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Virtuous argumentation and the challenges of hype

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I consider the virtue of proportionality in relation to reasoning in what I call 'hype contexts' (contexts in which otherwise perfectly temperate claims take on an outsized or inappropriate importance, simply due to their ubiquity). I conclude that a virtuous arguer is one that neither accepts nor rejects a claim based on its ubiquity alone, but who evaluates its importance with reference to the social context in which it is made.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, hype, hyperbole, maxim of quality, open-mindedness, proportionality, virtue

1. WHAT IS HYPE?

1.1 Introduction

In this age of 24/7 news channels, social media advertising campaigns, and the rising influence of the public relations industry, it can seem as though we are constantly surrounded by hype. In a given day, we may hear of a Hurricane that is certain to destroy key sections of the East Coast, or of a politician who is a mortal lock to win the presidency in four years, or of the nearly limitless potential and seemingly magical properties of some new piece of technology. We may hear these stories repeated *ad nauseum* in the media, or find that our friends and family cannot help but bring them up in conversation or share items about them on social media. We may even be drawn in ourselves, and help spread the word to others. Before long, however, the storm breaks, the politician commits a mortal gaffe, and the once miraculous piece of technology is released, beginning its relatively short path to obsolescence. In the aftermath, we may look back at our enthusiasm with regret, and make the following resolution: "Next time, I won't believe the hype."

Although the term has many different connotations, the sense of 'hype' that interests me is the one that is applied to subjects or states of affairs that receive exaggerated or otherwise outsized levels of attention from a particular community. Insofar as this exaggerated attention may affect one's ability to accurately gauge the truth or cognitive value of the information involved, hype contexts present significant challenges for arguers. If, as Andrew Aberdein has suggested, "the virtues of argument are those which propagate truth," the problem facing arguers in contexts of hype is that of determining which claims to propagate. (Aberdein, 2007, p. 18) My goal in this paper is two-fold: first, I aim to present a conceptual analysis

of hype and distinguish it from a number of superficially similar phenomena. In particular, it is my contention that hype is something distinct from hyperbole or overstatement, but is rather a feature of the contexts in which claims are made. Secondly, following Daniel Cohen, I want to show how the possession of certain critical virtues, particularly the virtue of proportionality, can help arguers cope with the challenges posed by hype contexts. (Cohen, 2009)

1.2 Example: Hurricane Irene

Consider the following example: In late summer 2011, Hurricane Irene bore down on the East Coast of the United States. Because the storm was predicted to make landfall near New York City (a large metropolitan area not accustomed to such storms), it received considerable media attention. The news channels applied the usual blanket coverage and political authorities took to the airwaves to warn residents of the potential dangers of staying in vulnerable areas. In the end, however, Irene did not do as much damage as expected.¹ In the days after the storm passed, there was considerable attention paid to way it was discussed before (and as) it made landfall, with many dismissing the media coverage and official reaction as nothing more than empty or dangerous hype.

1.3 Hype and hyperbole

From the example, we can see that hype involves a kind of exaggeration. But what kind of exaggeration? The first one that comes to mind, not least because of the obvious etymological relationship, is *hyperbole*. In its most respectable guise, hyperbole is the practice of making an exaggerated claim (“I have a million things to do today”), in order to suggest a non-exaggerated, if less colorful claim (“I am very busy today”) in the minds of one’s audience. In so doing, one flouts the first Gricean maxim of quality—“Do not say what you believe to be false.” (Grice, 1989, p. 46) Because one has uttered something so transparently false, one’s interlocutor is forced to infer that one intends to convey a weaker, non-hyperbolic claim, and that one only uttered the hyperbolic claim for emphasis (Grice, 1989).

On the hype-as-hyperbole view, the danger posed by hype contexts like the Irene case comes about because it is not always apparent that a speaker is attempting to flout the maxim. In cases in which one knows the speaker and her habits, or in which the context is fairly clear, one will have an easier time deciding whether or not she is sincere and is actually committed to the hyperbolic claim. In other cases, however, it can be much more difficult to determine sincerity. For one thing, one may not have access to the same information as the speaker, and one must simply take her words at face value. In these cases, exaggerated claims can be especially dangerous, both because they may mislead one’s audience, and because they may undermine one’s credibility.

¹ At least not in New York City, storm- related flooding did considerable damage in New England (Avila & Cangialosi, 2011).

The case of Irene is a useful one for this discussion, because it nicely encapsulates why we might think it important to critically engage with exaggerated claims of this kind. Although Irene fizzled, Hurricane Sandy, which hit the same region a year later, showed the potential destructiveness of such storms. A major worry expressed after Irene was that all the attention paid to a storm that failed to meet expectations would make people less likely to listen to such warnings in the future. The worry was that, by hyping the storm, the media and authorities were, to borrow a phrase, “crying wolf.” The moral for media figures and public officials is clear: violate the maxim of quality at one’s peril. Careless talk costs lives.

1.4 Hype without hyperbole

So far so good, but I don’t think the hype-as-hyperbole view gives us the full picture. Consider, for example, the practice recently initiated by the Weather Channel in the United States to give specific names to significant winter storms, a practice that heretofore had been applied only to Atlantic hurricanes and other tropical cyclones (Niziol, 2012). For example, Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I live, was hit by the remains of what had been called “Winter Storm Nemo.” This new naming practice seems to involve a kind of exaggeration, since the practice of naming storms has henceforth been applied only to tropical cyclones, which are, in general, far more severe and potentially destructive than winter storms. But there is nothing hyperbolic about the practice of giving a storm a name. It doesn’t, for example, make claims containing that name false or insincere. “The storm is expected to dump 25 cm of snow on Halifax” and “Winter Storm Nemo is expected to dump 25 cm of snow on Halifax” seem to express the same content (assuming that the reference of ‘the storm’ and ‘Winter Storm Nemo’ is identical). And yet, the latter sentence seems, to my ear at least, to be the more exaggerated claim, in part because the practice of giving a distinct name to a storm implies that it is important or significant in some way. This case can be compared to that of the dishonest politician who proclaims, in front of an illiterate audience, “My opponent has regularly engaged in nepotism with his sister.” Here, the politician has not said anything false. A slur (of some sort) was implied, but was never actually asserted.

We can go further. In the preceding example, the implied claim, which might be cashed out as “Winter Storm Nemo is as significant (and perhaps as potentially dangerous) as a hurricane,” was intended. However, I think there are good reasons to believe that one can hype something without intending to do so. To see why, consider a variation of the Irene case (call it Irene*). This time, let us stipulate that the statements issued by the media and public officials are all temperate: they are non-hyperbolic and appropriate to the circumstances under which they are issued. Where there is some doubt about the hurricane’s path, let the statements be suitably relativized to reflect this uncertainty. If the scenario in which the hurricane causes a huge amount of damage in New York City is one of the least likely ones, let this information be stated upfront. The rest of the scenario runs as before: the (now) temperate claims are repeated *ad nauseum* in the media, and public officials issue statements befitting their judgment of the risks to the public. With these changes in place, would Irene* seem to be as hyped as Irene?

I think there is good reason to believe that, despite the substitution of temperate, non-hyperbolic claims for exaggerated, hyperbolic ones, Irene* would still be the subject of hype. For one thing, even in the revised scenario, the storm is still being talked about an awful lot. The claims made about the storm may be temperate, but their frequency and near-ubiquity makes them salient in the minds of those who hear them. These individuals, in turn, will be much more likely to spread the claims to their friends, family and acquaintances. In extreme cases, some people may mistakenly infer (and spread) a hyperbolic or exaggerated claim merely from the fact that the more temperate claims have been constantly repeated.² But even if no one makes such hyperbolic inferences, the constant repetition of these claims serves to exaggerate their importance.

Seen in this way, the problem in the original scenario was not merely that the media and public officials described Irene in hyperbolic terms (though this certainly did not help); it was that claims about the storm were in constant circulation. The very fact that the storm received blanket coverage made it seem more important, more worthy of our attention, than it actually was. In this sense, for the purposes of hype, what is said does not matter so much as how often (and in what way) it is said. And this, I argue, is why it is important to think about how we ought to argue in hype contexts.

2. HYPE AND ARGUMENTATION

2.1 The relevance of hype for argumentation

It is worth thinking about argumentation in the context of hype for at least two reasons. First of all, the concept of hype is sometimes explicitly deployed in arguments as a way of dismissing rival claims or positions. In such cases, to call something ‘hyped’ is often just to claim that it is empty, misleading, or false, and that it should be accordingly dismissed. So, for example, to say that ‘global warming is just hype’ is a way of saying that concern about climate change is overblown, and that it does not require the level of attention it has received. Given the number of issues that may be saddled with the ‘hype’ label, it is important to determine when such a move to dismiss is well founded, and when it is not.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the presence of hyped claims in a context can make it difficult to effectively make and evaluate arguments. Because hype serves to exaggerate the importance of a given claim, it can mark some claims as being more worthy of engagement than they would be on the basis of their content alone. Engaging in argument in such contexts can be difficult if any of the claims one makes or evaluates pertain to the thing being hyped, if only because they will draw a disproportionate amount of attention, while other claims may be ignored.³ It is for this reason that the development of critical virtues is so important.

² It is, of course, an empirical question whether or not such a process actually occurs, though Kahneman’s (2011) account of ‘availability cascades’ suggests there may be support for this view of hype.

³ It is perhaps in this sense that we talk about something being ‘over-’ or ‘underhyped.’

2.2 *Critical Virtues*

Daniel H. Cohen has put forward the idea of a critical virtue as an acquired habit of mind or character that improves one's capacity for critical thinking. (Cohen, 2007, 2009) Among the critical habits one might acquire are what Cohen calls the virtues of 'open-mindedness' and 'proportionality' (Cohen, 2009). Open-mindedness is the virtue of being open to new evidence and new arguments. Proportionality, on the other hand, is the virtue of being able to adequately assess the cognitive value of participating in a particular argument or cognitive endeavor. Cohen conceives of proportionality as a kind of platonic meta-virtue—one meant to govern the application of our other cognitive habits and skills. As such, it does not resemble a classical Aristotelian virtue—a mean between two vices—but instead is meant to operate at all times and in all contexts. This ability or capacity goes beyond simply being able to determine whether a statement is true or false. Rather, it involves the ability to determine what might be gained from engaging in a given discussion or argument. In particular, it serves the role of governing our ability to keep an open mind.

As we go about our lives, we come into contact with all kinds of claims, opinions, facts, and other tidbits of information. The virtue of open-mindedness is that of allowing some (though not all) of these encounters to influence one's beliefs. The job of determining what sort of information is relevant to our various cognitive projects (including our epistemic projects) falls, on Cohen's view, to the virtue of proportionality. Cohen illustrates this dynamic by considering the so-called 'telephone-book' problem. If all we want are true beliefs, why do we not go about acquiring the cheapest information we can find (by, say, memorizing the information contained in telephone books, actuarial tables, and world almanacs)? The answer is that our pursuit of true beliefs is rather situational. We do not want just any information; we want information that is valuable for the enterprises we wish to pursue. This means we must critically evaluate the claims we encounter, not just on the basis of their truth, but also on the basis of their cognitive value. (Cohen, 2009) For this reason, I think the virtue of proportionality is a useful concept to keep in mind when thinking about reasoning in hype contexts.

2.3 *Virtuous argumentation in hype contexts*

Earlier, I suggested that hype serves to exaggerate a claim's importance. Although this exaggeration may be brought about semantically, that is by means of hyperbole, it can also be brought about by the regular repetition of a claim in a particular context. As such, hype does not require the dissemination of false or even particularly misleading information, but it does crucially involve an exaggerated or misleading sense of cognitive value. One of the things that hyping a claim does is produce the sense that it something we need to pay attention to—that we would be remiss if we did not update our beliefs on the basis of that claim. Because hype critically affects the way we perceive the cognitive value of claims, any account of the virtue of proportionality must describe how it is to be manifested in such contexts

There are two ways in which hype contexts can cause problems for assessments of cognitive value. On the one hand, one may be unable to identify hyped claims *as* hyped claims. This will be the case when, for example, one does not have much experience with the subject matter in question. In such cases, one will be more likely to engage with the hyped claim, regardless of its actual cognitive value. Call this state of character the vice of *credulousness*. A credulous arguer does not evaluate the cognitive value of the claims that pass his way; he merely takes them as given. Credulousness is a vice because to engage with a claim is, in some sense, to consider it important. Even the attempt to debunk what one takes to be an overhyped claim will serve to draw attention to it. By engaging with it, therefore, one risks perpetuating the hype cycle one wished to put an end to.

On the other hand, an arguer might, having gained some experience with a particular subject of discussion, become quite good at determining when she is operating in a hype context. She might then accordingly discount any claim made in such a context as being of little worth. While this might, at first glance, appear to be an admirable case of epistemic restraint, it is possible to take things too far. It seems quite hasty to assume that a hyped claim is one that is not worth knowing: while it may be worth rejecting hyped claims in some circumstances, it may not in others. So we can conclude that there is something vicious about an arguer who is predisposed to reject hyped claims out of hand. Call this the vice of *cynicism*. So while the credulous arguer tends to engage with hyped claims due to their ubiquity, the cynical arguer errs on the side of rejecting engagement with these claims *simply because they are hyped*.

At first blush, it may seem that, contra Cohen, I am claiming that proportionality is a mean between two vices (in this case, credulousness and cynicism). I think there is a way to accommodate these observations on Cohen's picture. Remember that proportionality is meant to be a meta-virtue, one that governs our use of our cognitive abilities. In particular, it is meant to govern our use of the virtue of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness *is* on Cohen's picture, an Aristotelian virtue, in the sense that one can be too open-minded and not open-minded enough. When one is too open-minded, one risks taking on any old claim, regardless of whether or not will allow one to achieve any cognitive gains (learn something new, or at least develop a position). On the other hand, one can fail to be open to evidence that would surely help one achieve one's cognitive goals. In such cases, one fails to be sufficiently open-minded. These two vices, I suggest, may well be credulousness and cynicism by other means. The virtue of proportionality, then, is the skill to determine when something is worth engaging with, and when it can safely be left aside. And this is just the skill one needs to successfully navigate hype contexts.

2.4 Conclusion

Let us return now, briefly, to the two challenges hype poses for virtuous argumentation. The first was that accusing a rival claim or position of being "hyped" is a popular way of dismissing it, often with very little further justification. From the preceding discussion, it seems to me that this will often be a cynical move. An arguer

with a well-developed sense of proportion will thus be less likely to make such argumentative moves herself, and less likely to accept them when they are made by her interlocutors.

The second challenge posed by hype contexts was that such contexts tended to warp assessments of cognitive value. Hyped claims will seem more important, or more worth engaging with, than non-hyped claims. A sense-of-proportion helps an arguer realize a simple point: whether or not a claim is hyped is irrelevant to its actual cognitive value. The features that mark its actual cognitive value are still present in hype contexts, though they may be harder to distinguish than in normal circumstances. The mark of a virtuous arguer (one who exhibits the virtue of proportionality) is her ability to discern these features in the midst of all the noise.

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