective “cognitive community” to which a particular ‘argument evaluator’ belongs.

Shifting the focus on epistemology in argumentation theory

What I dislike about all those epistemic approaches that are looking for non-relative standards of argument evaluation is the picture they seem to have in mind with regard to philosophy's role in society. It's a sort of armchair-philosophy. In real life everybody is struggling to survive, fighting for his or her needs and interests, and pluralist societies are divided about the main issues of how to live, how to organize societies, and how to solve the problems of a rapidly changing world with horrible inequalities. But we as philosophers are sitting at home, evaluating arguments that people out there are formulating in the rare cases their fights take more civilized forms, and teaching students how to do the same.

I am more sympathetic to Pinto's idea to question the very idea of a "theory" of argumentation with well-defined goals, means, and standards:

I am inclined to question the idea that our critical practice must look to a *theory* of argument or inference for a foundation and an anchor. What we need is not to ground or justify our more or less successful practice. What we need is rather a clearer perception of how that practice works, an appreciation of its strengths and weaknesses, and fruitful suggestions for improving it. (Pinto, 2001, 130)

Improving the *practice* of argumentation is the proper objective of that epistemological approach to argumentation I am interested in. There are three different activities I have in mind: conflict management and collaborative learning processes (cf. Hoffmann, 2005, under review); argument development when somebody wants to present more complex ideas; and analyzing and criticizing the cohesion and argumentative structure in texts. It is an *epistemological* approach since the common focus is on understanding and on the conditions of understanding. Thus, the term "epistemology" is used here in a somewhat limited sense; I am less interested in *knowledge* – neither in problems of justifying its truth conditions nor in its genesis – but more in what Kant called "Erkenntnis," that is in "cognition" or "understanding" in the more procedural meaning of these terms.

Kant was the first to elaborate the idea that the "conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are at the same time conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*" (Kant, CPR B 197), stressing thus that there is no cognition of anything that is not based on another cognition. While Kant thought there were some first and original a priori conditions of cognition that provide the possibility of objective

knowledge, Peirce abandoned the idea of any “first cognition,” arguing that there is no cognition “not determined by a previous” one (CP 5.258 ff.), and that all cognition is mediated by what he called “collateral knowledge” (Peirce, CP 8.178, 8.183, 6.338, 8.314; cf. Hoffmann and Roth, 2005; Hoffmann and Roth, forthcoming). In the 20th century, many followed these paths in various ways, for example Quine when saying “To be is to be the value of a variable,” and emphasizing that it is our respective “conceptual scheme” that determines the possibility of interpreting all our experiences (Quine, 1971 <1948>).

Taking this kind of epistemology as a starting point, the principal idea of my approach is the following: Whenever understanding becomes a problem – be it in conflicts, in communication, in reading a text, or in developing ideas – we have to reflect on the *conditions* of this understanding. To facilitate such a reflection, I developed elsewhere a tool called Logical Argument Mapping (LAM; cf. Hoffmann, under review). Argumentation is used here as a means to promote understanding by making visible, and changeable, the conditions of our own understanding possibilities.

The only form of argument I need by now for this is the famous *modus ponens* whose logical validity is generally accepted since Chrysippus introduced it as the most basic of his “self-evident” or “indemonstrable moods” (*anapodeiktoi tropoi*) about 2200 years ago: “If the first [i.e., a proposition], then the second; but the first; therefore the second” (Kneale and Kneale, 1988 <1962>, 163). The idea of using *modus ponens* is motivated by the following epistemological consideration: Defining an argument most simply as “providing reasons for a claim,” or “premises for a conclusion,” we can assume that everybody who formulates a specific set of reasons *A* for a specific claim *B* presupposes in this situation – implicitly, at least – that these reasons are indeed acceptable and sufficient reasons for this claim. What does it mean, however, when somebody presupposes that *B* is justified, or warranted, by *A*? It means that this person, when she reflects on what she did when formulating her argument in this way, should be ready to accept two different things: first, that *A* is the case and, second, that there is a relation between *A* and *B* that can be formulated as rule. Talking about a “rule” here does only mean that for this person in this situation the relation between the reasons *A* and the conclusion *B* is not arbitrary; after all, she is convinced that it makes sense to provide *A* as a set of reasons *for B*.

I do not use the concept of rule here in the sense that Rawls called 50 years ago the “practice conception” of rules, meaning that “rules define a practice” and are thus “logically prior to particular cases” (Rawls, 1955, 23 f.). The laws of a society or the predefined rules of a game are thus based on the “practice conception” of rules, they determine which actions are acceptable and which are not. By contrast, when somebody reflects on the way she combined reasons and claims in a particular situation, she might think – if at all – of what Rawls called the “summary view” of rules, that is the idea of a rule that has been generalized as a sort of “summary” of past decisions (18 ff.). In this sense, following a rule does not mean to act according to predefined, or external laws, but it means more something like acting according to one’s habits – habits that might only implicitly be known, given as part of what Peirce called our “collateral knowledge,” that is knowledge that conditions how we think and behave.

To *represent* such a generalized, or habitualized, rule that becomes visible when somebody accepts a specific set of reasons *A* as reasons for a specific claim *B* we can use the material implication: If *A*, then *B*. This way, we can transform any argument that is formulated in the simple form “*A*, therefore *B*” into a logically valid argument – the *modus ponens* – by adding a further premise that represents just that habit of thinking that we can assume as the ground for our simple argument:

If <i>A</i> , then <i>B</i>	(habitualized rule)
<i>A</i>	(reason)
therefore <i>B</i>	(claim)

The essential point is that people who represent their thinking in this way get access to two very different things: They can see, on the one hand, what they take as a *fact* and, on the other, what they have to make explicit as a *rule* in order to justify, based on this fact, a certain claim. Since the formulation of this rule is based on a certain habit of thinking, making it explicit means to make visible just those conditions of understanding that determine why somebody accepts *A* as a reason for *B*. Representing the relation between reason, rule, and claim in a graphical representation (“map”) provides the *challenge* to reflect on both premises independently, to question whether both are really acceptable in this form, and to change them eventually, to introduce certain qualifications, or to look for further support for each of them. Logical Argu-

ment Mapping aims thus, first of all, at fostering self-reflection. It is supposed to facilitate an iterative process of reflection on one's own thinking and mostly implicit conditions of understanding by opening up a space in which the essential elements and relations of our thinking can become visible.

What is important, in particular, is reflecting on our habits of thinking. Representing those habits in the form of a rule opens up the opportunity to ask a sort of Kantian question: Can I will that this particular maxim of my thinking that I am using in this argument should be accepted as a universal law? Are the habits that make me accepting *A* as reasons for *B* really generalizable?

Taking an epistemological stance of this sort means, first of all, putting the *practice* of argumentation above the *evaluation* of arguments. The question is not whether arguments like the one quoted in the beginning are "good" or "bad" arguments, it is more a question of how to reveal the habits of thinking that make people argue in this or that way – and to motivate them to reflect on those conditions of arguing in an ongoing process. The challenge I am addressing here is the question how thinking and arguing can be kept in motion, and to enable people to develop new ideas and to change their mind. The epistemological task should not be the fight for absolute evaluation standards to control argumentation, but to think primarily about how people can *improve* their argumentation skills, and how they can learn something about themselves by developing arguments.

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