

ADAB's reflections on Prof. Stevens' answers

ADAB team

Dear Katharina,

In your answer to Question 3 you present the (virtue) pluralistic approach as an approach that “operationalize resources other than the resources developed by virtue ethics/epistemology/argumentation theory to evaluate arguments.” You then suggest that the pluralist can avoid self-serving eclecticism by showing “that a certain way to behave during argumentation is morally problematic or morally valuable from more than one perspective”—say, that a certain behavior is problematic/valuable from a utilitarian, deontological, and virtue perspective. I think this is an effective strategy for avoiding slipping into self-serving eclecticism, and when the pluralist is successful in implementing this strategy, they are off the self-serving hook. There is another hook, however. The evaluations of the different ethical perspectives do not always line up. Sometimes they are in conflict. An action might be deemed valuable from a utilitarian perspective, but not so from a virtue perspective. Here, all that the pluralist can say is that the action in question is ethically good from a utilitarian perspective but ethically bad from a virtue perspective, which implies a perspectivism that leaves us unable to ethically judge the action as a whole with sufficient confidence. It seems to me that to the extent we want to avoid self-serving eclecticism AND evaluate the action as a whole, we need to address such perspectivism.

A similar point can be made to your answer to Question 1 where you make a very good case for the importance of attending to the ethical dimension of argumentation—that argumentation without an ethical dimension is very problematic and undesirable. I agree and so, let us think of argumentation as a single phenomenon that has several components: epistemic, agreement, persuasion and ethical. Each component corresponds to a type of evaluation and, like before, when the evaluations of the different components are in line, we face no problem. But there will be cases where the evaluations of the different components are in conflict. An argumentation could be, for instance, deemed epistemically robust and persuasive but not virtuous (ex. manipulative). In such a case, the pluralist will be able to say that the argumentation in question is problematic/unproblematic with respect to this or that component, but she cannot pass an evaluative judgment on that argumentation as a single phenomenon.

What the previous two paragraphs indicate is that there is a significant advantage to be gained from moving from a “pluralist framework” to an “integrated framework”. Let me explain:

What we have in both paragraphs is (i) a single item (an action; an argumentation), (ii) the evaluation of this item requires accounting for different considerations (utilitarian, virtue, etc.; epistemic, ethical, etc.), and (iii) these considerations can be in conflict.

A pluralist framework that recognizes the existence of different considerations that have a bearing on evaluation is superior to a monist framework, since it reflects a more holistic approach to, and understanding of, the item under consideration. The pluralist, unlike the monist, can conceptually distinguish between the different considerations. This, however, makes us realize that the different considerations can be in conflict. The challenge is how to proceed from here.

Reductionist-pluralist. One possibility is that the pluralist maintains that the evaluative powers of the different considerations can be reduced to one fundamental consideration. The reductionist-pluralist needs to show that the fundamental consideration can account for our practices of evaluating actions/argumentation and that nothing of value has been lost in the reduction. Assuming the reduction succeeds, proceeding on the reductionist path can solve the problem of conflicting considerations. Such a path, however, is not attractive. Consider, for instance, a pluralist who acknowledges the importance of attending to the ethical consideration of argumentation and recognizes that ethical considerations have a say when evaluating argumentation. Consider, further, that such a pluralist maintains that the epistemic-, agreement-, or persuasion-based evaluations always trump ethically-based evaluations. Such a position robs ethical considerations from having any significant evaluative power. (Note that such a pluralist is consistent with your answer to Question 1).

Coexistent-pluralist. Another possibility is that the pluralist maintains that the different considerations refer to (ontologically) different entities. We can think here of the almost standard position in Argumentation Theory according to which there is a strict separation between argument1 and argument2, and that both coexist in the phenomenon of argumentation. The advantage of such a position is that the argumentation theorist can make use of these different entities (argument1 and argument2) whenever deemed appropriate.

Two points are worth noting here. First, this brings us back to the worry self-serving eclecticism mentioned in Question 3 and addressed above. And, as already discussed, your suggested strategy to deal with this worry is only successful when the different considerations point in the same direction (are not in conflict). Second, the coexistent-pluralist that does not account for the interaction between the different considerations (say the evaluations of argument1 and argument2) might easily end up privileging one over the others. The coexistent-pluralist, however, recognizes the different considerations as legitimate for the evaluation of argumentation and, thus, privileging one over the others implies ignoring those others, which is inconsistent with recognizing their legitimacy.

To recap: The pluralist framework recognizes the existence of different considerations and holds that these considerations have a bearing on evaluation. I tried to argue that reductive pluralism is

unattractive if not self-defeating, and that a coexistent pluralism risks self-serving eclecticism and being inconsistent.

Thus, in order not to fall back into monism it is not sufficient that we be pluralists, we should in addition spell out the connections between the different considerations: we need to account for their interactions and say when and under which conditions one consideration trumps another and why. When we take that additional step, we step into an integrative framework.

There are various ways we can develop and defend an integrative framework, but that is another question. What is crucial to keep in mind, however, is that whether we are aware of it or not, every time we pass an evaluative judgment over an action or an argumentation where different considerations are in conflict, we are relying, implicitly or explicitly, on some integrative framework. The *challenge of integration* (i) arises from the fact that we are dealing with a single item (an action or an argumentation) that requires an evaluative framework that integrates the various considerations, (ii) is most pressing when the different considerations are in conflict, and (iii) calls for a framework that accounts for the interactions between the different considerations in order to determine when and under which conditions one consideration trumps another and why. To pass a judgment on a singular item with conflicting considerations without being reflexively explicit about the integrative framework at work is a form of *evaluative blindness* that, as argumentation theorists, we must work hard to avoid. While there could be multiple ways for articulating an integrative framework, there might be no way around relying on and developing such a framework.