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In Support of the Weak Rhetoric-as-Epistemic Thesis: On the Generality and Reliability of Persuasion Knowledge

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Abstract: Drawing on a recent experimental social-psychological study of group deliberation, this chapter suggests that affect may not only influence, but replace cognition. *Vis-à-vis* this result, we present a weak version of the *rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis*. Rhetoric is understood to provide a probable form of knowledge of the available means of persuasion which may contribute to achieving the epistemic ends of groups. In particular, the use of argumentative and suasory devices, widely understood, may facilitate that information possessed by individuals is reflected in the group's decision. Thus, with respect to deliberative discourse, rhetoric need not *create* knowledge, but may help to socialize it. The chapter stresses the importance of studying the conditions under which what someone knows provides the reasons for which a collective decides.

Key words: affect, cognition, group discussion, persuasion, reliability, social epistemology, suasory devices

1. Introduction

Assume you know something. Assume further that a deliberating group in which you participate may adopt what you know as the group-decision, or not. How do you go about persuading the group? What should you better not do? This problem-setting, or so the following argues, may promise a fruitful reorientation of the rhetoric-as-epistemic debate.

We take rhetoric to provide *probable* knowledge of the available means of persuasion in a given speech situation. These means may bring about the assent of an audience, but they do not guarantee it. This stance might surprise especially those who take rhetorical knowledge to be bound to contexts, i.e., available only as particular speech situations "unfold," and therefore closed to systematic generalization. In contrast, we do not exclude that rhetorical knowledge of some generality is possible. Rather, we suggest that there are trade-offs between the level of generality and the reliability of rhetorical knowledge.

Our claim is that a *weak* rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis suffices to leave—or, depending on the reader's point of view, to make—rhetoric relevant to social-epistemology. Our purpose is two-fold. We stress the value of rhetorical knowledge for questions of social epistemology. Secondly, we lay out the rationale for an interdisciplinary research project featuring, amongst others, communication, rhetoric, social psychology, philosophy, political science, i.e., an experimental version of what Simons (1990) calls "new rhetoric."

On the weak version of the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis, probable knowledge of the available means of persuasion is relevant for deliberative group discussions, because the best available reasons forwarded in a group discussion *should* support the decision reached

by a deliberating body (Section 2). We contrast this norm with a result from group discussion research in social psychology obtained by Boy & Witte (2007). This result suggests that, under specific experimental conditions, humans track affects rather than cognitive contents. Importantly, these conditions cite "emotional involvement." When similar conditions apply in non-experimental contexts, this could go some way towards explaining why groups may flout the epistemic ends of group discussion, i.e., choose badly (Section 3). In turn, such results support the systematic inquiry into the conditions under which "rhetorical and suasory devices" (Harpine 2004), widely understood, do reliably serve epistemic ends, e.g., to avoid error and acquire true belief (Goldman 1999), or not. Before concluding, we respond to four objections (Section 4).

2. The Rhetoric-as-Epistemic Thesis

In the following, we briefly trace the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis to Robert L. Scott, then work out the difference between knowledge and certainty (Sect. 2.1), introduce the idea of investigating the reliability of suasory devices (Sect. 2.2), and finally opt for the weak version of the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis (Sect. 2.3).

Robert L. Scott (1967, 1976, 1993) coined the phrase "rhetoric is epistemic." Broadly put, he held that rhetoric pertains to more than ornament or style. Rather, rhetorical discourse creates—or, at least, it *may* create—both objective truth and subjective certainty. Following Aristotle, rhetorical discourse is regularly said to establish probable claims, rather than necessarily true ones. Further, since propositions with deontic contents are potential deliberative results, rhetoric may therefore be said to establish moral claims.

It is some variant of the above that has surfaced as the *rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis*. Sadly, compared with philosophical analyses of the conditions under which humans possess knowledge, a fact about the extant debate within rhetoric is sloppiness. As Harpine points out, "rhetoricians have long shown a fondness for poetic definitions" (2004, p. 340). This holds for both the terms *epistemology* and *rhetoric*. Evidence seems to implicate Scott as well as those who have meanwhile declared his thesis dead. See Jasinski (2001) for an overview.

Notably, Scott (1993) later regretted having used the term *epistemic* because, to him, this term suggested a state of certainty. In contrast, his mature position is: whenever "uncertainty cannot be obviated … rhetoric has a genuine role. [However, i]n the world of certainty, it does not" (ibid., p. 133).

2.1 Knowledge is distinct from Certainty

Harpine's (2004) critique of the rhetoric-as-epistemic debate contains two constructive contributions. The first consists in making clear that certainty has—and already at the time of Scott's first essay had—little to do with what philosophers normally call knowledge. After all, for some proposition p to count as known by subject S, it is for good reasons considered non-necessary that S is in a state of certainty with respect to p. Borrowing symbolism from epistemic logic (Hintikka 1962), placing certainty in the analysans of *knowledge* amounts to conflating *first* with *second order knowledge*, i.e., $K_S p$ ("S knows p") and $K_S K_S p$ ("S knows that, S knows p").

Already on the standard, though no less problematic, definition of knowledge as *justified true belief* (aka. the "JTB-analysis")—traced to Plato's *Thaetatus* and *Meno*—S's state of mind did not feature. Likewise, the standard challenge to the JTB-analysis—the

"Gettier problem" (Gettier 1963)—does not invoke certainty either. Rather, it trades on the possibility to be right for the wrong reasons, e.g., by sheer luck. In such cases, we normally are, and we should be, disinclined to speak of knowledge.

Recall that Gettier's case presents true belief that is ill-justified. For example, I (can be said to) fail to know that 'Jones, owns a Ford,' provided (i) *p* abbreviates 'Jones owns a Ford', (ii) Jones does own a Ford, (iii) my belief in *p* is entirely based on observational evidence of Jones driving what—unbeknownst to me—is *his wife's* Ford, and (iv) I never receive evidence of Jones owning a different car.

Meanwhile, numerous variations of the above have given rise to a philosophical industry of Gettierized knowledge. Standardly, next to JTB, a fourth condition, G (for Gettier), is often assumed to be necessary. The details differ widely. Granted, then, that the JTB-analysis of knowledge is less than perfect, it is not clear either that subjective certainty is part of the problem, or the remedy.

Note that Gettier's paper was published some four years before Scott's first essay, and has meanwhile become a classic among epistemologists. In contrast, Scott took until 1993 to admit that he used classical terms in loose fashion, although these had meanwhile been subjected to severe criticism. Sadly, some scholars still evaluate Gettier's case as nothing but an "abstruse problem for analytical philosophy," as remarked by an anonymous reviewer in response to an earlier version of this chapter.

2.2 The Reliability of Argumentative and Suasory Devices

Harpine's second constructive contribution consists in using the notion of reliability to propose a reorientation of the arguably imprecise discourse on the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis towards a research program that is relevant to social epistemology. Unaware that it is currently executed in greater detail, we modify the following by the term 'social'.

> Rhetoric-as-epistemic theorists would have plenty of room to discuss *the reliability* of the various argumentative and suasory devices that rhetoricians employ and to discuss when rhetoric does and does not reliably contribute to [social] knowledge. (Harpine 2004, p. 348; *italics added*)

Adding 'social' makes more precise that the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis is most promising with respect to the question: What should *the group* do? As Hintikka states: "You can remove knowledge from the contexts of decision-making, but you cannot remove a relation to decision making from the concept of knowledge" (2007, p. 12). Following Hintikka (ibid., pp. 11-37, 189-210), in all of the below, the term *information* may be substituted for *knowledge*, such that '*S* knows *p*' comes out as '*S* has (fallible) information with respect to *p*'.

Assume, then, that some group member has knowledge on a decision problem of some magnitude such as: "Shall we go to war today or not?" (Exchanging the term 'war' for 'the movies' does not alter the problem, it apparently trivializes it). Further, assume that other group members fail to have knowledge, but are nevertheless opinionated or display various preferences. If so, should not the knower try to turn what she knows into part, or even the whole, of the group decision?

We can note that it does not make an immediate difference if a knower knows that she knows (see Section 2.1). We do not need to assume second-order knowledge, but can ground her rational interest in effecting persuasion—and also the group's rational interest in being persuaded—in the agent's possession of first-order knowledge. If she also possesses second-order knowledge while her interlocutors fail to have first-order knowledge, this would only strengthen the verdict that she should persuade the group.

In variation, one might assume that group members know different parts of the truth. Then, should they not try to appropriately integrate (only) the true parts into the group discussion? The latter case amounts to more than a complex version of the first. In both cases, truth is part of the discussion. In the former case, one would like to see truth retained in the group-decision. In the latter, an intermediate issue is the aggregation of partial truths. We let this case fall to the side.

If discussant are subject to persuasion—as, at times, it seems they can be—, then given assumptions, some uses of "argumentative and suasory devises" in deliberative contexts may reliably contribute to a group's convergence on the truth, rather than on falsehoods. Two such assumptions are: (i) a decision-problem has a preferred solution (or a similarity-class of solutions); (ii) a group member made the best solution, as well as the reasons why it *is* the best solution, part of the deliberation. These assumptions state that the truth (alternatively: the best available information) was accessible to the group, and it was supported by the right reasons, as opposed to the wrong ones.

2.3 A Weak Version and Two Variants of the Strong Version

The above should have made clear that, if decision problems have preferred solutions, it is an issue of social relevance whether groups converge on the right decision. Insofar as the group's convergence on the right decision depends also on the use of argumentative and suasory devices, one endorses the *rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis* in its weak version. Since this places rhetoric into its Platonic role as the handmaiden of truth, the weak version is normally found less interesting, and may appear trivial to some (cf. Harpine 2004, p. 341).

We can compare this with Zhao's (1991) characterization of the weak version. He presents truth as "hidden" from human perception, but in principle accessible (Slogan: "The truth is out there"). Rhetoric is placed in the role of that which facilitates access "through the clash of subjective minds in open argumentation" (ibid., p. 255). Further, Zhao presents the strong version in two variants. On the mild variant, truth is not "out there"—nor, of course, hidden. Rather, truth is created through rhetoric (i) for a *restricted* realm of reality, e.g., for deontic propositions, such as 'Thou shalt not kill', or—this is the strong variant—(ii) for *all of* reality, including, e.g., the temperature of your cup of tea, say, 66 degrees Celsius at five percent measurement-uncertainty.

Unless suitably qualified, the latter variant seems to be too strong. Else, "truth would be rhetorical," whatever but a post-modernist metaphor this might be. Yet, on qualifications such as: "Rhetoric is for the New Rhetoric [in the wake of Perelman] … a *descriptive theory of truth* in the sense that it tells why and how an audience adheres to some theses, opinions, or beliefs presented for its agreement …." (Corvellac 2008, p. 7; *italics added*), the thesis is not strong enough. Understood descriptively, the strong variant is not immediately relevant to epistemology, but to psychology, political science, or sociology.

Moreover, also the mild variant is only *prima facie* defensible. After all, its defense seems to incur a position on moral realism (Boyd 1988). If so, then proponents of this variant seem committed to the claim that there are no true moral values (nor true statements referring to them). Else, *if* moral realism is non-false, endorsing the mild variant of the strong version *is* to defend the weak version of the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis. This point may not sit well with everybody. Remaining non-committed with respect to moral realism, then, provides a good reason to endorse the weak version of the thesis.

In summary, the weak version suffices to leave rhetoric relevant to social epistemology. To the extent that group decisions regularly follow upon their production and uptake, the

reliability of argumentative and suasory devices is immediately relevant to the epistemic ends of group deliberation such as error avoidance and truth convergence.

3. Affect and Cognition

Presumably, Section 2 will have prepared readers for the claim that rhetoric *can* support epistemic ends, and entails endorsing that rhetoric may be the handmaiden of truth. This section presents an experimental study of group discussions which varied the group atmosphere and the group performance (Sect. 3.1) in a hypothetical survival problem (Sect. 3.2), then reports and interprets its results, which support the claim that human affects may override cognitive contents (Sect. 3.3). Moreover, this study also supports the claim that, although (probable) knowledge of the reliability of argumentative and suasory devices contributes to the epistemic ends of collectivities, specificity and reliability of such knowledge seem to be inversely related, to which we return in Section 4.

Boy & Witte (2007) provide evidence consistent with the assumption that, under some experimental conditions, humans may be more sensitive to the affective than to the cognitive aspect of argumentative interaction. Their study suggests that the affective aspect can replace the cognitive one such that epistemic merits ("good grounds") lose out. They had groups of three enact a group-solving task according to a script, then video-recorded the group discussion. Subjects ("observers") then watched one or more recordings, reporting their (subjective) evaluation of *group atmosphere* and *group performance* on Likert scales ($n = 180$; average age 27; 70% students; ibid., p. 13).

Rather than a live-interaction, observing and rating video-taped interaction is assumed to avoid unwanted influences onto the evaluation. "Observers get the chance to purely evaluate group performance and atmosphere without being directly involved into the group interaction" (ibid., p. 7).

3.1 Group Atmosphere *vs*. Group Performance

Discussions exhibit one of four types, generated by two independent binary variables: (i) epistemic merits are part of the discussion and are either selected for in the group decision or not (good *vs*. bad performance); (ii) the interaction is either cooperative/fact-oriented or antagonistic/emotionally-charged (good *vs*. bad group atmosphere).

> In the good group atmosphere […] people were instructed to behave less dominantly and very person-oriented. Three characters were presented accordingly: A friendly and task-oriented character, a cooperative and initiative character and an emotional and friendly character. In the bad group atmosphere condition, people were instructed to behave very expressively in their interaction style and two people were instructed to behave very dominantly. The three roles were characterized either by an aggressive and powerful behaviour or by authoritarian and emotionally reserved behaviour or by a calm and withdrawn behaviour (the person who gets oppressed by the others). (ibid., p. 12)

This separates "how" and "what," or the *process* and the *result* of group deliberation in a two-by-two design.

	good Performance	bad Performance
good Group Atmosphere	gGA / gP	gGA / bP
bad Group Atmosphere	bGA / gP	bGA / bP

Fig. 1. Two-by-two design

The question studied is to which extent cognitive and affective factors matter for the *perception* of group-deliberation quality? One may say that perceptions track epistemic merits when observers' (individual or averaged) ratings of the group performance are consistent with the following ordering:

(1) gGA / gP ≥ bGA / gP > gGA / bP ≥ bGA / bP

(1) says that the ratings for a good group atmosphere crossed with a good performance (gGA / gP) are *greater or equal* to a bad group atmosphere crossed with a good performance (bGA / gP) which, in turn, are *strictly greater* than a good group atmosphere crossed with a bad performance (gGA / bP), and so on. (1) appears to be immediately plausible as a norm for group discussions.

3.2 Scenario and Expert Solution

The scenario of this study is known as the desert survival problem (Lafferty & Pond 1974). Actors adopt the characters of victims to a plane crash in the desert. Three passengers survive without harm. Observers learn that an emergency signal could not be sent, that the expected day-time temperature is 54 degrees Celsius, and that the following 15 objects were saved before the plane burnt out:

  Torch, Jack Knife, Air Map of Crash Area, Plastic Raincoat (large), Magnetic Compass, Bandage Kit with Gauze, .45 Caliber Pistol (loaded), Parachute (red/white), 1000 Salt Tablets, Book: "Edible Animals of the Desert," Two Pairs of Sunglasses per person (p.p.), One Liter of Water p.p., Two Liters of Vodka, One Overcoat p.p., One Cosmetic Mirror.

  The decision is to stay at the wreck and wait for help, or to leave for a mine (120 km away) where help is expected. Being a group decision, the constraint is to stay together. On expert opinion, the chance of being saved alive is reported as 80%, provided one stays at the wreck and uses the above objects correctly. Leaving is nearly equivalent to suicide; the primary challenge to survival is dehydration. Experience shows that most—Boy and Witte (ibid., p. 11) report a figure of 85% —prefer leaving for the mine. "Presumably this decision is connected with the need to do something for oneself to survive instead of waiting passively for help" (ibid.). Hence, most subjects vastly underestimate the risk.

  Observers assessed the group decision ("stay or leave"), and how well actors had ranked the saved objects according to their importance for survival. This ranking being

part of the group decision, the ordering is a function of grasping dehydration as the primary challenge, or not. For instance, the mirror is useful as a signal. Wearing overcoats decreases perspiration. Water should be consumed on the first day (when making decisions). In contrast, the bandage-kit is not helpful (it is known that no survivor was physically harmed in the crash; dehydrating bodies hardly bleed), consuming vodka or salt tablets increases the amount of water needed.

In all experimental conditions, reasons such as the above *are* part of the discussions. In our terms, this means: epistemic merits are present. Briefly, the expert-ordering is:

1. Mirror, 2. Overcoat, 3. Water, 4. Torch, 5. Parachute (shelter/signal), 6. Knife, 7. Raincoat (to collect condensation), 8. Pistol (signal), 9. Sunglasses, 10. Bandage Kit, 11. Compass (to signal), 12. Map (to start fire), 13. Book (likewise, else useless), 14. Vodka (harmful), 15. Salt tablets (likewise).

Fig. 2 Expert ordering over saved objects

3.3 Results

We report results qualitatively; for quantities and measures of statistical significance (results were significant), see Boy and Witte (ibid., pp. 13*ff.*). Repeating for purposes of comparison the (normative) expectation from above as (1), below, (2) and (3) summarize observers' average ratings of the group atmosphere and the group performance, respectively. Here, '$\approx$' denotes 'is almost the same as'.

(1) $\quad gGA / gP \geq bGA / gP > gGA / bP \geq bGA / bP$ $\qquad\qquad$ (Expectation)

(2) $\quad gGA / gP \approx gGA / bP > bGA / gP \approx bGA / bP$ $\qquad\qquad$ (Atmosphere)

(3) $\quad gGA / gP \approx gGA / bP \approx bGA / gP \approx bGA / bP$ $\qquad\qquad$ (Performance)

Results show that observers reliably identify *only* the cooperative one as the preferred group atmosphere. Secondly, they do *not* rate a good group atmosphere significantly higher when it correlates with a good group performance.

> Participants of this study were not able to make a clear distinction between group atmosphere and group performance in their performance evaluations. If there is a possibility of simple comparisons then the group atmosphere was used as a cue for evaluation of the group performance. A clear influence of the factual information on the learning function was not observed. (Boy and Witte 2007: 22f.)

Hence, when rating the group performance, a group converging on the expert-decision for the right reasons, or not, fails to be a relevant factor. Put differently, in this experiment, observers fail to demonstrate sensitivity to epistemic merits. It seems that the threat to one's life *cannot* bias subjects towards leaving the plane, rather than waiting for help. After all, subjects only observe the discussion (but see Section 4.1). Still, the study supports the claim that, although they are part of the discussion and sometimes featured as its result, the right reasons can, in a literal sense, become impotent.

4. Discussion

In contrast to studies demonstrating that group discussions increase the quality of the group decision *vis-à-vis* an individual's choice prior to such discussion (see Kerr & Tindale 2004; Seibold & Meyers 2007; O'Keefe & Jensen 2011 for overviews), the above results discourage high expectations as to the epistemic aspect of group decisions. Should similar studies be externally valid, then it would be unsurprising to learn that, under conditions of "emotional involvement," a group consensus is not based on the best grounds featured in discussion. Rather, one might expect various biases to motivate decisions. On their potentially positive role in group deliberation, see Mercier & Landemore (2012). A rather upbeat interpretation of affect in groups is provided in Spoor & Kelly (2004).

Furthermore, or so one learns from extending Gettier's case (Section 2.1) to groups, even if a group decision features the solution supported by the best grounds, it may still have been adopted for the wrong reasons. So, if groups get it right after discussion, this may still be for reasons of luck. Here, we assume that discussants may behave just as observers did in the above experimental study. This means that group decisions are likely based on non-epistemic cues. As Seibold & Meyers put it:

> The overview of our research program and allusions to the work of others, as well as the challenges discussed, underscore the important role that argument plays in group decision making processes and outcomes. Still, we are far from understanding the complexity involved in group members' argumentative practices and group products. (Seibold & Meyers 2007, p. 329)

In further developing this line with respect to the goal of this chapter—to have rhetoric immediately relevant for social epistemology—, below, I discuss four objections.

4.1 External Validity?

It may seem natural to object that the result presented above does not generalize, i.e., it only holds for the sample available to Boy and Witte, but the pattern might break down in replication. Different groups, and different decisions—or so is the objection—may lead to different results. Call this the 'lacks external validity-objection'.

Reply: It is an empirical question whether the above result transfers beyond the laboratory. Crucially, when studying the effects of affect, it may not be enough that the decision problem has a solution that is supported by expert-opinion; it may also need to be a problem that humans are emotionally involved in to begin with. Anything with a lower emotional investment than the kind of life-threatening choice presented by the desert-survival problem might cease to provide the right conditions. Yet, also this question is open to empirical study.

4.2 Undercutting the Cognitive-Affective Distinction

One may object that the distinction into cognitive and affective factors (i.e., those related to the information-content of messages *vs*. the mood of discussants) is a rough and typically analytic distinction which may be without a real counterpart. It may take much finer grained distinctions and, perhaps, a "clean" separation of cognitive from non-cognitive—or, more generally, the separation of types of—message factors (see Powers 2007, pp. 135*ff*.) may not be possible.

Reply: While the above results have been produced on the basis of an admittedly rough distinction, it does not convince to doubt that there is *any* reality to it. The demand for more fine-grained distinctions—e.g., source, channel, message, receiver context, and effect factors (ibid., p. 136)—is laudable, and nothing stated here contradicts it. Rather, more fine-grained distinctions should (somehow) recover the cognitive *vs.* affective distinction. Its "roughness" is a reason to develop, rather than to reject it.

4.3 Moot Point!

One may object that the weak rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis, as presented here, is trivial, uninteresting, and far from new. Especially rhetoricians may be more attracted to the strong version (Section 2.3), as it seems to lend greater importance to their field.

Reply: It is clearly important to learn—again, in principle, this is an empirical question—which argumentative and suasory devices do reliably (fail to) bring discussants to adopt superior information as the group decision. Such knowledge being exhausted by finding out which devices do *not* work is not necessarily a useless result. Boy and Witte's study suggests one basic insight: Under normal conditions, antagonistic behavior is reliably non-conducive; discussants perceive it as non-preferred. Beyond this insight—this is the point to make—, we seem to have little in the way of knowledge about the reliability of argumentative and suasory devices. For lack of a better term, let's call this a knowledge gap.

4.4 Persuasion Knowledge is not General

A research program that seeks to remedy the above gap demands interaction between epistemologists, rhetoricians, and social-psychologists, amongst others. The first may be expected to provide what we called good grounds; the second possess the requisite background to make persuasive effects measurable in experimental settings; the latter have insight into the communicative conditions to be varied. So, all possess something the others (presumably) want, or—if the foregoing is accepted—*should* want.

This is not a new idea! Worse, perhaps, it might be for a specific reason that social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland 1961), as well as similar and contrasting work, has had little success in producing information on the reliability of argumentative and suasory devices: "[T]here is no single way of presenting information that guarantees persuasion. Much depends on the relations between communicator, audience, the nature of the communication, and the particular circumstances of the communication" (Billig 1996). Hence, this seems to be the strongest objection: *General* persuasion-knowledge is not possible.

Reply: One may have to accept a trade-off between, on the one hand, the *specificity* and, on the other, the *reliability* of persuasion-knowledge. Consider that, across conditions, antagonistic behavior is dis-preferred. This does provide some guidance; it informs us about what behavior *not* to display. *Prima facie* uninformative as this may seem with respect to each particular situation in which one seeks to persuade, the insight is nevertheless comparatively robust. There may be few situations (though, perhaps, not none) in which antagonistic behavior is conducive to deliberating groups converging on the truth.

Provided agents accept that reliable information on what does persuade, or not, is desirable for group deliberation, they may also be inclined—perhaps more so than they

otherwise would be—to accept that *specific* action cannot be "squeezed out" of such information. Conversely, the greater the action guiding value ("text-book advice"), the less reliable such information may be for *particular* deliberative situations. The alleged failure of social judgment theory, then, may potentially be explained by accepting that comparatively informative persuasion-knowledge is comparatively unreliable, while comparatively reliable persuasion-knowledge is comparatively uninformative, in the sense of suggesting specific communicative acts in given situations.

5. Conclusions

If the main result of Boy and Witte's (2007) study is accepted, it becomes clear that, when deliberating bodies adopt the best reasons offered in the discussion to support the group decision, then it is likely that these reasons were presented in a manner that is perceived to be cooperative. Furthermore, it seems clear that emotional investment in a situation can screen-off whatever epistemic merit a discussion may feature. It is an open question if this extends to situations of emotional non-investment.

Insofar as argumentative and suasory devices do influence which decision a group adopts, it becomes pertinent to study conditions under which said devices reliably lead to social knowledge, or to falsehoods. We have defended such research against four objections, and suggested that the reliability and the specificity of persuasion-knowledge may be inversely related.

Along these lines, one may potentially explain the failure of social judgment theory, and make the claim more precise that rhetorical *knowledge* (in the full sense of the word) is contextual, i.e., available only as particular communicative situations develop.

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