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# Commentary on Aikin

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# A Commentary on Scott F. Aikin's "A Self-Defeat Problem for the Rhetorical Theory of Argument"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Scott Aikin argues that rhetorical theories of argument risk being self-defeating. We will begin by stating what it is for a theory to be self-defeating, then argue that rhetorical theories would appear to be less prone to this objection than most theories, and finally turn to Aikin's account of how they nonetheless suffer from this flaw. We identify problems for his theory before assessing his argument in our concluding remarks.

## 2. THE NATURE OF SELF-DEFEATING THEORIES

According to Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons*, a theory is self-defeating if it fails in its own terms to achieve its desired results. Thus, to use J. S. Mill's famous example, we know that one of the least efficient ways to make oneself happy is to set out to make oneself happy, and consequently any theory which held that one should always seek happiness would be self-defeating. Or to take an example from constitutional law, the original intention theory, according to which the constitution means whatever its framers thought it meant, is self-defeating since (oversimplifying a great deal) both Jefferson and Madison, leading authors of the constitution, claimed that the document should not be interpreted to mean simply whatever they thought it meant. How could a document mean only what the authors thought it meant when the authors thought it meant something other than *just* what they thought it meant?

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### 3. HOW COULD A RHETORICAL THEORY BE SELF-DEFEATING?

A rhetorical theory of argumentation argues that an argument is a good one if it convinces those to whom it is directed of the position for which it is arguing. Given this it is hard to see how a rhetorical theory of argument could be self-defeating since for any given version of the theory either (a) it is unconvincing (in which case it just fails straightforwardly) or (b) it is convincing (in which case it seems it cannot be self-defeating by its own standards). More than other accounts of argumentation, the rhetorical theory seems to be inherently immune to arguments that it is self-defeating. Thus, if he is successful, what Aikin has shown is something quite important: that a certain type of theory fails in the very way one would least expect of it.

The more natural objection to rhetorical theories of argumentation is that they suffer from a form of Euthyphro's dilemma (as Aikin recognizes). Is an argument (or a theory about arguments) good because it is rhetorically satisfying or is it rhetorically satisfying because it is good? Happily, most supporters have realized their work faces this problem and have dealt with it. Aikin's approach is interesting because it is so novel. If it works, it poses a huge problem for rhetorical theories. If, according to the rules of rhetorical argumentation, all arguments for the rhetorical theory fail, then the rhetorical theory of argument would be unsalvageable.

### 4. AIKIN'S ARGUMENTS

Aikin separates his criticism of the rhetorical theory into two arguments: the "quick and dirty" argument, and the "process argument." Each, he alleges, presents a self-defeat problem to the rhetorical theory of argument, though it is the latter that is the more charitable to rhetorical theories.

The quick and dirty argument against the rhetorical theory is simply that, when presented with the arguments in favour of the theory, an audience is not convinced. According to the theory, if an audience is not convinced by an argument, then the argument is a poor one. Aikin expects that any arguments promoting the rhetorical theory will not meet the evaluative standards of thoughtful individuals; thus these arguments fail to offer justification for assent to their conclusions when one charitably takes the conclusions as facts of the matter. The rhetorical theory of argument, for *some* individuals (those with stringent standards of evaluation), is self-defeating on this account, but this will not be the case for *all* individuals and fails to discredit the theory irreparably. But note that this is a non-standard sense of self-defeating. For those for whom the argument fails, it fails because they are not convinced, not because it succeeds!

The process argument eliminates factors contingent to particular individuals and attempts to show how any individual who accepts the rhetorical theory as her theory of argument cannot give unqualified assent to its main commitments. Aikin recognizes that the theory's two central commitments<sup>1</sup> are themselves the products of arguments generated to elicit assent (R1) for those commitments that are to be evaluated according to their effectiveness at eliciting this assent (R2). He further distinguishes between two

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<sup>1</sup> The first commitment (R1) *that arguments are aimed at eliciting assent for their conclusions in a given audience*, and the second (R2) *that arguments should be assessed according to their success in achieving such assent*.

types of assent, unqualified and qualified, which he takes respectively to be assents to the truth of a conclusion and assents to a conclusion without the corresponding assent to its truth. Rhetorical arguments, Aikin claims, can only ever generate qualified assents since they do not provide justificatory reason (reasons derived purely from the strength of the premises and inference to the conclusion) to accept a conclusion as a true statement. One removes oneself from a commitment to the truth of a conclusion when one recognizes that the arguments given in support of it were devised only to elicit assent because one's assent is based, at least in part, on one's affective and conative attitudes. If all arguments are designed to elicit assent (as the rhetorical theory holds), and arguments exist for R1 and R2, then one cannot have justificatory reason for assenting to the truth of R1 and R2, or for *any* conclusion. Furthermore, if one can only hold qualified assents, then all arguments are poor arguments according to the rhetorical theory because qualified assent is not equivalent to actual commitment. Thus, the rhetorical theory of argument cannot produce *actually* convincing arguments for itself or for anything else and, as such, is a self-defeating theory: it fails to do precisely what it purports to do.

## 5. FOUR QUESTIONS FOR AIKIN

Putting aside the quick and dirty argument, we would like to raise four questions.

1. *Is it the case that R1 and R2 need be justified through argument?* If the rhetorical theory is correct, then it is a brute fact about all arguments that they are an endeavour to elicit our assent for their conclusions. That good arguments do this could not be strictly proven without begging the question. However, it may well be something we should accept on Moorean grounds.<sup>2</sup> As for R2, the close relationship between R1 and R2 is justification for taking it to be the primary factor in evaluating arguments: whether an argument is successful in convincing its audience bridges the innumerable *individual* standards of evaluation audience members could possess.
2. *Is there a genuine distinction to be made between qualified assent and unqualified assent?* What is it to be convinced by something but not be convinced of its truth? One cannot consistently hold  $p$  and not  $p$ . "I think that the moon is made of green cheese; however, I do not think it is true that the moon is made of green cheese," is contradictory. To believe that  $p$  is to accept that  $p$  is true; otherwise one does not actually believe that  $p$ . If to assent to something is to believe it to be true, then all actual assents are unqualified.
3. *Why should one accept the claim that a convincing argument can be a bad argument?* The rhetorical theory states that what makes an argument good is that it succeeds in convincing its audience. Aikin's uses external standards to

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<sup>2</sup> R1 (that arguments are made to elicit assent) can be defended in much the same way that G. E. Moore's defended the existence of external objects. Simply by holding up his hands Moore pointed out that we grant more credibility to the claim that our hands exist *qua* external objects than we grant to any argument—however philosophically sophisticated and impressive we might find it—that our hands do not exist *qua* external objects. One might defend R1 in just this way.

deny this—for example, that an argument will always be either formally valid or invalid. While sometimes this is the standard most appropriate for evaluating an argument it is not *the* standard by which arguments should be evaluated.

4. *Why is it impossible for arguments intended to elicit assent to provide justificatory reasons to accept their conclusion?* On the rhetorical theory of argument, one has justificatory reason to accept the conclusion of an argument as true when one's standards are met (regardless of the objective quality of the argument or the individual's standards). That all arguments are put forth to convince us of their conclusion is a fact about arguments that does not affect our personal standards, and it is beyond the scope of the rhetorical theory to dictate what standards of evaluation an individual should take as her own.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Aikin's argument is potentially devastating; however, there remain substantial problems. To be self-defeating, a theory must fail on its own terms, and this—despite Aikin's interesting and very able analysis—still has to be established.

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