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Evaluating Narrative Arguments

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Abstract: This paper will discuss how narrative arguments should be evaluated, i.e. I will offer a means of differentiating between acceptable and unacceptable narrative arguments. I will argue that narrative arguments should not be evaluated as products; hence, narrative argument evaluation will be a rhetorical evaluation focused on the process. In line with the rhetorical model of argument evaluation, I develop an account of the virtuous audience, which will be the standard for assessing narrative arguments.

Keywords: argument evaluation, narrative arguments, virtue argumentation, virtuous audience, universal audience.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question of how to evaluate narrative arguments. I will be discussing how to evaluate narrative arguments as process as opposed to arguments as product, as with dominant accounts of argument appraisal such as informal logic. The first part of this paper will show that dominant accounts of argument evaluation are not suitable for the evaluation of narrative arguments because they focus on the product of argument. The second part of the paper will develop an account of argument evaluation for arguments as process, that is the virtuous audience, which will combine the rhetorical understanding of audience with virtue argumentation. The virtuous audience cultivates argumentative virtues that help them assess good and bad arguments and allow them to reject racist and misogynistic arguments. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the goals of assessment that relate to cultivating virtues that avoid the acceptance of dangerous stories such as racist or misogynistic stories.

2. Preliminaries

Before proceeding, some preliminary clarifications are in order. I define a narrative argument as a story told in the context of dissensus or disagreement. The type of narrative I will be discussing is an oral and interpersonal storytelling, which takes place in conversations between at least two people and hence it is dialogical. I will not discuss narrative as it is used in novels, but rather in the act of dialogical and interactive storytelling, which is essentially communal, social and interpersonal. Since my account of narrative argument focuses on interactive personal narrative, rather than written and/or novel argument, my focus will be on the process of arguing. By narrative process I refer to the whole interaction in which the story is used as an argument, including such components as body language, tone, context, audience, background and shared history. Narrative arguments do not arise in solitary monologues, but are usually part of a larger interaction. Narrative argumentation is a dynamic and interactive process that happens between the arguer and the audience. Narratives arise in conversations in response to something said or an argument made, and so they are integrated into the whole interaction. Narrative is often used

alongside other modes of arguing such as the visceral (physical), kisceral (intuitive) and emotional mode discussed and developed by Michael Gilbert (1997, p. 75).

By product and process of argument, I am referring to the old and contested distinction in argumentation literature which was first introduced by Daniel J. O'keefe in 1992. O'keefe distinguishes between the concept of arguing (which is the process) and the argument that results from the process of arguers engaged in arguing (which is the product of arguing). O'keefe calls these two features, i.e., the product and process of argument, 'argument 1' and 'argument 2.' Argument 1 refers to the content, what is being said in the argument which is the product of arguing and argument 2 refers to the process, mode, or act of arguing (O'keefe, p. 4). The product of argument is also sometimes referred to as a thing or an object, whereas the process of argument is referred to as an interaction. This distinction has been both popular and controversial among argumentation scholars, but it is an intuitive and helpful distinction, and I will assume it in what follows. This distinction is helpful in explaining how argument evaluation has been divided in terms of evaluating the product of argument or the process of arguing as in the rhetorical tradition. And so, I will be discussing only narrative arguments as process—a dissensual and dialogical exchange between two or more people, with multiple integrated but conceptually distinguishable modes built into the argumentative context. I will argue that this type of narrative cannot be evaluated using traditional methods—it calls for a distinct evaluative framework.

3. Dominant account of argument evaluation

In this part of the paper, I will explain dominant accounts of argument appraisal and show how they are not useful for assessing narrative arguments.

Traditionally, argument evaluation was taken to refer to normatively evaluating whether a conclusion is acceptable or whether the reasons provided are sufficient to warrant the acceptance of the conclusion. There are several such theories of argument evaluation, two of the main ones being the informal logical perspective and the pragma dialectical perspective. The informal logical perspective focuses on evaluating the product, i.e., the argument as consisting of premises and a conclusion. Informal logicians evaluate arguments based on three requirements that an argument must satisfy to be good, namely relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability (RSA) (Johnson 2000, p. 191). The RSA model cannot apply to narrative arguments because most of the criteria focus on premises and their relationship to the conclusion, which requires that we extract premises and conclusion from the narrative. This is problematic because once you reduce the narrative to premises and conclusion, it loses some of its persuasive power. This is partly because, when reduced to a product, narrative arguments lose important evidential content, such as emotional and physical content. This affects the perceived legitimacy of the argument. Also, the narrative argument becomes a different type of argument once it is taken out of its original form and structure. Once the argument is captured into the form of premises and conclusion, it does not tell us anything about the process of arguing, and often omits important features of the argument in an effort to reduce and capture the ordinary argument into a rigid form of premise and conclusion.

Another prominent approach to argument evaluation comes from the dialectical approach, an example of which is the pragma dialectical theory of Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst and the Amsterdam school. The pragma dialectical approach investigates the procedures that are involved in the argumentative exchange and looks at whether the

argumentative rules have been followed. The pragma dialecticians are interested in testing these through critical discussion. Hence, according to pragma dialectics a good argument is a well-regulated critical discussion, which involves four stages: the confrontation stage, opening stage, argumentation stage and the concluding stage. The discussion is governed by a code of conduct in the form of argumentative rules. This approach stipulates that if arguers ignore or violate argumentative rules, the argumentative exchange can result in fallacies (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans 2002, p. 182). Some of the rules for critical discussion include the following:

Freedom rule: Parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints.

Unexpressed premise rule: A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he himself has left implicit.

Argument scheme rule: A standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied.

Validity rule: The reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or capable of being validated by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises. (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans 2002, pp. 182-183)

Most of the rules are difficult to apply to narrative arguments because even though the pragma dialectical approach looks at argument as an interaction and certainly has some good rules such as the freedom rule which is useful to any type of argument including narrative, nevertheless pragma dialectical rules still relates to argumentation that is structured and rigid in form which narrative argument is not. Further, the narrative argument would have to be turned into a critical discussion in order to apply the rules of critical discussion to it. However, narrative argument is a complex activity that cannot be narrowed down into the four stages of a critical discussion without losing its persuasive and powerful force embedded in its narrative form. Narrative arguments are not structured and therefore cannot follow the four stages of critical discussion. Further, changing narrative into a critical discussion runs into the same problem of reduction that the informal logic approach poses.

It must be acknowledged that both the informal logic and pragma dialectics provide worthy accounts of argument appraisal and are surely useful for evaluating many kinds of arguments especially traditional types of arguments, but my contention is that these approaches are not applicable or suitable to narrative because I am not interested in dissecting the narrative into argument parts. I avoid compartmentalizing narrative argument because 1. the whole narrative is an argumentative act and 2. narrative parts are all meshed together and cannot be broken down into separate parts. And as mentioned earlier, doing so risks changing the argument and losing its persuasive power.

While there is a tendency among argumentation scholars to ignore the process of arguing when assessing arguments, rhetorical approaches and the recent development of virtue argumentation do attempt to evaluate an argument in terms of the process and practices of argument, yet they also have their setbacks. For example, while virtue argumentation theories do look at the process—though in a very limited way, as I will later show—they ignore the audience. However, it is both the arguer and the audience that form the full dynamic of

argumentation. Because narrative argument evaluation, as I conceive of it, focuses on the process of arguing and the cultivation of virtues, it will combine insights from both the rhetorical and virtue theories of argumentation.

4. The virtuous audience

The virtuous audience borrows from the rhetorical understanding of audiences, most notably Chaim Perelman's account, which is the most thorough and renowned account of audience in rhetorical argumentation. Similar to Perelman's rhetorical account of audiences, the virtuous audience is interactive and is very much involved in the construction and outcome of the argument. That is because the argument is adapted to the audience. Arguers begin with agreement that is shared with the audience and hence the audience plays a role in how the argument begins and ends. Similarly, the virtuous audience essentially includes both the arguer and interlocutor. The virtuous audience is involved with the arguer and is not this remote, distanced and detached entity that only listens to or receives the argument. Rather, the virtuous audience is an active participant in argumentation and is never passive or merely a recipient of the argument.

Since rhetoric sees argumentation as a relationship that forms between the arguer and their audience, both interlocutors are important for argument analysis. The rhetorical perspective emphasizes how arguments are experienced by the audience (Tindale 2004, p. xi). Rhetoric goes beyond the product of argument to include the different modalities and modes the arguer uses to adapt her argument to the audience and situation. And so it is more fitted for narrative arguments.

Another aspect of the rhetorical account of audience that I apply to a virtuous audience is that the audience is the measure of argument much like Perelman's understanding of audience. From the rhetorical perspective, a good argument is one that is effective and persuasive to an audience. This is why the rhetorical approach is interested in adapting arguments to audiences in order to gain their agreement and adherence. According to Perelman an argument is as worthy as its audience. Perelman draws a distinction between two types of audiences: the particular and the universal. While the particular audience addresses segments of society, small or particular groups, the universal audience addresses all of humanity, more importantly all rational human beings. As such, Perelman makes clear that a discourse that appeals to reason is one that is appealing to the universal audience because such an audience is a reasonable and rational one (1982, p. 17). And so the difference in these audiences is actually a difference in the goals of argumentation. Discourse addressed to small groups (specific audiences) aims to persuade; whereas discourse aimed at larger groups, i.e. the universal audience, aims to convince (Perelman, 1982, p. 18). The appeal to particular audience is an appeal to particular characteristics and situations occupying a particular space and time whereas the universal audience relates to argumentation that transcends all those particularities and makes a broader appeal (Crosswhite 1989, p. 158).

Narrative arguments are assessed by the listener, that is the audience. The virtuous audience is rhetorical because stories are often adapted to the audience. When we tell stories we do so by ensuring that our stories are going to be believed by the audience. Depending on the audience, different stories may be acceptable or rejected. Narrative arguments are co-created between the arguer and the audience. That is why the storyteller also needs to adapt his story to the audience and the context and situation as he /she sees fit. The teller knows that if the story is

far fetched and does not rely on a shared conception of reasonableness, it risks being rejected by the audience. The narrative argument is part of the whole interaction and is not a solitary occurrence. In an argumentative setting where disagreement has arisen, stories are usually introduced in response to a point made or question asked and are thus integrated with ongoing talk and debate, and because stories are very much integrated and woven in the whole interaction between arguers, they often are adapted and rely on background knowledge shared by the disputant in the interaction. When we tell stories we do so within shared conceptions of reasonableness.

Stories rely on shared history and background assumptions of what is reasonable, and this standard of reasonableness varies from particular to universal. And so we can draw the comparison to particular and universal audiences in relation to narrative in that some narratives have a more universal appeal as they speak to a common human experience such as narratives of loss or grief. But other narratives may be particular in nature, such as narratives that appeal only to a narrow and dangerous ideology and may be said to be particular in that regard in that they only appeal to small segments of humanity, perhaps the segment of humanity that is misogynistic or racist. While the universal and particular audience can help us shed light on how certain stories are accepted by appealing to a specific audience, it does not really help us to cultivate practices where the audience can be more critical in their judgment of stories. While Perelman's account of particular and universal may help us understand that dangerous stories are accepted because they appeal to limited and narrow audiences, which he refers to as the particular, it does not help us to rule out the possibility of accepting dangerous narratives. Whereas cultivating argumentative virtues does. While Perelman does say that the universal audience would not accept bigoted beliefs, he does not tell us how such audiences come to be more discerning in their judgment. I argue that it is through virtues developed by the audience that one can become more discerning and reject dangerous narratives.

Perelman's account of audiences does not tell us how one can come to develop the skills or competence to achieve more universality in arguing. However, the one way Perelman addresses skills is in relation to the universal audience, specifically the reasonableness of the universal audience who he says in their "judgment and conduct is influenced by common sense" (Fisher 1986, p. 89). He also claims that the universal audience has proper competence, which means being "disposed to hear" the argument, "submit to the data of experience," and have the proper information and training to ultimately be "duly reflected" (Crosswhite 1989, p. 163). However, it is not clear what proper competence entails. I argue that the proper competence Perelman suggests can be understood in terms of argumentative virtues. Hence, while Perelman's account of the universal audience has the merit of attempting to attain more inclusivity, it does not tell us how one can come to develop the skills or competence to achieve more universality in arguing. More must be said about what makes an arguer move from the particularities of the situation to a more universal stance, and that is where I think the virtuous audience may have more to say. I argue that it is through virtues developed by the audience that one can become more discerning and reject dangerous narratives. Having good argumentative practices allows us to argue well, which reduces the probability of accepting bad narratives. Hence, the main difference between Perelman's account of audience and the virtuous audience is the focus on virtues. And second, I distinguish between audience in terms of virtue rather than the particular or universal.

Next I will explain the virtues that an audience needs to cultivate in order to be able to reject dangerous narratives. The virtuous audience evaluating the narrative are not passive

recipients, and are, in fact, critical and have virtues that aid them in differentiating between dangerous and acceptable arguments. To discuss the virtues that must be cultivated by the audience, I now turn to virtue argumentation.

5. Virtue argumentation

Virtue ethics is a new, burgeoning approach to argumentation that concerns itself with the ethical character of arguers. A virtue approach to argumentation was proposed by Daniel Cohen and Andrew Aberdeen in 2007, and has since expanded. The list of Argumentation virtues is not exhaustive and it is still being developed simply because virtue argumentation is a new argumentation theory. Most of the virtues developed by Cohen and Aberdeen can be applied to the virtuous audience such as:

Willingness to engage in argumentation

Being communicative

Faith in reason

Intellectual courage

sense of duty

Willingness to listen to others

Intellectual empathy

Insight into persons

Insight into problems

Insight into theories

Fair-mindedness

Justice

Fairness in evaluating others' arguments

Open-mindedness in collecting and appraising evidence

Recognition of reliable authority

Recognition of salient facts

Sensitivity to detail

Willingness to question the obvious

Appropriate respect for public opinion

Autonomy

Intellectual perseverance

Diligence

Care

Thoroughness (Aberdeen 2010, p.175).

Other virtues that I will add to this list relate to the audience in particular as for example having a fair intention which is the intention to take the other person seriously and not to think of them as idiotic or insane. In other words, it means having the intention to view one another as intelligent and capable by giving them a fair chance and not dismissing them immediately. Fairness in intention is similar to an already existing virtue developed by Aberdeen and Cohen which is fairness in evaluating others' arguments. What is different between those virtues is that one focuses on the evaluation of another's argument, while the other, i.e. the virtue of fair

intention focuses on having a good intention when entering arguments which includes both evaluating the argument but also how one perceives another as either intelligent or incompetent.

But this virtue also needs to be balanced with another virtue which is critical trust. This virtue requires that one look for cues of coherence and intelligibility in the story and credibility in the teller. Hence, the two virtues I would add to the list include fair intention and critical trust.

Current accounts of virtue argumentation have focused on the arguer cultivating virtues while ignoring the crucial role of the audience which is also needed for not only the production but also the evaluation of good arguments. That is, the virtues developed by Aberdeen and Cohen relate only to the virtuous arguer. However, I argue that these virtues need to be also developed by the audience because it is the audience that is judging the argument, and therefore needs to have certain set of virtues in order to reject bad narrative in the case of storytelling. As such, I build on the current development of virtue argumentation by introducing the role of the virtuous audience. That is because, focusing solely on the virtues of the arguer to the exclusion of the audience will not help us in evaluating the argument. Further, the emphasis on virtuous audience highlights the importance of argumentation as a dynamic process and a shared responsibility between the speaker and the audience.

Assessing the narrative through the virtuous audience allows us to maintain the form of the narrative as narrative without having to reduce it to premise and conclusion as with act based argument appraisal that focus on the product of arguing. It is only through assessing a narrative as process that we can avoid the reduction problem associated with act based argument appraisal. Act based argument appraisals such as informal logic fits more with the notion of arguments as a product. That is because in order for one to assess whether an argument is cogent, one needs to deconstruct it into promise and conclusion. And it requires looking at the relationship between the premises and the conclusion.

6. Conclusion

The virtuous audience is a rhetorical audience who has cultivated virtues. The rhetorical audience includes both the arguer and the audience because narrative is a co-creation between those engaged in the argument. My concept of the virtuous audience combines insights from Perelman's account of audiences and virtue theories of argumentation. While bad narratives do get accepted by people it is only through the virtuous audience that we can hope these stories get rejected. The virtuous audience, if they are critical, then they are less likely to accept bad narratives. Bad narratives are more persuasive and powerful than one would like to imagine and that ultimately depends on the type of audience that accepts them. Hence, good narrative arguments are those that are accepted by the virtuous audience. Ultimately though for good argumentation to take place and to avoid the production and acceptance of bad narratives, what is required is the cultivation of virtues by both the arguer and the audience.

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