

Skepticism and Argumentative Virtues

Escepticismo y virtudes argumentativas

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Abstract: If arguing is a game that philosophers play, then it's a rigged game. Although many theories of argumentation explicitly connect argumentation with reason, rationality, and knowledge, it contains certain built-in biases against knowledge and towards skepticism. Argumentation's skeptical biases can be put into three categories: those built into the rules of play, those embedded in the skills for playing, and finally some connected to the decision to play. Three ancient philosophers from different traditions serve exemplifying case studies: the Middle Way Buddhist Nagarjuna, the Greek Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus, and the Chinese Taoist Zhuangzi. They have very different argumentation styles and they reach very different kinds of skepticism, but in each case, there is an organic connection between their argumentation and their skepticism: Nagarjuna produced arguments for the Truth of No Truth; Sextus generated strategies for counter-argumentation; while Zhuangzi deftly avoided all direct argumentation - in an implicit argument against arguing. I conclude that Virtue Argumentation Theory, with its focus on arguers and their skills, provides the best lens for understanding the lessons to be learned about argumentation and skepticism from this idiosyncratic trio.

Keywords: Virtue Argumentation, Skepticism, Nagarjuna, Zhuangzi, Sextus Empiricus.

Resumen: Si argumentar es un juego que los filósofos juegan, entonces es un juego regimentado. Aunque muchas teorías de la argumentación explícitamente conectan la argumentación con la razón, la racionalidad y el conocimiento, contiene ciertos sesgos contruados en contra del conocimiento y hacia el escepticismo. Los sesgos hacia la argumentación escéptica pueden ser puestos en tres categorías: aquellos contruados como reglas de juego, aquellos encarnados en las habilidades para jugar, y finalmente algunos conectados a la decisión de jugar. Tres filósofos antiguos de distintas

tradiciones sirven de ejemplos como casos de estudios: el Camino Medio Budista Nagarjuna, el pírrico griego Sexto Empírico, y el Chino Taoista Zhuangzi. Ellos tienen estilos argumentativos muy distintos y alcanzan distintos tipos de escepticismo, pero en cada caso, hay una conexión orgánica entre su argumentación y su escepticismo: Nagarjuna produjo argumentos para la verdad de la no verdad; Sexto generó estrategias para la contra-argumentación, mientras que Zhuangzi sagazmente evitó toda argumentación directa – en un argumento implícito contra argumentar. Concluyo que la teoría argumentativa de la virtuosidad, que se enfoca en los argumentadores y sus habilidades, provee las mejores lentes para entender las lecciones a aprender sobre la argumentación y el escepticismo de este idiosincrático trío.

Palabras clave: Argumentación virtuosa, escepticismo, Nagarjuna, Zhuangzi, Sexto Empírico.

1. Introduction

It sometimes seems that arguing is a game that philosophers play, but philosophers should beware: it's a *rigged* game. Even though many of the most insightful and eloquent expressions of what argumentation is all about explicitly connect it with reason, rationality, and knowledge, the fact is that it contains certain built-in biases against knowledge and towards skepticism. Arguing can be most irrational.

What I would like to do here is trace the connections between argumentation and skepticism by way of three different philosophers who can with some justice all be classified as “Skeptics”: the ancient Greek Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus, his contemporary in ancient India, the Middle Way Buddhist Nagarjuna, and, from several centuries earlier, the ancient Chinese Taoist Zhuangzi. They are all deeply suspicious of dogmatism and they argue against it with a near-infectious enthusiasm. In labeling the three of them as Skeptics, I do not mean to ignore the very real and important differences in their philosophies. Instead, I mean to draw attention to the similarities in their *positions*, their skepticisms, to get at the differences in their *arguments* and what those differences reveal about the love-hate relation between argumentation and skepticism.

The real target is argumentation theory, not epistemology, exegetical commentary, or historical scholarship. I conclude that it is Virtue Argumentation Theory – with its focus on *how* arguers argue, its distinction

between *skills* and *virtues*,¹ and its embrace of the difference between *rational* and *reasonable* arguing² – provides the best lens for understanding and appreciating the lessons that can be learned about argumentation and skepticism from this idiosyncratic trio.

2. The Skeptical Bias

Begin with the claim that argumentation has built-in biases towards skepticism. This needs some qualification because some argumentation is not concerned with knowledge at all, except in a very tangential way, so the focus here is on arguments about things like whether God exists or if epiphenomenalism is a viable theory of mind rather than arguments about who should take out the garbage or which restaurant we should go to for dinner. Within that restriction, however, *all* argumentation has the means to be *skeptical* argumentation. Not all forms of argumentation exhibit all of the biases to the same degree, but the gravitational attraction that skeptical positions exert on argumentation can always be felt. It is not irresistible, but it is always present. Ironically, some of the very best skeptical *arguments* – that is, arguments *for* skepticism – are not very good examples of skeptical *argumentation*, while arguments for dogmatic conclusions often show the clearest effects of the skeptical slant.

Argumentation's skeptical biases can be put into three categories: those built into the *rules* of play, those embedded in the *skills* for playing, and finally some connected to the *decision* to play. I'll start with the rules.

¹ Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* is the *locus classicus* for raising the question of how virtues and skills relate, but the question remains open. For example, Zagzebski (1996 p. 150), comments, "I suggest that Aristotle's distinction between qualities that can be taught and those that are acquired by imitation and practice is closer to distinguishing skills and virtues, not intellectual and moral virtues." The distinction adopted here largely follows that of Annas (2011 p. 19), in its emphasis on the "need for learning and drive to aspire" to distinguish genuine virtues from the mere "mastery of technical matters" found in physical skills, knacks, and talents.

² Keating (1996) traces the distinction back to Kant; Toulmin (1997) finds it in Aristotle.

2.1. The rules of argument

When it comes to arguing, it is a fundamental principle that *everything is arguable*, so we can argue for or against skepticism directly. But that fundamental principle of argumentation is also the source for additional argumentative advantages for skeptics. If everything is arguable, then nothing is beyond dispute. If disputability entails dubitability, and if, as some accounts maintain, genuine knowledge must be indubitable, then it would be “game over” as soon as play starts. Skepticism would be written into the ground rules for argumentation.

The relations between the disputable, the dubitable, and knowledge are surely more complex, and therein lies the interesting story. We can dispute things that we know and do not doubt; we can even dispute things that we cannot doubt. Argumentative possibility³ is not limited by either psychological or epistemological possibility. Nor is it limited by logical possibility. The presence of contradictory, absurd, or otherwise impossible premises does not spell the end of reasoning or arguing: “Yes, I know that there *cannot* be round squares, but what if there were such things? How would they register to us as percepts and concepts? On my account, they would not register at all – and I think that is the right answer because...”

The rules of argument do not restrict argumentative possibility at all, and that gives the skeptic more than enough leeway to challenge any claims to knowledge.

In practice that leeway is not unlimited. There are constraints on what can be argued. Religions declare some topics taboo; social conventions and cultural contexts put other topics beyond the pale; and at the local level, both casual conversations and critical discussions have to take some things for granted. There are occasions when it is completely reasonable to opt out of an argument with, “*Now is not the time to argue*” or “*This is not the right place to argue*” or “*We are not the right people to be arguing about this.*”

Things are different in theory. Anything can be put on the table by any-

³ The argument for this very broad concept of “argumentative possibility” is developed in Cohen (2004b).

one at any time. In the arena of pure reason, “*Not here*,” “*Not now*,” “*Not this*,” and “*Not us*” have no place. There is nothing to stop a difference of standpoint from becoming a full-fledged dispute.

Four things noticeably tilt the field towards the skeptic: the rules of argumentation are themselves fair game for arguing; every premise used in justifying other claims can also be questioned; there is no limit on the objections that can be brought forth; and previously closed questions can always be re-opened.

Each of these possibilities represents a permanent opening for the persistent skeptic, especially in her natural role as the opponent in an argument. If we, acting as proponents for a thesis, can be asked to argue about the rules for arguing before we can argue about any subject – creating a new preliminary stage for the argument – then we can also be asked to argue about the rules for arguing *about the rules for arguing* before we can get that prior stage started. That way leads to a regressive series that can’t be crossed. Ground-level arguing is prevented from getting the traction it needs to get going. If, somehow, we did get an argument under way and began offering justifications for our standpoint, we could then be asked to provide justification for any justification that we offered, and justification for that justification, and so on, leading to an infinite regress in another direction. This time the regress prevents the argument from ever finishing. Furthermore, if we somehow managed to start an argument and reach the conclusion, we are always open to questions and objections. Opponents are limited only by their cleverness in raising questions and objections and their determination and stamina in continuing to raise them. Finally, were we to start an argument, reach the conclusion, and even achieve dialectical closure, there is still the problem of a determined opponent who keeps re-opening the question. Nothing can be finally established; consensus cannot be forced.

Not only is it permissible, at least in theory, for arguers to put whatever they like on the table, it is also permissible for arguers to take things off the table. We can retract our commitments in the course of an argument and retreat from our positions. While this option gives skeptics another advantage, it is, as they say, “a feature not a glitch” of argumentation. It is an option that makes it possible to modify, refine, and improve our standpoints

in the course of an argument in response to objections and questions – and that is a very good reason for arguing in the first place. It provides a strong incentive to submitting our views to trial-by-argument because it creates room for *successful* proponents to take away epistemological gains from arguing.

The flip side of the option to revise one's position is that it is license for unsuccessful proponents to *move the goalposts*. Thus, just as skeptically inclined arguers can sabotage a critical discussion by putting things on the table *ad infinitum*, they can undermine the possibility of successfully concluding an argument by abandoning any commitments that may have been made along the way. Maneuvering a skeptic into the role of a proponent, rather than opponent, does not help.

All of these features of argument are ripe for abuse, but they are also the ingredients needed for successful argumentation.

2.2. Argumentation skills

The fact that the rules of argumentation offer advantages to the skeptic is not sufficient to make skepticism the inevitable outcome of all arguments. It takes skill to be able to exploit those advantages. Because the skill sets for argument and for skepticism overlap so significantly, it is precisely the most skillful arguers who are posed to become the most formidable skeptics. In practice, the uneven distribution of argumentation skills among skeptics and dogmatists can further tilt argument's playing field towards skepticism.

There is potential chicken-and-egg problem when it comes to the identifying argumentation skills. If argumentation skills are those talents that enable one to argue well, but arguing well is simply a demonstration of argumentation skills, then neither could be defined without the other. The problem dissolves under analysis. The "arguer's skill set" is a composite: it is the union of several sets corresponding to the different roles that arguers fill. The creative skills employed by the proponent who constructs an argument for a position, for example, need not be the same as the analytic skills that enable an opponent to find weaknesses in that argument. Hilary Kornblith makes this point quite explicitly: "Reason-giving requires a wide range of skills that need not be present in the reasons-responsive person..."

the ability to form one's beliefs in a way that is responsive to evidence is not at all the same as the ability to present reasons for one's beliefs."⁴

As a gloss, I would add that being skillful in an argument's primary roles – proponent or opponent – does not automatically entail skillfulness in the ancillary roles of judge, arbiter, or even just spectator.

Naturally enough, it is the skills exhibited in the role of the opponent in an argument that are most useful to the skeptic. One way to argue *against* a proposition, P, is to argue *for* not-P, but since the skeptic's default is non-belief rather than disbelief regarding candidates for belief (better, because it is knowledge claims rather than beliefs that bother the skeptic: the absence of a *knowledge claim* rather than a claim to knowledge of the negation), it suffices to undermine P rather than establish not-P. Thus, such opposition skills as

- finding weaknesses in an argument
 - raising good objections
 - asking pointed questions
 - challenging the premises
 - identifying hidden assumptions
- and • shifting the burden of proof

all fit very, very neatly into a skeptic's repertoire. Other opposition skills can certainly be used in skeptical arguments, but these are particularly congenial to being exploited for that purpose.

There are two things to note about this list. First, while these are all significant and generally praiseworthy talents to bring to bear in an argument, none of them is actually necessary for proponents when *constructing* their arguments. It helps to anticipate objections and to recognize one's assumptions, of course, but arguments can be constructed without doing so. There really are different skills sets to consider. Second, these skills can all be taken to extremes, degenerating into excessive quibbling and nit-picking, interpreting-without-charity (and thereby deliberately missing the point), or adamantly refusing to cooperate in any way that would facilitate reach-

⁴ Kornblith (1999, p. 277).

ing any satisfactory closure to the argument. These failures are all examples of exercising one's argumentation skills *non-virtuously*. Not every skill is a virtue; skillful arguers can be quite vicious! Sometimes it takes great virtue to be able to resist letting one's skills turn inherently skeptical argumentation into outright arguments for skepticism.

Similar comments apply to those argumentation skills that are more characteristic of proponents. For the most part, proponent skills tend to be inimical to skepticism because proponents are largely in the business of trying to persuade their targets to accept, i.e., to *believe*, their conclusions. The overarching or prototypical skill is simply

- persuasiveness.

Other proponent skills are relatively neutral with respect to skepticism. Examples would include:

- strategic skill in tactical retreats
 - the ability to frame arguments in the best possible light
- and
- the ability to command attention and be listened to.

Let me focus for a moment on one complex proponent skill-set that is especially valuable for proponents in arguments: the ability to tailor one's argument to take advantage of the opponent at hand. Let us call this "*exploiting one's opponent*." It involves a combination of rhetorical, dialectical, and logical proficiencies. First, one needs the *rhetorical insight* to be able to read one's opponent. This is the interpretive skill an arguer needs to base her argument on premises appropriate to her audience. Arguers who cannot identify their opponents' assumptions will not be in a position to offer reasons for their conclusions that can be expected to have any traction. However, that insight by itself is not enough. Effective arguers also need to exploit that insight. They need *inferential follow-through*, the ability to grasp the implications of those assumptions in order to select the ones that can be of help. The final task, then, is a matter of *dialectical construction*: the creative stage of presenting an argument that will enable the target opponent in the given circumstance to see how those premises connect to the desired conclusion.

Rhetorical insight identifies an opponent's commitments; *inferential*

follow-through knows what to do with them; and *dialectical construction* puts them into action.

Because arguments are not wholly constituted by inferences – the dialectical and rhetorical dimensions cannot be ignored – the job for proponents in arguments is not simply a matter of drawing the right conclusion from the given premises. More often than not, the arguer’s task is just the reverse: *finding the right premises for the given conclusion*. It is a matter of “reverse engineering” the inferences. Together, rhetorical insight, inferential follow-through, and dialectical management enable a proponent to exploit an opponent’s conceptual resources for the proponent’s ends. Of course, this is true for any arguer, but I believe the skeptic is particularly well situated to exploit these skills with any but the most closed-minded of dogmatists. Even just the minimum opening provided by anyone open-minded enough to engage in argument at all is enough for the seeds for skepticism to take root, so if we are resolute in the quest to find premises appropriate for skeptical arguments, we will succeed. As we shall see, the network of concepts surrounding and constituting argumentation – inferences, objections, questions-and-answers, debate, etc. – inevitably includes notions that already contain fertile seeds for skepticism.

As ever, the exercise of these skills is subject to abuse.

I’d also like to introduce and address the concept of third-party or “non-combatant” skills. For more nuanced analytic purposes, these might be divided into different subgroups of skills needed by judges, juries, commentators, spectators, referees, and any others connected to the argument, but for the purposes understanding how skepticism and argumentation relate, they can be grouped together. It may seem odd to count spectators as participants in an argument, but there are a couple of reasons for doing so. On the one hand, like the primary protagonists, they are agents who can judge the argument satisfying or not. If third-party spectators are not satisfied, that would be *prima facie* evidence that the argument was not *fully* satisfying. On the other hand, all of these non-combatant roles are themselves subject to being judged as having been performed well or not. To varying degrees, the quality of their performance contributes to the satisfactoriness of the argument as a whole.

The one skill I want to bring into focus is *open-mindedness*. By open-mindedness, I mean the ability and willingness to consider objections to

and perspectives that are incompatible with one's own standpoint – and to do so in good faith.⁵ Open-mindedness is not the same as skepticism. One can be both open-minded and dogmatic at the same time. It may not be an easy epistemic trick, but it is entirely possible to be deeply committed to one's beliefs while remaining open to the possibility of counterevidence and counterarguments. To be sure, strongly held beliefs are potential road-blocks on the way to skepticism and open-mindedness helps clear the road, so they are often aligned.

It might seem odd to label open-mindedness as a *skill*, rather than an attribute or characteristic or property or state-of-being. It is generally thought of as the virtuous form of the skill whose lack is dogmatic closed-mindedness and whose excess is credulity. That account misses something important: being closed-minded is *not* the only way lack the virtue of being open-minded. An open mind is open to reason, so being inattentive or uninterested is the functional equivalent of willful, dogmatic deafness to reasons. A disengaged spectator is no more persuadable than one whose mind is made up.

Open-mindedness is a pattern of mental behavior that one can consciously choose. And we can improve with practice. It is also something that judges, juries, referees, and audiences need in order to be good judges, juries, referees, and audiences – but it is not something that is of obvious utility to proponents and opponents. Indeed, it can even have *disutility* for them: for proponents making their cases or opponents offering objections, an open mind can diffuse their energy. The blinders provided by a closed mind can certainly help keep one focused on the task at hand!

Of course, the fact that open-mindedness is not of obvious utility does not necessarily mean that it has no utility or negative utility for protagonists. Normally, it has great utility, particularly if the goal is getting something more cognitively satisfying out of an argument than just winning.

And once again, we have a skill that can be abused by taking it to extremes.

⁵ See Hare (1985) for a general account of open-mindedness and Hare (2003) for the more specific issue of how open-mindedness relates to the question of fair and impartial consideration of opposing viewpoints.

3. Argumentation and choice

There is one more aspect of argumentation that is rather friendly to skepticism: argumentation requires *agents*. It is an act, something we *do* rather than an exterior event in our lives that happens to us. Arguing is a *choice*, and it can be a *rational* choice. It is not forced. In addition, even after entering into an argument, arguers retain the option of choosing to opt out at any time, up to and including any resolution that is reached. That is, we can summarily reject arguing the conclusion of an argument – *and we can do it without necessarily becoming irrational!*

The first point is that choosing not to argue can be rational. In some ways, this is simply the early problem of finding a foundation played out in another arena. How could there be reasons for reasoning that someone who is not already reasons-responsive would find compelling? This time the argument is not about which rules to follow when we argue, but about whether to argue at all. The result, however, is the same: an infinite regress. There is a choice to be made. Thus, in addition to preventing arguments from getting started by arguing about the rules for arguing, determined skeptics have the additional tactic of arguing, for any given topic, about whether to argue about it. Even without a pre-argument argument about whether to argue, we can simply opt out⁶: “*I have better things to do now than argue with you.*” There are many occasions when these tactics are rational. Therefore, it is not the action-types themselves that are irrational (although specific instances are more often than not *unreasonable*).

One way that this plays into the skeptic’s hand is that if an argument is about establishing knowledge or providing compelling reasons for belief, he can simply choose not to argue. The skeptic does not need to put himself into that position.

The second point is that choosing to opt out of an argument after it is

⁶ As Grice (1989) emphasizes, opting out of conversational rules is very different than violating them. Thus, the decision to avoid arguing cannot count as a *fallacy*. However, it certainly can count as being unreasonable, i.e., of transgressing against the principles of reason. Therefore, it is a mistake to identify the principles of argumentation with the principles of reason, unless the principles of argumentation include rules about when to argue and when not to argue, in addition to principle concerning *how* to argue.

underway also need not be irrational. Even the choice not to accept the conclusion of a well-conducted critical discussion is not necessarily irrational. For example, consider this scenario that has been played out time and again in mathematics classes. Someone presents a putative proof that $1=0$. There are several of them in general circulation, trading on division by zero, taking positive and negative square roots, playing fast and furious with infinities, or some other fallacy. Try as he might, the uninitiated might not be able to locate the error, with all his questions answered and his objections parried. In desperation, he resorts to a meta-argument. The proponent might be equally baffled by it, so there need not be any insincerity or duplicitousness. At that point, the opponent might say something along the lines of, “*Well, the argument looks good to me, but the conclusion is so clearly absurd that there has got to be something wrong with it because really good arguments don’t work that way. Perhaps with enough time I’d be able to find the error or, if not, then I am sure that someone cleverer than I am at mathematics would be able to help me out. So, even though it looks sound to me and I cannot find any fault with it, I still reject it.*” There is a meta-argument here, viz., in its use of the premise about how good arguments work. The retreat to the meta-level to reject this argument does not strike me as irrational in the least. After all, even some philosophers, those unimpeachable exemplars of reason, have been known to avail themselves of this same strategy, *ceteris paribus*, when it comes to arguments for – or against – the existence of God. It might not be very open-minded, but neither is it necessarily irrational.⁷

But as with the other gambits, this too can be taken too far.

4. Three Skeptics

Let me turn now to the three philosophers mentioned earlier: Sextus Empiricus, Nagarjuna, and Zhuangzi. What unites them as skeptics is their antipathy to dogmatic knowledge claims; what divides them is their *argumentation*. It is not just that they offer different arguments arriving at different conclusions, but that they offer different *kinds* of arguments exhibit-

⁷ This argument is adapted from Cohen (2004, ch. 5).

ing different attitudes towards argumentation and different conceptions of what arguing is all about.

4.1. Nagarjuna

The 2nd century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna was the most logically rigorous of the three. His arguments are presented as systematic attempts to establish a position. Ironically, Nagarjuna's ultimate position denies that there is any ultimate Truth so his "position" is that there is no position, at least not in any Archimedean sense. Nevertheless, his arguments are exemplary instances of the argument-as-proof conception. He carefully laid out his premises and he diligently drew out their logical consequences. He also was very conscientious about anticipating and rebutting the objections his peers had already raised or would likely raise against his arguments, so his arguments also earn high scores dialectically.

There is the making of a paradox here insofar as apparently *apodeictic demonstrations* lead to the denial of Truth. Nagarjuna's denial of Truth, i.e., his assertion of the Truth of No Truth, avoids outright self-contradiction, however, because Nagarjuna's account of true assertions does not involve grounding them in anything genuinely objective. His own assertions are not excepted.⁸ On his account, the predicates we use to categorize objects are all conventional constructions, devoid of any permanent essence. This applies to the truth predicate too: "Truth" does not apply to anything objective, *ex parte re*, or "really real." It has only "*dependent origination*" rather than its own independent essence. It is characterized by "*emptiness*." But this same *caveat* also applies to all of its correlates, "*Being*," "*non-Being*," "*essential*," "*conventional*," and, crucially, "*emptiness*" itself. The profound Truth of No Truth is to be read as just one more linguistic and conventional construction rather than anything ultimate.⁹

⁸ Garfield (1995, pp. 356-358) reads the closing of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhya-makakarika* as telling us to regard "all of these necessarily conventional designations as characterizations of an ultimate nature that is ultimately uncharacterizable" and sees in that a remarkable anticipation of the close of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with its apparent dismissal of all of his own "propositions" as revealing that they themselves qualify as nonsense.

⁹ Garfield (1995, pp. 311-321) develops this line of thought.

Nagarjuna's most common gambit takes a given concept and show how it was intertwined with others to lead to the conclusion that no things are what they are independent of everything else. Causes cannot be causes unless there are effects, and vice-versa; parents cannot be parents unless there are children, and vice-versa; and the same for the future and the past, the name and the named, the knower and the known, and so on. Nothing has an independent essence, (including both nothingness and essentiality).

There is an obvious objection. This line of reasoning ignores the big difference between the way that the mother cannot exist without children and the way that children depend on their mothers for existence. The reader wants to scream out, *"Sure, without children, the mother cannot exist as a mother but that doesn't mean she cannot exist at all! She depends on her children for her motherhood, for her existence as a mother, but not for her existence simpliciter. She herself would exist."* Nagarjuna's reply is ready and waiting, *"What are you speaking of? What is the person, the object, that would simply be? Is it a wife, a daughter, a soul? All of those concepts can be shown in the same way to be inseparable from other concepts. A wife-without-husband? A daughter-without-parents? A soul-without-body? This 'she herself' of which you speak is an elusive will-'o-the-wisp, an illusion. There is no fixed essence belonging to a metaphysically independent entity and, therefore, no objective thing to be an object of genuine knowledge."*

From a perspective well after the analytic "Linguistic Turn," I take the point to be the familiar but still unsettling one from philosophers as diverse as Wittgenstein, Quine, and Derrida that no description captures the thing itself. The problem is that we seek to define things, but it is only words that can be defined, not things. And even at that, very few words are actually susceptible to the kind of definition that we demand to express the dreamt-of kind of knowledge.

We can put Nagarjuna's point another way: although it is not the only thing we do with language, we use language to *talk about things*. In the act of doing that, we have to make those things *"talk-about-able"* – and then we congratulate ourselves on the great metaphysical fit between the world we talk about and how we talk about it. Stanley Cavell, in commenting on the search for Self, once asked, "How can it be that one among the endless true descriptions of me represents *the* truth of me, tells me who or what I

am?”¹⁰ I read Nagarjuna as has having had a similar insight but with regard to all things.

Which proponent skill does Nagarjuna abuse?

Nagarjuna’s great skill was being able to find and exploit inconsistencies in our thinking about language, thought, knowledge, and being. The paradoxical air of trying to *prove* that there are no truths is resolved by tracing Nagarjuna’s conclusion back through his arguments to its source: his mastery of the crucial combination of proponent-arguer skills mentioned earlier – *rhetorical insight*, *inferential follow-through*, and *dialectical construction*. He was able to find the openings for skepticism that are already present – and, in fact, deeply embedded – in our thinking. He exploited the gap between our persistent essentialist demands for precise definitions and our equally persistent inability to provide them.

To be sure, if language is a tool for *communication* rather than a system of *representation*, then we do not actually need to “know” what our words mean – in the sense of being able to define them via necessary and sufficient conditions – for those words to be perfectly serviceable, or for us to know how to use them. We don’t need to know what a game “really” is in order to know that Nagarjuna is playing a game with our knowledge. Recall the sage observation that often the real difficulty in getting to the bottom of things is knowing when to stop. For many purposes and contexts, Nagarjuna’s follow-through went too far. He assumes, reasonably enough, that his opponent means something by his words, but presumes, not so reasonably, that this means there will be a definition to refute. His philosophy may be rational, but perhaps not reasonable; his argumentation is *skillful*, but perhaps not *virtuous*.

To be fair, I have been dealing with just the de-constructive part of Nagarjuna’s philosophy from the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. There, he targeted such important components of knowledge as cause-and-effect, knower-and-known, and sign-and-signified, but he targets *their essentialist senses*. Skepticism results from his arguments only when the conceptually dependent concepts he individually de-constructed are not collectively re-constructed. He did offer a skeptical reconstruction, much as David

¹⁰ Cavell (1979, p. 388).

Hume did with causation. Knowledge *in its unreconstructed sense* does indeed remain elusive, but it, too, can be rehabilitated along with the others. Indeed, knowledge, reason, and argumentation, in their re-constructed senses, are integral components of Nagarjuna's overall project: there is a cognitive part to achieving nirvana. Insights into the nature of suffering, i.e., its emptiness, are necessary for escaping it, and "insight can only be gained through reasoning and hence language and thought."¹¹ Argumentation is the vehicle. That, however, is part of a different argument.

4.2. Sextus Empiricus

Sextus is the easiest to analyze from the perspective of argumentation theory and his argumentation offers a clear case for thinking of argumentation in terms of skills and virtues. He is a classic Pyrrhonian skeptic who conscientiously tries to refrain from claiming any knowledge. The central Pyrrhonian idea is that for our own peace of mind we should try to resist our natural inclinations to take dogmatic positions. Mental tranquility – *ataraxia* – is the ultimate goal of his argumentation. Neither established knowledge nor confident belief is the target. Dogmatic beliefs bring with them the possibility for error and, thus, the attendant worries that we might indeed be wrong. Belief, inconveniently, is rather hard to avoid. It takes work, and that work takes the form of *counterarguments*, rather than arguments.

Since Sextus is trying to refrain from any standpoint, he has nothing to argue *for* but plenty to argue *against*. He does not need positive arguments because he is not concerned with establishing a position. Nor is he concerned with convincing his interlocutors: their beliefs are not something to worry about either. Thus, the goal of Pyrrhonian argumentation is neither *proof* nor *persuasion* – the two most commonly cited *teloi* for arguments. While Sextus has no use for either proof or persuasion, he does have use for argumentation: he needs counterarguments to inoculate himself from succumbing to others' arguments. It is the Cartesian project in reverse: instead of fighting the Skeptics with their own weapon, doubt, Sextus fights the dogmatists weapon using their own weapon, argumentation. However, because he religiously assumes the role of an opponent rather than a pro-

¹¹ Garfield (1995, p. 298).

ponent, he offers *general strategies* for constructing counter-arguments instead of *specific arguments*.

Our questions are, first, which argumentation skills does Sextus characteristically use in his *counterarguments*? Next, how does he *abuse* those skills to end up as a skeptic? That is, what, in the end, makes his argumentation *rational* but *unreasonable*? And what, finally, is the missing *virtue*?

In the course of the *Outlines*, Sextus cites virtually all the tools that are available to opponents, with a particular fondness for playing the “*How-do-you-know?*” card – the wild card that can always be played and can never be trumped. Of course, the fact that it is always *rationally* permissible to ask for further justification for any claim does not mean that it is *reasonable* to ask for it for every claim.

There are two ways to think about what goes wrong when an arguer follows, or threatens to follow, the justification regress up the infinite branch of the Pyrrhonian (or “Münchhausen”) Trilemma.¹² First, it betrays a lack of any real *sense of proportion*. Whether that is best thought of as a specific virtue or as some second-order or super-virtue, it is what distinguishes exemplary arguers from merely good reasoners. In the context of a philosophical debate about epistemological foundations, I suppose it could be taken as evidence of intellectual tenacity, but in most contexts it is more often a willful refusal to cooperate in argument with no more intellectual integrity than a filibuster. And that points to a second way of characterizing the problem: it is disingenuous. *Sincerity* is another missing virtue.

Sextus reveals his own lack of serious engagement with argumentation when he writes of the value of *weak* arguments: there are times, he writes, when weaker arguments are actually preferable to stronger arguments.¹³ Weak arguments are just what you need when confronted with someone else’s weak arguments. Since a strong counter-argument will do a better job than a weak one in defeating a weak argument, Sextus is admitting that defeating opponents’ arguments is not his real goal. The goal is disarming or resisting them. Stronger arguments do that, of course, they run

¹² The “Pyrrhonian Trilemma” (or “Pyrrhonian Problematic”) generally refers to the three options for justification chains – infinite regress, arbitrary terminus, or circularity – represented by the second, fourth, and fifth of Agrippa’s “Five Modes” presented in Bk. I, ch. xv, pp. 40-43 of Sextus Empiricus (1994).

¹³ Sextus Empiricus Bk. III, ch. xxxii.

the risk of convincing the arguers who uses them as well as the arguers against whom they are directed. The fact that you may be deploying what *you yourself know* is a weak argument is sophistry, in the most pejorative modern sense of the term. Harry Frankfurt has another name for it.¹⁴ Sextus thought it was fair play; what it really is, is bad faith and most certainly not an example of virtuous argumentation.

4.3. Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi presents a much more unusual and challenging case for argumentation theory. The unusual part is that in a reversal of Sextus and Nagarjuna, Zhuangzi's initial skepticism gives rise to his *non-argumentation* rather than arising *from* his *argumentation*. The challenging part is simply that Zhuangzi *doesn't argue*. Or at least, that's how it seems. What he doesn't do is *present* arguments, but that does not mean there aren't any arguments *present*. What he does do is present a series of stories, parables, anecdotes, and even jokes, all with the aim of persuading his readers of the wisdom, value, and truth of an interconnected array of actions, attitudes, and beliefs. Arguments are where we find them, and we can find them here. If we understand arguments broadly to include any attempt at rational persuasion, then Zhuangzi's arrangement of stories can indeed be read as arguments.¹⁵

It is easy to get caught up in the whimsy of *The Zhuangzi's* parables and lose sight of the forest for the trees. The surreal fantasies of giant birds, thoughtful trees, and dreaming butterflies are all meant to be lenses for looking at the world. The parables that celebrate lowly, menial tasks like butchering an ox and catching cicadas, *elevate* them and find *meaning* in apparent *meaninglessness*. Conversely, the parodies ridiculing scholars

¹⁴ Harry Frankfurt (2009).

¹⁵ If, as is generally accepted, the organization of *The Zhuangzi* text is the result of many editors over many centuries, then an argument reconstructed on the basis of the details of the arrangement of stories is not actually due to Zhuangzi, the person. But by that same token, neither is the text actually Zhuangzi's. Regardless, we can still attribute "the arguments of *The Zhuangzi*" to "the author of *The Zhuangzi*" as unproblematically (i.e., just as problematically) as we can make that attribution with other author-and-text pairs.

pierce the façade of apparent *meaningfulness* to expose the ultimate *meaninglessness* of their carefully crafted words.

The Zhuangzi takes special aim at logical disputation, often in the person of the logician Huizi. He is a recurring presence in the text, sometimes as an admirable figure but more often as a foil. Despite the text's celebration of skillfulness, Huizi's great skillful at argumentation comes under critical attack, especially when the pursuit of knowledge by way of argumentation devolves into mere gamesmanship with words. Arguments are derided as "mere glue" but even seeking after knowledge is "an addiction" and the "crime of the sage," while knowledge itself is characterized as "curse" and "an instrument of evil."¹⁶ The wisdom of the Ancients was held up in stark contrast as something that was complete but completely without words. Words discriminate between things, and that is the first step to rendering the Tao "deficient." Language cannot accommodate that wisdom.¹⁷

The irony can hardly be missed: Zhuangzi puts words to use to express how useless words are. The irony is doubled, however, when these comments are paired with the passages *exalting* uselessness. At the end of the first chapter, Huizi tries to dismiss Zhuangzi's words as big and useless, like the old gnarled tree in his village that was too knotty and twisted for any carpenter to bother with. Zhuangzi's responds by pointing out that the tree's "uselessness" is not merely harmless – "*Why not let it be a tree?*" – but precisely what enabled it to become big and old. The point is extended three chapters later when a similarly "useless" old tree ("*As a ship it would soon sink, as a coffin it would soon rot, as a tool it would soon break, as a door it would leak sap, as a pillar it would bring infestation*") appears to the carpenter in a dream to explain how its uselessness is what allowed it to become a sacred shrine. It is a magnificent and transcendent uselessness!¹⁸

Words fail; argument is futile; analytic reason is just not the way to engage with the world. What emerges might be better characterized as an anti-rationalism, or even an anti-intellectualism, than a kind of skepticism.

¹⁶ These are from the translation by Hamill and Seaton, Chuang Tzu (1998, ch. 5, p. 39; ch.10, p. 70; ch. 9, p. 65; ch. 5, p. 39; and ch. 4, p. 23, respectively).

¹⁷ *Chuang Tzu* 1998, chapter 2. It echoes the opening of the *Tao Te Ching*: "The tao that can be told/is not the eternal Tao/The name that can be named/is not the eternal Name."

¹⁸ This version is from the translation by B. Ziporyn, Zhuangzi (2009, ch. 4 p. 30).

Yes, our cognitive powers are limited but the positive takeaway is that there is more to our lives than reason, and that is the most important part. The deepest truths about the Way may be ineffable but they are not inaccessible. Knowing is not the only way we can relate to or have access to the world. Confucius made this explicit in the *The Analects*:

*To know the Way is not as good as to love it, and to love it is not as good as to take delight in it.*¹⁹

Zhuangzi takes the idea even further, turning it into a more negative point: not only is book-learning unnecessary and unimportant, that sort of knowledge can be positively detrimental for the kind of *know-how* that we need for living well. Unlike Cook Ting whose skillful butchering brings him closer to the Tao, Huizi alienates himself from the Tao by the exercise of his argumentative skills. He cannot become One with the words of his argument.²⁰

The presence of Huizi practically begs for a diagnosis in terms of argumentation skills that are manifestly present and virtues that are egregiously absent. Huizi's skills are those of a verbal warrior: his words and his knowledge are weapons and he is always ready to engage in complex, tactical disputes. Zhuangzi is the opposite: he is elusive, perhaps confrontation-averse, and his interests are too broad to be confined by the rules of a critical discussion. It is not that he lacks the discipline to refrain from following red herrings, but that he has a curiosity powerful enough to escape those rules. These are not a combatant's flaws; they are a non-combatant's positive attributes.

Zhuangzi's missing virtue, then, is the mean between being too argumentative and not being argumentative enough. Being willing to argue when the circumstances are right is an argumentative virtue. There seems to be no common name for this virtue. Perhaps "engage-ability" would

¹⁹ *Analects* 6:18-20.

²⁰ For example, Huizi is teased for obsessing about abstractions like 'hardness' and 'whiteness' while unable even to keep awake at his desk (in chapter 5) and shown to be a prisoner of his own rigid definitions of words (at the end of chapter 1 and the subsequent discussion of wordless wisdom in the next chapter; in particular, his inability to appreciate "uselessness" comes into very high relief with the parable of the "useless" tree in chapter 4).

work.²¹ Nor is there a common name for the variety of ways in which someone might be insufficiently argumentative. The question does not concern the reasons, noted earlier, to refrain from arguing on any given occasion. Rather, it concerns the sundry character traits that would prevent one from arguing *when one should*. The list would include such traits as: intellectual cowardliness or unwillingness to stand up for one's principles; indifference or intellectual apathy; excessive agreeableness, whether from being confrontation-averse or too ingratiating; and a stubborn refusal to engage in argument. All of these are cognitive flaws. Huizi may have been overeager to engage in argument and disputation, but Zhuangzi certainly escapes that criticism!

5. Summary and conclusion

We can sum up the epistemological standpoints of these three philosophers roughly as follows: Sextus *doubted* that we can ever really know anything; Nagarjuna *argued* that there really isn't anything *to* know; while Zhuangzi, from the sidelines, *wise-cracked*, "What's so good about knowing anyway? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Next, we can characterize their argumentation, also roughly, this way: Nagarjuna laid out positive, analytic *arguments* for his position; Sextus proposed strategies for generating *counter*-arguments against other positions; and Zhuangzi *avoided* direct argumentation altogether, taking great delight in satirizing those who do argue and offering a motley of parables and parodies instead.

And then, from even just this much, we can extract three different views of what arguments are all about. Nagarjuna treated arguments as *demonstrations* that establish their *conclusions*; Sextus thought of arguments as *tools* to maintain cognitive *equilibrium*; Zhuangzi regarded argumentation as a *linguistic trap*, a red herring along the Way, and perhaps even a sort of pathology *to be avoided*.

Finally, we can offer a diagnosis. From the standpoint of a non-skeptic,

²¹ This is the virtue notably missing in the story of Job, disqualifying God as an "ideal interlocutor." See Cohen (2004a, ch. 1).

each of these philosophers can be accused of abusing one or more of the arguer's skills: Nagarjuna is a past-master with proponent skills; Sextus has full command of the opponent skills; Zhuangzi is the non-combatant *par excellence* – a “conscientious non-objector.”

Nagarjuna's argumentation, Sextus' *counter*-argumentation, and Zhuangzi's *non*-argumentation are all *rational* insofar as they obey, or at least do not transgress against, the logical, dialectical, and rhetorical principles of argumentation. However, they are, arguably, not always *reasonable*. Of course, there is the alternative analysis, to which I am actually rather sympathetic: we can take their lessons to heart, concluding that it is our dogmatic claims to knowledge that do not pass the test of reasonableness. In that case, the real lesson to be taken away from thinking about argumentation in terms of arguer's virtues is that epistemic humility is a virtue to argue for and to argue by.

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