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Reply to my Commentators

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to MacIntosh and Wein's thoughtful challenges. Their main challenge is that I have not shown the rhetorical theory to be self-defeating. I take it that self-defeat is a concept with a wide penumbra stretching from strictly semantically self-refuting statements (e.g., "All A-statements are false"), to pragmatically inconsistent speech-acts (e.g., "I don't exist") and plans (e.g., the hedonistic paradox MacIntosh and Wein outline), and ultimately to theories that if true undercut the justification one could have for holding them (e.g., Levinas's thesis that the Other is unthematizable—if it is true, then he cannot demonstrate it).¹ My thesis is that the strong program in rhetoric yields undercutting reasons against the case for the program. The quick and dirty argument is that I, a member of the target audience for the theory's arguments, am not convinced, and so they must not be good arguments. The process argument is that if rhetorical arguments can only yield qualified assent when we see them as entirely rhetorical, then the arguments, by the standards of the theory, must not be very good. Admittedly, this is not strict self-defeat for the theory (it does not entail its own falsity, if true), but it certainly is a problem. If that's not self-defeat, fine.

MacIntosh and Wein's first objection is that, perhaps, the rhetoricality of arguments may be *brute*, analogous to external objects on Moore's proof. This may be right, but this strategy is to posit a non-rhetorical feature of the theory (the bruteness of its referent) as a reason that justifies it. Consequently, it undercuts a rhetorical theory of reasons. Moreover, Moorean strategies are argumentatively vicious in settling disputes.²

MacIntosh and Wein's second objection is as to whether there is a legitimate difference between qualified and unqualified belief-ascriptions. They are right that to believe *p* is to accept *p* as a true statement, and in this case, it is a case of what I've called assent-unvarnished. But surely we can see the difference between *assessing oneself to believe that p* and *assessing p's truth*. It is the logical gap between the two thoughts that yields qualification of assent.

The third objection is that the rhetorical theory does not recognize the difference between bad and convincing arguments, and so my step (4), the admission of argumentative regret, is not allowable. This may be an effective defence against my

¹ See my essay with J. Aaron Simmons outlining the varieties of self-refutation for Levinas's view (2009).

² See my essay on Moore's proof and how it fails the dialectical demands of anti-scepticism (2008).

process argument, but it opens rhetoric to the old Platonic worry that arguments, no matter how fallacious, will pass if convincing.

The final objection is that the required rhetorical objectives of argument need not undercut our justification for being moved by them. But when we find ourselves moved or unmoved by argument, we do not point to their rhetorical objectives, but to the quality of their premises or the logic of their support. If we view arguments, on the strong program, as entirely rhetorical, we have nothing to go on.

[Link to commentary](#)

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REFERENCES

- Aikin, S. and J. A. Simmons 2009. Levinasian otherism, skepticism, and the problem of self-refutation. *The Philosophical Forum* 40:1.
- Aikin, S. 2008. Moore's hand and the dialectical demands of anti-skepticism. *Southwest Philosophy Review* 24:2.