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Response to Commentary on “Patrick Bondy, Bias in Legitimate Ad Hominem Arguments”

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1. Introduction

I am grateful to Andrew Aberdein for his thorough and helpful commentary; he points out a number of places where I need to clarify my view. In this brief reply, I will address three of his points.

2. Definitions

Aberdein notes that I’ve defined “ad hominem argument” in a broader fashion than is generally done, to include positive ethotic arguments. Indeed, I also include responses to an argument, where the respondent appeals to the positive circumstances of an arguer, not only her character and abilities, in the category of ad hominem arguments. I think that positive and negative responses to arguments, where the responses appeal to features of the speaker’s character or circumstances, are an interesting category of arguments, and they are sufficiently like what are usually called “ad hominem” responses to an argument to merit that name. In the end, though, this is perhaps an inconsequential terminological issue.

He also notes that my use of the term “bias” is narrower than most, when I say that “The term “bias” applies when we judge a person, group of people, or institution, according to a comparatively very harsh or very easy standard” (2016, p. 1). Cognitive biases, such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and so on, are left out of the account. In my defense, I only meant to propose that applying comparatively very harsh or easy standards is sufficient for the applicability of the term “bias,” but Aberdein is right that I do sometimes talk as though this is a definition rather than a sufficient condition. So to be clear, my point was really just to stipulate that these are the kind of biases I am interested in here, because they’re the kind of biases that are relevant in a discussion of ad hominem arguments.

3. Unjustified biases

A more important point that Aberdein correctly raises is that in some places, I talk as though any belief in a premise that merely has an unjustified bias as one of its initiating causes is thereby an unacceptable premise for use in arguments. This view is of course incorrect, and it is not what I meant to say. The idea, rather, is that a premise the belief in which is based on an unjustified bias is an unacceptable premise.

Aberdein then points out that even this clarified view conflicts with both his own (2010) view and Heather Battaly’s (2010) view about legitimate ad hominem arguments. Aberdein and

Battaly hold that, as long as a respondent criticizes a speaker on the basis of a character flaw that the speaker in fact possesses, the ad hominem attack is legitimate. This view contrasts with mine, since it is of course possible to hold an unjustified but nevertheless true belief that a speaker possesses a character flaw relevant to the assessment of her argument. In my view, an ad hominem response based on such an unjustified belief is illegitimate.

Aberdein ends section 3 of his commentary with the remark that “Bondy’s distinction between legitimate and illegitimate ad hominem would seem to turn on the success of a process of justification that may be entirely internal to the arguer.” I think that this is entirely correct, because I am committed to internalism about epistemic justification. However, let me just note that an externalist about epistemic justification could also hold, as I do, that an ad hominem response to an argument that is based on an unjustified bias is an illegitimate ad hominem – but the externalist would deny that what makes the difference between legitimate and illegitimate ad hominems is determined by facts about what is internal to individual arguers.

4. Scepticism

In section 4 of his commentary, Aberdein helpfully connects up the discussion of legitimate and illegitimate biases in arguments with Carter and Pritchard’s (forthcoming) weak, intermediate, and strong bias-driven scepticism about knowledge. Weak bias-driven scepticism about arguments would be the view “that some arguments we have taken to be good are actually bad, since they rely essentially on bias.” I am happy to embrace this kind of scepticism.

Intermediate bias-driven scepticism about arguments would be the view that “some arguments we have taken to be good are actually bad, since they rely on bias, albeit inessentially.” Aberdein takes me to be committed to this kind of scepticism. I did not mean to commit myself to it, though that wasn’t clear in my paper.

Beliefs can be held on the basis of multiple independent sources, some of which might be good, others bad. In such cases, the belief can be justified by its good basis. So, in cases where a speaker puts forward an argument that employs premises that are based on unjustified biases, but that are also independently based on other good sources, the premises can be justified, and therefore the argument isn’t necessarily a bad argument just because of the presence of the unjustified biases.

Strong bias-driven scepticism about arguments would be the view that “some arguments we have taken to be good are actually bad, because even though they are in fact free from bias, we are unable to rationally exclude the possibility that it is present.” Aberdein also takes me to be committed to this kind of scepticism, because there are cases where we are unable to rule out that there are unjustified biases affecting our judgment of an argument.

I am not certain whether or not I am in fact committed to strong bias-driven scepticism. For now, I will just remark that even if I end up being committed to it, it’s not so very troublesome, since most arguments will be such that we are able to rule out the presence of any lingering effects of exposed and unjustified biases, simply because most arguments are not based on unjustified biases in the first place.

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