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# Commentary on Cohen

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# Commentary on Daniel H. Cohen's "Sincerity, Santa Claus Arguments and Dissensus in Coalitions"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I consider three questions arising from Cohen's interesting paper: Is sincerity in premise assertion a premise virtue? Are arguers who are insincere in the assertion of one or more of their premises necessarily indifferent to the truth? Does their insincerity necessarily prevent their argumentation from producing cognitive benefits?

## 2. THE VIRTUE OF SINCERITY

Cohen says that in his paper virtue argumentation theory (VAT) "is applied to the requirement that good arguments have good premises." According to his abstract, what Cohen concludes is that "a sincerity condition serves better than truth or assertability conditions." But in his introduction, Cohen says this: "Consistent with its focus on arguers, what matters for VAT is that arguers be *sincere*." This is not an application of VAT to the requirement that good arguments have good premises. Rather, it's an application of the theory to the requirement, as Cohen would take it to be, that good arguments have good arguers: to be good, arguers must be sincere. But suppose the point that what matters for VAT is that arguers be sincere *were* an application of the theory to the requirement that good arguments have good premises. The requirement would entail that to be good, premises must be sincerely asserted. But such a requirement would be misguided, for if a premise is sincerely asserted, the virtue is not in the premise but in the arguer's performance; it lies not in what is asserted but in how the assertion is made. If sincerity in premise assertion is a virtue, it is located not in premises sincerely asserted, but in the argumentation<sup>1</sup> of arguers who assert their premises sincerely. I don't think that Cohen means to deny this point, and I think he could accept it without damage to his main claims.

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<sup>1</sup> In these comments, I follow Alvin Goldman in taking argumentation to be "an act of presenting an argument to an audience or an interlocutor" (Goldman 1995, p. 60).

## 3. INSINCERITY AND TRUTH

Cohen believes that insincere arguers “lack respect for truth”; they have an attitude of “indifference to the truth” and a “disregard for the truth”. I think that this isn’t necessarily the case. It may trouble the parent in Cohen’s Santa Claus example that he is using a false premise, in which case he is not indifferent to the truth. But if his use of a false premise troubles him, he may think that his concern on this score is outweighed by what he takes to be the premise’s possible or likely utility in persuading the child to accept the argument’s conclusion and, as a result of accepting it, do something that the parent believes it is in the child’s interest to do (viz., go to bed). To generalize: An arguer who knowingly uses a false premise need not be indifferent to its falsity, or, then, to the truth. She may think that the premise’s falsity counts against the propriety of her using it, but that this worry is overridden by a further consideration, such as the likely utility her using it will have in achieving an outcome to which, in the context of her argumentation, she attaches greater importance than she does to being truthful in that context.

## 4. INSINCERITY, VERITISTIC VALUE, AND INTERPERSONAL JUSTIFICATION

Cohen holds that insincerity in argumentation “is a compromise of one’s *epistemological integrity* because it disengages and distances one from the pursuit of knowledge—and indeed, from any of the possible cognitive gains that can come about through argumentation”. I want to examine this view by reference to Alvin Goldman.

Goldman holds that in a case of argumentation that is *monological* (“a stretch of argumentation with a single speaker” (Goldman 1999, p. 131)) and *factual* (“concerned with belief; should a proffered conclusion be believed or not?” (Goldman 1999, p. 132)),

[i]f audience members accept the speaker’s evidence, and agree that the asserted conclusion *P* is inferable from this evidence, they too will adopt a belief in *P* (Goldman 1999, p. 133).

If *P* is true (as Goldman here assumes it is), and if the audience “had previously withheld judgment, or rejected *P*, their switch to belief in *P* constitutes an increment in the social level of knowledge” (Goldman 1999, p. 134). This would be a “veritistically” good outcome - an outcome good from the point of view of truth determination and the production of knowledge (understood “in the ‘weak’ sense of *true belief*” (Goldman 1999, p. 5)). Goldman holds that

veritistically good results are expected if the practice of argumentative discourse (in the endorsement mode [the mode in which the arguer endorses the argument he presents]) satisfies four conditions:

- (1) the speaker believes the asserted conclusion;
- (2) the speaker believes each of the asserted premises;
- (3) the speaker is justified in believing each of the asserted premises;
- (4) the asserted premises jointly provide strong support for the conclusion<sup>2</sup>. (Goldman, 1999, p. 134)

<sup>2</sup> In a footnote Goldman says that “a better formulation of (4) would be [...]: ‘the asserted premises *in conjunction with tacit premises justifiably believed by the speaker* jointly provide strong support for the conclusion’” (Goldman 1999, p. 134).

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The satisfaction by a piece of argumentation of conditions (1) and (2) ensures (or, at any rate, is necessary for it to be the case) that the argumentation is in “the endorsement mode” (as distinct, for example, from its being discourse in which the speaker merely presents an argument for consideration by the audience, without endorsing it).

Conditions (1)-(4), Goldman maintains, are “conditions to which speakers should conform if V-value [veritistic value] is to be promoted” (Goldman 1999, p. 135). He adds that he has not invented these conditions.

Conversational argumentation [...] is governed by certain ‘folk rules,’ including rules to the effect that proponent arguers should conform with conditions (1)-(4), among others (Goldman 1999, p. 135).

Our interest is in condition (2): the speaker believes each of the asserted premises. This condition is violated if the arguer is insincere in her assertion of one or more of the premises. In such a case, what might otherwise have been a gain in veritistic value (the determination of truth, the production of knowledge) is prevented, or so it seems Goldman must say, given his view that speakers should conform to all four conditions if veritistic value is to be promoted.

Goldman claims that if an arguer is in the epistemic position defined by conditions (1)-(4), “it is (rather) likely that the asserted conclusion is true” (Goldman 1999, p. 133). Suppose that the arguer is not in that position because he is insincere in his assertion of one of the argument’s premises: by asserting the premise he purports to believe it, but he doesn’t really believe it. Hence condition (2) is not satisfied. Is it then less likely that the asserted conclusion is true? The answer is no (and similarly if condition (1) is not satisfied—if the arguer does not believe the asserted conclusion). The relevant conditions are (3) and (4). If condition (3) is satisfied, then (Goldman holds) the premises are likely to be true; thus, if condition (4) is also satisfied, the conclusion is likely to be true. Condition (2) has no bearing on the likelihood of the conclusion’s being true (and neither does condition (1)). It might be thought, though, that if condition (3) is satisfied, condition (2) must be satisfied as well: if the speaker is justified in believing each of the asserted premises, then he does believe each of them. Note that if this were true, condition (2) would be redundant. But it is not true. I can be justified in believing something that I do not in fact believe. (On this point, see Audi 1988, pp. 1-2.)

Condition (2) is not relevant to the likelihood of the conclusion’s being true. But from this it does not follow that condition (2) need not be satisfied if the speaker’s argumentation is to result in the audience’s coming to believe the conclusion, and thus produce a gain in social knowledge. Here we should recall Goldman’s remark that

[i]f audience members accept the speaker’s evidence, and agree that the asserted conclusion *P* is inferable from this evidence, they too will adopt a belief in *P* (Goldman 1999, p. 133).

There is no mention here of the speaker’s believing each of the asserted premises (or of his believing the asserted conclusion). Moreover, if the audience members are to accept the speaker’s evidence, it is not necessary that they believe that the speaker believes each of his asserted premises, for they might have independent evidence of the truth of those premises. Thus condition (2) need not be satisfied if a speaker’s argumentation is to result

in the audience's coming to believe the conclusion, and thus produce a gain in social knowledge.

In an earlier essay (Goldman 1995), Goldman defines what he calls a justification-creation sense of interpersonal justification (IP-justification). IP-justification so defined requires that the speaker create (personal) justification in the hearer. For this to happen, the hearer must believe the proposition that the speaker justifies to the hearer (the conclusion) as a result of believing the justifying premises "and appreciating the premises-conclusion relation" (Goldman 1995, p. 58); such IP-justification is therefore "persuasion entailing". Goldman writes:

Speaker S IP-justifies proposition Y to hearer S\* (in the [justification-creation and] persuasion-entailing sense) if and only if:

- (i) S presents an argument A to S\*, of which Y is the conclusion,
- (ii) argument A is an (epistemologically) good argument relative to S\*, and
- (iii) S\* comes to believe Y by inference from the premises of A and appreciation of the proper connection between premises and conclusion. (Goldman 1995, p. 58)

An argument is an epistemologically good argument relative to person N if and only if:

- (i) N is justified in believing the conjunction of all the premises of the argument,
- (ii) the argument is either valid or inductively strong, and
- (iii) N is justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion. (Goldman 1995, p. 57)

This definition of the epistemological conception of a good argument, Goldman notes, is roughly the same as Richard Feldman's.

Notice that Goldman's definition of IP-justification in the justification-creation and persuasion-entailing sense does not require that the speaker believe the premises of the argument she presents to the hearer; this means that IP-justification in these senses (as defined by Goldman) does not require sincerity in premise assertion. An audience to whom a speaker IP-justifies (in these senses) a proposition becomes persuaded of the proposition's truth. If the proposition is in fact true, and if it was not previously believed by the audience, the result is a gain in social knowledge. Such a gain, then, can be achieved in argumentation in which the arguer is insincere in his assertion of one or more of his premises.

We reached a similar conclusion above in discussing the second of the conditions to which Goldman says (in Goldman 1999) speakers should conform in their argumentation if veritistic value is to be promoted—the condition that they believe each of their asserted premises. The upshot is this: it need not be the case that, as Cohen holds, insincerity in argumentation "disengages and distances one from the pursuit of knowledge—and indeed, from any of the possible cognitive gains that can come about through argumentation."

[Link to reply](#)

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