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# Commentary on: Kathryn Norlock's "Receptivity as a virtue of (practitioners of) argumentation"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

While significant work in argumentation theory (and philosophy of argument) has been devoted to the *presentation* of arguments, many now argue for renewed attention to *responses* to arguments, and, in particular, to the epistemic responsibilities of responders who clearly also play a central role in the successes or failures of argumentation. As Kathryn Norlock notes, this renewed attention is motivated, among other things, by concerns about the ancillary adversarial "blood sport" practices of argumentation that are not unknown in philosophy and in other contexts of debate. Since practices of argumentation are significantly *communal* and *relational*, Norlock adds, we need to assess these practices as also *ethical* ones. More particularly, she argues that we can usefully mine insights from an ethic of caring (as advanced by Nell Noddings especially), and she endorses Noddings's account of *receptivity* ("the precondition for ethical interaction") as a virtue that practitioners of argumentation might usefully exhibit. My comments will focus on two central topics: the ambivalent use of "caring" as central to the ethical picture Norlock sets out, and the relationship between the epistemic and the ethical in argumentation as suggested by her account.

## 2. PROBLEMS WITH "CARING"

Norlock does not overlook the fact that there has been some controversy about "an ethics of care/caring," as that has been proposed as a model for a feminist ethics, particularly when it problematically draws on stereotypes of femininity. Caring can, Norlock notes, "evoke associations with sentimental emotions, femininity, and inarticulate feelings of affection"--clearly something not associated with rigorous logic and argumentation. She draws attention to *relationality* as the key feature of an ethic of care that she wants to emphasize--particularly as it applies to argument situations, where discussants are understood to be in a *dyadic* relationship of reciprocal receptivity which is, in Noddings's words, "not necessarily an emotional mode." But the "caring" background is still somewhat problematic. I think it is evoked by Norlock's interlocutor who objects, "But I can go to a conference session without any interest in the other's well-being." Norlock responds that some aspects of morally caring about a speaker may not be relevant here, and I would like to see

more about which specific aspects of caring Norlock sees as relevant. Relationships, including caring relationships, can take many forms. Caring about the well-being of another in a close familial relationship is quite different from the caring relationship a physician might have with her patient, where the patient's physical health or well-being is paramount. Insofar as caring and receptivity are appropriate in the relationship between a presenter and responder (or arguer and receiver, in Norlock's wording) in an argument exchange, they are surely quite different still. There is a relationship to a third element that both discussants have that makes the argument situation quite different, I maintain. Norlock hints at this when she talks about "the relationship between arguer and receiver, and the relationships of both to the wider philosophical community that provides the opportunities for argumentation." I want to expand upon this by inserting the *epistemic dimension* which, to my mind, significantly determines the specific contours (perhaps even "caring" contours) of the application of ethical considerations.

### 3. THE ETHICAL AND THE EPISTEMIC

Norlock suggests that the virtue of receptivity in argument situations (as it is linked with charitability) is "not just an intellectual virtue, but a moral one." However, she pays much more attention to the moral aspects in this paper, downplaying the intellectual ones. I want to expand on Norlock's account of the virtue of receptivity in two ways: first, I suggest that we understand it as a *hybrid virtue, an epistemic-ethical one*, and second, that we see this virtue as grounded in a *triadic* relationship between presenter, responder, and the epistemic goal of the exchange in question--typically truth or better understanding. Insofar as the two interlocutors have epistemic-ethical responsibilities to each other (and I think they do), those responsibilities are significantly framed by the third element in the relationship.

In a recent 2012 paper on adversarial argumentation in philosophy (one that Norlock refers to) I argue that we not overlook the epistemic responsibilities of responders (as well as presenters) in an argument exchange. More particularly, I maintain that "[the responder's] responsibilities to attend carefully to [the presenter's] argument and not misrepresent it need to be further delineated in accord with the overarching responsibility to present appropriate and reasonable responses *that serve the overall goal of advancing truth or understanding in matters related to the [topic at hand].*" (Rooney, 2012, p. 321) How these responsibilities are implemented in a given situation depends on the specific topic of the argument, the context of argumentation, and, in some cases, on who the arguers are: in particular, who they are as differentially located social agents when the argument at hand is likely to draw on the different class, gender, or race experiences and knowledge of the interlocutors. Part of my argument in that paper relies on recent work on *epistemic injustice*, work that draws attention to problematic credibility deficits related to social prejudices that responders may exhibit in testimonial and argumentative exchanges. In her work on epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker proposes the development of "epistemic justice" as (what she calls) a *hybrid intellectual-ethical* virtue that helps to counter instances of epistemic injustice

which she understands as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1)

How might this work relate to Norlock’s emphasis with receptivity in argumentation, particularly insofar as receptivity recommends that we care about persons and not just their ideas? She resists (though ambivalently) my suggestion in another (2010) paper that we refrain--in argument situations--from wording such as “You are wrong,” when “I disagree with your view” seems more appropriate. She links my suggestion to what she sees as a tendency in philosophy to treat arguments as separable from their authors. Sometimes, Norlock continues, that separation may be appropriate (with hypothetical arguments, for example), but sometimes not. I am unclear that the link to my suggestion stands, since I think that wording such as “You are wrong” --particularly in adversarial argumentative situations-- exhibits something less than the type of *caring for someone in their capacity as a knower* that I assume Norlock intends, especially if it involves (in her words) “reducing [someone’s] personhood to that of an opponent.”

Norlock maintains that it is sometimes important that we (as responders) “scrutinize the author [of an argument], her reasons, her position in the world as she formulates it, and her goals in entering a philosophical community to engage in argumentation.” I entirely agree, though I would caution that articulating this important recommendation within Noddings’s account of caring (and the controversial associations this concept has evoked) may have the effect of drawing attention *away from* the specific cognitive and epistemic experiences and capacities that one should attend to in interacting with the arguer as a full epistemic as well as moral agent. I am thus interested in hearing more about how Noddings’s and Norlock’s understanding of receptivity as a virtue of argumentation might be further fleshed out as a distinctly epistemic-ethical virtue.

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