

Argumentation and the social significance of reasons

PATRICK RYSIEW, THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

1. Social epistemology is interesting in its own right. But it can also give us a new perspective on issues in more traditional, non-social epistemology. Jennifer Nagel's very interesting paper is a case in point. Nagel aims to show how social considerations might help to explain some familiar ideas about epistemic justification -- in particular, how Mercier and Sperber's (M&S's) argumentative theory of reasoning might help explain why it's natural to group four basic types of judgment into (what she calls) epistemologically 'hard' (perception, testimony) and 'easy' (inner sense, inference) cases. More specifically, Nagel seeks to use the argumentative theory to shed light on "why we commonly think of perceptually and testimonially supported judgments as justified despite feeling worried, on reflection, that only what is internally available can justify" (p. 21*) -- such that, on reflection, sources such as perception and testimony can appear a kind of epistemic second best.^{1, 2}

Like Nagel, I'm quite open to the possibility that our thinking -- about epistemic matters, and otherwise -- is deeply influenced by social factors. And, like Nagel, I think that there is indeed a natural path (or paths) from M&S's argumentative theory to the asymmetry, and instability, in our epistemic judgments that she describes. However, I am not sure that that path is quite the one that Nagel maps out. Here, having briefly rehearsed M&S's argumentative view and the use to which Nagel puts it, I offer some thoughts on how the argumentative theory might (and might not) help to explain the naturalness of distinguishing between 'easy' and 'hard' cases, in the manner described above.

2. Our ability to reason is manifested in both individual reflection and discursive argumentation. It is typically assumed that the former underpins the latter -- that argumentation is merely the external expression of an individual cognizer's reasoning capacities. But this does not address the question of the ontogeny of our reasoning skills, a question that is not obviously to be answered in terms of any supposed gain in reliability that reasoning might afford. Reversing the traditional order of dependence, Mercier and Sperber argue that "[r]easoning has evolved and persisted mainly because it makes human communication more effective and advantageous" (2011, p. 60b). More specifically, according to the argumentative theory, "reasoning is a tool for epistemic

¹ This instability in our epistemic judgments corresponds to "an awkward relationship between the restriction of justifiers to the internal and the value placed on the effort to reach truth and avoid falsehood" (p. 20*). Nagel describes this as "a tension in epistemological internalism" (*ibid.*). However, insofar as the instability already described above is a general feature of our thinking about the justification of various beliefs, the tension is not restricted only to internalist epistemologies (except insofar as we are all to some extent intuitive internalists).

² While they're very familiar among epistemologists, I am not sure how natural and widely shared the latter sentiments are. Because it would distract from the main issues being addressed here, however, I set that worry aside. Nor will I be raising concerns about the argumentative view itself (which I'm on record as being at least sympathetic to -- Rysiew 2001). The target question, then, is: to the extent that the asymmetry Nagel describes is natural and widespread, how might the argumentative view help explain that?

vigilance, and for communication with vigilant addressees. Its main function is to enable communicators to produce arguments designed to convince others, and addressees to evaluate arguments so as to be convinced only when appropriate” (Sperber *et al.* 2010, p. 378). Here again is the thinking:

Just as an ability to detect certain of its features enables a creature to cope with its natural environment, linguistic communication enables a creature, not simply to pass on this modest sort of knowledge (though it might do that), but to cope with other humans – to pass on information with a view to shaping their minds and, thence, *their* behavior.

The potential benefits of receiving information from others, however, must be weighed against the costs of acquiring *misinformation*. Hence, there arises the need for hearers to evaluate the reliability of both individual speakers and the messages they convey. And among the most obvious ways of doing so is to attend to both the internal coherence of the message and to its external coherence with things already believed.

Meanwhile, from the point of view of the hearer, the next move in “the evaluation-persuasion arms race” (Sperber 2001, p. 410; Sperber and Mercier 2012) would be to anticipate such ‘coherence-checking’. In the case of things not likely to be taken simply on trust by the addressee,³ she can provide an explicit presentation not merely of a given message, but of its internal and external coherence: she will “try to convince her addressee by offering premises the addressee already believes or is willing to accept on trust, and showing that, once these premises are accepted, it would be less coherent to reject the conclusion than to accept it” (Mercier and Sperber 2011, p. 60b). A speaker’s thus offering *reasons* for *p*, her advertising its *coherence* with believed or credible things, functions as a kind of ‘honest display’, and is liable to make the hearer more likely to believe what’s conveyed, thus furthering the communicator’s goal of persuading, and so manipulating, his audience. (So, in the beginning anyway, the principal benefit of *having* reasons is that we’re able to give them.)

Through successive iterations, there arises out of this process skills -- at times explicitly articulated, in the form of rules of logic and rhetoric, etc. -- centering around the effective presentation and evaluation of arguments, skills which both speakers and hearers are then able to exploit in individual cognition. In this way, while it arises simply as a means of manipulating the beliefs and behavior of others (and avoiding being unduly manipulated oneself), the ability to reason can come to serve as an instrument for both effective interpersonal information-transmission and one’s examining, regimenting, and extending one’s own stock of knowledge.

³ It is here especially, Nagel suggests, that source monitoring – keeping track of the origins of one’s belief, most often automatically and without conscious effort -- has obvious advantages. It helps us know what needs to be conveyed in which situations (pp. 9-10*). Like reasoning, it is unlikely that our source monitoring ability is to be explained in terms of its enhancing the accuracy of individual judgment. And like reasoning (as M&S see it), Nagel suggests, at least one of its major functions is social. As to evidentials, Nagel points out that they may have a natural home in contexts of persuasion, where they can serve to indicate “what is being offered as a reason for what” (p. 14*).

3. The argumentative theory offers a novel and intriguing way of thinking about the ontogeny of our ability to reason. But it also promises a new way of thinking about some familiar features of the traditional epistemological landscape. Among the things the argumentative theory might shed light on, according to Nagel, is “why we commonly think of perceptually and testimonially supported judgments as justified despite feeling worried, on reflection, that only what is internally available can justify” (p. 21*).

On the argumentative theory, recall, the impulse to offer reasons for one’s beliefs is liable to kick in when a given claim is expected not to be taken simply on trust. And, Nagel suggests, it is the differential susceptibility of beliefs based on perception, testimony, inner sense, and inference, to meet with such resistance that explains why judgments grounded in perception and testimony can seem, on reflection, to be on shakier ground than those grounded in inner sense and inference. Importantly, this is *not* because of any difference, perceived or real, in the reliability of these types judgments; rather, it is because some of them, by their nature, are going to be more susceptible to public scrutiny and social challenge.

Thus, Nagel writes:

“Judgments that are themselves founded on explicit reasoning from intuitively evident premises will not naturally awaken resistance, even in situations where perhaps they should. We find something instinctively satisfying in hearing the explicit production of reasons for a conclusion, even if these reasons are for example one-sided reasons supporting a conclusion we are antecedently committed to....” (pp. 16-17*)

This, again, is not to be confused with the claim that reasoning is particularly reliable: “on reflection, we can appreciate that explicit reasoning remains vulnerable to distorting factors such as confirmation bias, and to the standing risk that we have taken faulty premises on trust” (p. 17*).⁴ The point rather, as the Mercier-Sperber theory predicts, is that “we are instinctively driven to accept the premise-conclusion patterns that others are instinctively driven to produce.” (p. 17*).

Beliefs based on inner sense also have “a sheltered social status” (p. 17*) – not, again, because they are hyper-reliable (arguably, they’re not), but because their content largely shields them from corrective scrutiny, and because neither their content nor their accuracy is, in any case, something that generally holds much interest for others.

By contrast, judgments of perception *do* often matter to others, and *do* concern a public world readily observable by others. (Many beliefs based on testimony are like this as well.) So mistakes here are much more likely to be noticed, and to matter; because of this, those judgments are much more likely to meet with resistance – to not simply be taken on trust. Thus, even though we tend to take our perceptual beliefs to be unproblematically justified, “[o]ur natural attitude to justification shifts when we expect resistance from others” (p. 20*): knowing that others may well not simply accept some judgment based

⁴ Much recent research has highlighted various respects in which our natural reasoning tendencies encourage or involve various forms of bias and error. For a brief overview of the relevant debate(s), see Rysiew 2008.

on perception or testimony, we may well feel the urge to find some argumentative basis for them. (“[M]uch reasoning is done in anticipation of situations where an opinion might have to be defended” (Mercier & Sperber 2011, p. 68b).) And it may even seem to us, upon reflection, that absent supplementation by reasons such as might suffice to persuade others to accept them, those judgments are epistemically wanting.

4. As Nagel notes, an obvious objection to the foregoing line of thought is that “we can feel [the relevant] instability in our instincts about justification even without a live audience: reflecting in solitude, it can seem to me that I don’t have immediate perceptual knowledge of the printed page in front of me, but only have an interpreted awareness of inner seemings that are compatible with the absence of the objects I take myself to see” (p. 21*). However, even reflection in solitude may not be an appropriate test. As Sperber says,

“Humans, being permanently immersed in society and culture, are, even when on their own, the locus of ongoing cultural processes, and therefore never good examples of truly individual systems of belief production....” (Sperber 2001, p. 402)

In any case, such concerns as I have about Nagel’s discussion don’t have to do either with the extent to which social factors can shape private reflection or with the argumentative theory itself. Rather, as indicated, they have to do with the account she provides of how exactly that theory might help explain the instability in our thinking about the justification of certain beliefs, and a natural asymmetry in our attitudes towards the basic sources of judgment described. The issue again is “why we commonly think of perceptually and testimonially supported judgments as justified despite feeling worried, on reflection, that only what is internally available can justify” (p. 21*). Nagel’s suggestion is that *it is the greater susceptibility to public challenge of perceptual and testimonial judgments* that explains this. They lack the kind of “sheltered” (p. 17*) or “special social status” (p. 20*) that judgments of inner sense, and judgments supported by explicit argument, enjoy.

One wonders whether this is so, however. The point here is not the trivial one that “[a]lmost any judgment one makes may encounter resistance from an audience” (p. 16*). Rather, it is that it’s just not clear that, in terms of susceptibility to challenge, there is in general a marked difference between judgments based on perception, for example, and those accompanied by argument.⁵ It may well be true, as M&S say, that “much reasoning is done in anticipation of situations where an opinion might have to be defended” (2011, 68b); and it may be the (or, a primary) function of explicit, reasoned argument to make the acceptance of a given claim more likely. But both of these points – like the argumentative theory itself -- are neutral as to the asymmetry in question. While perceptual judgments may sometimes meet, or be expected to meet, resistance from the addressee, many times they do not – often, they are taken on trust.⁶ This is what one

⁵ ‘Inner sense’ may well be a special case, and for much the reasons Nagel describes.

⁶ Or at least, they are accepted without having to be accompanied by explicit argument. Epistemologists have discussed whether testimony-based beliefs generally are supported by background reasons, even if they aren’t typically reasoned to and/or without the speaker’s sincerity and competence having been investigated. (See the discussion of Adler 2013, Section 2,

would expect, given that we naturally think of such judgments as justified (p. 21*). And it is because they are often taken on trust that such judgments can be deployed, as they are, as mutually accepted premises in arguments designed to persuade.

As to argument-supported judgments, as Nagel says,

“Judgments that are themselves founded on explicit reasoning from intuitively evident premises will not naturally awaken resistance, even in situations where perhaps they should.” (p. 16*)

However, it is a separate issue whether “we are instinctively driven to accept the premise-conclusion patterns that others are instinctively driven to produce” (p. 17*) – or, at least, whether the instinctive drive to acceptance is any stronger here than in the case of expressions of judgments acquired via perception or testimony. In fact, the arguments others produce often don’t conform to the ideal of obviously legitimate inference from mutually obvious premises. And even when they do, it’s not guaranteed that the conclusion will be accepted – reasoning, after all, is not monotonic: “Realizing that our previous beliefs entail some implausible consequence we had not thought of before may give us reason to revise our beliefs rather than accept this consequence” (Sperber and Mercier 2012, p. 380; cf. Sperber *et al.* 2010, p. 374). So again, that the *function* of explicit argument is to increase the chance of message-acceptance does not ensure that it is often met. (It is the function of assertoric utterances generally, including assertions of judgments based on perception, to produce belief [Bach and Harnish 1978]; but *that* doesn’t ensure that *they* often succeed.) Often the presentation of a given argument is just one step in the dialogical exchange, the back-and-forth of advertising and scrutinizing coherence, which may or may not end in the hearer’s being persuaded of what the speaker says.⁷

5. For these reasons, I am not sure that it is the prospect of challenge from others – the relative ease with which we can expect to get various claims accepted on trust -- that leads us to sort our basic sources into the familiar ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ cases. However, even if *judgments* backed by explicit argument do not have a particularly privileged social status, if the Mercier-Sperber theory is correct, *argumentation* certainly does. And this, I think, holds greater promise of shedding light on the asymmetry, and instability, in our epistemic judgments that’s a familiar fixture in epistemological theory. Here, briefly sketched, are two lines of thought exploring this idea.

First, if the argumentative view is correct, then even though we naturally take beliefs based on perception and testimony to be justified, and even though reasoning holds no special promise of enhancing the accuracy of our judgments, argumentation becomes the public face of legitimate belief. The argumentative view – or rather, the practices that it

and the works cited therein.) But the complement of being taken on trust, for M&S, is requiring explicit argument prior to acceptance. And it’s clear that many perceptual (, testimonial, etc.) judgments of others are so accepted.

⁷ If errors in perceptual judgments may be more easily noticed than errors of inner sense, the same seems true of many judgments based on reasoning (p. 18*). While the latter judgments sometimes concern abstract matters (whether there is a largest prime number, etc.), they often have to do with matters as concrete as do perceptual judgments, and so can be just as subject to potential observational disconfirmation.

describes and predicts -- encourages thinking of legitimate belief in terms of supportability by reasons that any reasonable addressee would accept. (Instances of reports being accepted simply on trust are likely not to grab our attention: since the claims made are not disputed, and since they don't involve reflective engagement, they're likely to slide by unnoticed.) So, if the argumentative theory is correct, we should expect that people will find an argumentational view of *justification* (the property, not the activity), or well-founded belief, to be a natural one to take.⁸ So too, it will be natural to move into thinking that "what justifies a belief [must be] somehow available to the subject" (p. 20*; quoted from Audi 2001, 22). For, of course, factors beyond one's grasp or ken aren't fit to serve as reasons, and can't form part of a justifying argument (Bonjour 1978).

In short, where argumentation is prized – not to mention, where it's the focus of our effort and attention, as reflective epistemic agents – it will be very natural to think about legitimate belief along internalist lines. Backing by accessible reasons becomes the coin of the realm.⁹ And once we are thinking in such terms, judgments based on perception or testimony, unadorned by reasoned argument, can come to seem epistemically lacking. The point, then, is not so much that judgments backed by argument are epistemically *easy*, as it is that they're obviously *in the game*,¹⁰ whereas judgments based on perception or testimony (see n. 6) aren't in the game at all.

A second, closely related line of thought is this. If, in our reflective moments, judgments based on perception or testimony can begin to look precarious, *presenting* such can also put *us* in a precarious position, and not just because our claims might not be taken on trust. Though it doesn't figure prominently in her discussion, one notion that Nagel mentions is accountability:

“We naturally engage in reasoning in situations in which we want to persuade others of a conclusion that they would not accept on trust, but we can also be driven towards explicit reasoning even when alone, simply by the pressure of expected or imagined accountability to others (Lerner and Tetlock 1999).” (p. 13*)

Accountability here is not a purely epistemic phenomenon – it's tied to punishment and rewards, reputation, responsibility, desert (see Audi, p. 20*), and so on, where these are not solely or purely epistemic.¹¹ Because it places reasoning squarely in the social sphere,

⁸ Such a view is common among internalists. For a typical example, see Bonjour 1978.

⁹ And as with money, there is the prospect too that something with merely instrumental value--possessing money, or articulable reasons for one's beliefs -- can come to be seen as having fundamental value. (Compare Goldman and Olsson's (2009) discussion of 'value autonomization'.)

¹⁰ Cf. Lehrer's (2000a) device of 'the justification game'. Lehrer is not confused about the distinction between being justified in believing something and engaging in the activity of justifying it, any more than Audi is (see Nagel, p. 20*). Like Audi, however, he thinks of the former in 'discursive' terms (Lehrer 2000b).

¹¹ “For the purposes of this review, accountability refers to the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Tetlock, 1992). Accountability also usually implies that people who do not provide a satisfactory justification for their actions will suffer negative consequences ranging from disdainful looks to loss of one's livelihood, liberty, or even life (Stenning, 1995).

the argumentative theory brings epistemic matters into direct contact with social values and concerns such as these. And it is plausible that the general importance of such values and concerns encourages reflective worries that only what is internally available can justify, even when we have no specific reason to think that a given report will be challenged. For where we are concerned about such things as accountability, reputation, and responsibility, we're more apt to care about *control*. In the epistemic sphere, engaging in reflective processes and dialogical argumentation -- having accessible reasons for the beliefs we hold, and for which we might be held to account -- can appear to give us that. The materials of reflection and reasoning are propositions and states available to the subject "through consciousness or reflection" alone (Audi, quoted at p. 20*). So engaging in such processes can seem to put one's epistemic fate (and so one's extra-epistemic reputation, etc.) in one's own hands: one need only carefully consider the relevant states and propositions, and one can 'just see' whether and why something is true or likely to be true, and so on.¹²

Of course, it's another question whether such thoughts survive close scrutiny -- whether, that is, the processes in question are any more reliable, and any more free of an element of trust, than their perceptual or testimonial counterparts. I'm among those¹³ who think that they aren't. But the goal here is explanatory, not evaluative. And it should not be controversial that, *given* a concern with being in control of one's intellectual goings-on, a bare reliance¹⁴ on perception or on another's testimony is apt to feel like an uncomfortable form of heteronomy. Insofar as it helps explain a concern for cognitive control, the argumentative theory once again sheds some light on the latter belief.

6. It is ironic, of course, that social considerations might help to explain some of the allure of having beliefs based on reasons, reasons to which one has unproblematic access. The latter is the internalist's stock-in-trade; and internalism is characterized by a movement *away* from having the epistemic status of one's beliefs depend on factors 'external' to oneself or one's first-personal point of view, including social factors. While I have departed from the details of Nagel's account of how the argumentative theory

Conversely, people who do provide compelling justifications will experience positive consequences ranging from mitigation of punishment to lavish rewards that, for example, take the form of political office or generous stock options" (Lerner and Tetlock 1999, p. 255).

¹² "Knowing, or have a justified belief, in the externalist's sense doesn't satisfy our philosophical curiosity, doesn't answer our philosophical questions, because qua philosophers trying to be rational, we want more than to be automata responding to stimuli with beliefs. I would argue that we want *facts*, including facts about which propositions make probable others, before our consciousness" (Fumerton 1988, p. 455).

¹³ In addition to Nagel, examples include Williamson (2000) and Kornblith (2012). A historical source of scepticism along these lines is Reid (for instance, in his discussion of evidence -- 1785/1997, Essay II, Chapter 20).

¹⁴ Again: the contrast between 'bare reliance' or simple trust, on the one hand, and explicit reasoning or argumentation on the other is over-simple, but perhaps harmless enough in the present context: see note 6.

might encourage internalistic thinking, she is surely right that its doing so is one of the theory's interesting features.¹⁵

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¹⁵ My thanks to Cindy Holder, Jennifer Nagel, Jennifer Lackey, Alvin Goldman, and everyone else involved in *Episteme*'s Costa Rica conference.

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