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Research Project for Planned Visiting Professorship to Canada 2023-24

In what follows I outline the research project I aim to work on during the period of my planned research visit at the Toronto Metropolitan University during the academic year 2023-24. I have been working so far in philosophy of language (definite descriptions, quantifier domain restriction, conversational implicatures) and in argumentation theory (especially issues in pragmatics related to argument analysis). The project presented here includes an epistemological dimension. Although the details are far from clear to me, the idea of the research project is to discuss issues at the intersection between epistemology, argumentation theory and philosophy of language.

The first stage of the project focuses on discussing natural language arguments and their evaluation. Natural language argumentation is generally non-monotonic, which means that the evaluation of arguments depends on the relevant information contextually available. This introduces a contextual dimension to the evaluation. A second contextual dimension comes with the variability of the standards of correctness, which might also be different in different contexts. There is widespread agreement in the literature on argumentation theory that argument evaluation is contextual: the variation of both standards and relevant information affects the evaluation of the argument (Govier 1987, Johnson 2000, Goddu 2002). Govier, for instance, develops an “audience-relative account of argument cogency”, which includes a contextualist element. The same argument (e.g. an inductive argument) might be judged as good in a context in which the stakes (and so, the standards) are low and there are no known defeaters of the conclusion, and bad in a context in which the stakes are very high.

I plan to relate this discussion with the recent debates in epistemology on epistemic contextualism. While contextualist and relativist theories of knowledge attributions have been developed in great detail, they have not received much attention in argumentation theory so far. I aim to apply the results from the relativist-contextualist debate in philosophy of language and epistemology about knowledge attributions (DeRose 1992 and others) and attribution of justified belief (Wedgwood 2008). It is not “knows” or “justified” (as applied to beliefs) that I am considering, but “good”, as an adjective applied to arguments. Most argumentation theorists agree that the aim of argumentation is justification or something very close to it (see Mohammed 2016: 224), so the approach looks promising. This does not mean that the application of the framework is straightforward: as Goddu (2005) has shown, epistemic contextualism cannot be straightforwardly applied to argument evaluation for various reasons (one is that the sensitivity of belief does not seem to have a correspondent when it comes to argument).

The kind of “contextualist” approach to argument evaluation popular in argumentation theory, defended by Govier and others, seems to be closer to a *relativist* approach (in the sense of Kölbel 2015). This brings into question the issue of faultless disagreement about argument evaluation that needs to be considered carefully. If argument cogency (or goodness) is context-dependent, then an argument might be judged as good or bad depending on local standards and available information. An objection to this relativist approach is that there are situations in which the correctness of an argument depends on the standards and information available to the *arguer*, not the evaluator. The typical case is



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that of argumentation in contexts of expert knowledge: it is the experts' standards and information that are relevant in evaluating an argument belonging to a field of specialized investigation, be it medicine, technology, chemistry, ecology, law or even philosophy (philosophical arguments are not simply elaborations of pre-theoretical intuitions), and not the layperson's standards and information. Disagreement of this kind between an expert and a layperson is not faultless, as the latter does not have a correct grasp of the relevant standards and information. In such contexts, there is an epistemic barrier that precludes the layperson from realizing a correct assessment of an argument.

This latter observation has received attention in philosophy in the context of the discussion of the correctness conditions for epistemic deference to experts. For instance, Goldman (2001) notes that laypersons have access to only to indirect evidence for a claim belonging to a field of specialized knowledge, which is evidence (of different kinds and quality) that the source is reliable. Huemer (2005), and more recently Grundmann (2021), has argued that when aiming to answer a question such as "Are nuclear waste warehouses safe?" or "Should I get a particular vaccine?" we are facing a dilemma: we either adopt a deferential attitude towards experts in the relevant field and accept the experts' judgment, or alternatively make use of what we might call "autonomous critical thinking". Huemer and Grundmann argue that the former is always the best option, but that the latter is the most popular option. The Critical Thinking tradition, a popular approach to teaching reasoning skills in universities, which has deep intellectual roots going back to philosophers of the Modernity and the Enlightenment such as Descartes, Locke and Kant, places a great emphasis on autonomous reasoning and argumentation, while portraying appeals to intellectual authorities as unreliable or even fallacious (Locke's *ad verecundiam*). This approach to expertise has permeated argumentation theory, where the relevance of expert knowledge in argument evaluation is almost invariably reduced to a discussion of the merits of a particular form of argument, usually called "an appeal to authority". There is one significant exception, however: Stephen Toulmin (1958) and Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984) have defended the view that argument evaluation is field dependent, in the sense that there are specific requirements for a correct evaluation of an argument that belongs a field of specialized inquiry.

Building on Huemer's, Grundmann's and Toulmin's proposals, I claim that correct assessment of expert argumentation requires satisfying certain conditions which the layperson does not satisfy. For this reason, the layperson cannot answer questions such as those mentioned above by making use of the information available to her and her own general reasoning skills. I plan to engage with the literature in argumentation theory and critical thinking and to discuss the contextual conditions in which a person should suspend judgment relative to the assessment of an argument. This has important implications for the discussion of contextualism in argument evaluation that I mentioned at the beginning.

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