



What Argumentative Bullshit Tells us about Argumentative Vices and Virtues

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Abstract

The study of the problem of argumentative bullshit can be useful to shed some light on the practice of argumentation and the essence of argumentative virtues. Since argumentative bullshit is arguably the greatest threat to argumentation, and it is characterised by an indifference to the constitutive value of argumentation (supporting a claim with reasons), argumentative virtue could be understood as the opposite to that indifference: caring about the practice of argumentation and being disposed to sustain and improve it through their participation in it. Whoever produces argumentative bullshit cares more about certain external ends (reputation, political goals, making fun...) than about argumentative practice, whereas virtuous arguers never lose sight of the value of the argumentative practice. This suggests a MacIntyrean conception of the practice of argumentation, according to which argumentation is a practice with internal goods than can only be recognised and achieved through participation in it, while argumentative virtues are those traits conducive to the appreciation and achievement of argumentative goods.

Keywords Argumentative virtues · Bullshit · Internal goods · MacIntyre · Practice

1 Introduction

The study of vicious attitudes can teach us a lot about virtues. By identifying and highlighting what goes wrong in the most corrupt kinds of behaviour in an activity, it is often possible to draw some conclusions about what is expected from the participants in that activity and about what is the essence of the virtues for that activity. In this paper, I will apply that strategy to argumentative virtues. I will begin with an outline of the concept of argumentative bullshit, which I developed in previous work on the basis of Harry Frankfurt's conception of bullshit. Argumentative bullshit, according to my proposal, consists in an indifference to the constitutive norm of argumentation. In line with what Frankfurt claimed about bullshit, I argue that argumentative bullshit is the greatest threat to argumentation. As such, it is a manifestation of the most vicious kind of behaviour in argumentation. This will be the basis on which I will

propose, in Sect. 3, a conception of argumentative virtues according to which what characterises virtuous arguers is that they value argumentation in itself and are disposed to sustain and improve it through their participation in it. In Sect. 4, I will show how such an account of argumentative virtues suggest the possibility of developing a MacIntyrean approach to argumentative practice and virtues. Finally, in Sect. 5, I will address some concerns that such a conception of argumentation is likely to cause. Hopefully, the result will illuminate more than it obscures about the practice of argumentation.

2 The Problem of Argumentative Bullshit

In the final episode of the popular TV series *Seinfeld*, aired in 1998, the four main characters stand before a judge, accused of failing to help an old woman who was being mugged—thus violating the so-called “Good Samaritan law.” Their lawyer, Jackie Chiles (a parody of Johnnie Cochran, the famous attorney who defended O. J. Simpson in his murder trial), puts forward the following argument in his closing remarks:

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You know what these four people were? They were innocent bystanders. Now, you just think about that term. Innocent bystanders. Because that's exactly what they were. We know they were bystanders, nobody's disputing that. So how can a bystander be guilty? No such thing. Have you ever heard of a guilty bystander? No, because you cannot be a bystander and be guilty. Bystanders are by definition innocent. That is the nature of bystanding.

As the reference to the *definition* of “bystander” makes clear, Chiles is presenting here an argument from classification (Walton et al. 2008, p. 66). According to the scheme of this kind of argument, it can be represented as follows:

All bystanders can be classified as innocent.
These four people were bystanders.
Therefore, these four people were innocent.

This is, of course, a manifestly absurd argument—that is why it appears in a sitcom. But let us take it seriously for a moment. There are two considerations that explain the absurdity of Chiles's argument. First, nothing in the definition of “bystander” states that all bystanders are innocent. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “bystander” as “one who is present but not taking part in a situation or event: a chance spectator”¹. Chiles is simply relying on the fact that “innocent bystander” is a commonly used expression—just as “dear friend” or “vicious attack”—to misleadingly assume that the adjective “innocent” is part of the definition of “bystander.” Second, even if discussions about definitions very often take place in legal proceedings, it seems preposterous to argue that a defendant is innocent or guilty *by definition*.

These are all pretty obvious considerations. So obvious, in fact, that it seems unconceivable that Chiles himself could believe his own argument. Were his argument to be challenged by objections and critical questions, he would be unlikely to take it seriously and defend it. He would be, in other words, unwilling to commit himself to the argument that he has put forward. In previous work, I have argued that such a nonchalant attitude towards the arguments that one uses is a real phenomenon that must be differentiated from the use of fallacies or weak arguments—it is what I called *argumentative bullshit* (Gascón 2021).

The concept of argumentative bullshit is explicitly based on Harry Frankfurt's (2005) analysis of bullshit. According to Frankfurt, the essence of bullshit is an indifference to whether what one asserts is true or false. While liars pretend to make a true assertion that they believe to be false,

bullshitters pretend to report a true fact, but they are not really interested in the truth-value of their assertion (p. 55). Bullshitters do not purport to hide the truth, but rather their attitude towards the truth—their “intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it” (Ibid.).

I argued that the phenomenon that Frankfurt identified in relation to assertions could be fruitfully applied to arguments as well. Obviously, the premises of arguments are usually assertions, so there is a trivial sense in which one can produce bullshit while arguing. However, an arguer can also produce bullshit in a more specifically *argumentative* sense when she is unwilling to commit herself to whether the reasons that she presents really support her claim. As I put it, when an arguer produces argumentative bullshit (Gascón 2021, p. 302):

[...] even though the arguer has produced something in the form of a reason, they do not seem committed to the belief that such a reason supports such a claim—either the arguer expressly refuses that commitment, or it is not plausible to attribute it to them.

The most manifest case of argumentative bullshit is that in which the speaker's utterances have an obviously argumentative purpose—that is, the speaker is obviously involved in an argumentative discussion—but we would be hard-pressed to spell out exactly what argument she is putting forward. This happens very often when slogans or catchphrases are used in place of arguments, or when an argument goes viral and is repeated by people who do not really understand it. In those cases, we can *feel* that something is wrong with the purported argument, but there is no straightforward interpretation of it that could allow us to identify it as a fallacy. We may be tempted to characterise it as fallacious, but, as Hamblin pointed out, an arguer “cannot be convicted of fallacy until he can have an *argument* pinned on him” (1970, p. 225). It is more natural, I believe, to characterise those cases as instances of argumentative bullshit—in which the speaker is not arguing seriously. Perhaps this phenomenon is not very frequent in the law, where standards of rigour are strict (except in comedies such as *Seinfeld*) but it is surely common in the political discourse.²

Frankfurt claimed that, given that the bullshitter does not even reject truth but simply pays no attention to it at all, “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (2005, p. 61). This may be paradoxical, given that, as Frankfurt also remarks, “our attitude toward bullshit is generally more benign than our attitude toward lying” (p. 50). Whereas lying is severely frowned upon, and we readily distrust whoever

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bystander>.

² In Gascón (2021), I provided examples of argumentative bullshit produced by Donald Trump, Kamala Harris and anti-maskers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

is caught in a lie, it seems that people can more easily get away with bullshit. Why then insist that bullshit is more corrosive to epistemic standards in public discourse? I believe that the regrettable deterioration of political discourse during the last decades, characterised by the prevalence of so-called *post-truth* and *fake news*, as well as an increasing concern for fact-checking in journalistic practices, give us the answer. Frankfurt tried to warn us of what could happen if bullshit was not publicly condemned.

What has happened is that apparently people nowadays care less about whether what they assert is demonstrably true or not.³ A famous turning point took place in 2017, after Donald Trump took office as President of the United States. Trump's press secretary said that the audience that attended the event was "the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration," a claim that was widely questioned; in response to the criticisms, Kellyanne Conway, senior counsellor to the President, stated that the press secretary had just offered "alternative facts" (Swaine 2017). Since then, many statements have been made in the public domain with a shocking disregard for evidence and facts. We have seen it in during the Brexit campaign, the QAnon conspiracy theory, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines, and in the disinformation spread by political pundits such as Alex Jones. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the practice of making warranted assertions and relying on what other people assert is rapidly decaying—assertions have lost much of their value.

There is a clear reason why indifference to truth has such a deleterious effect on the practice of assertion. Epistemologists have argued that assertion is governed by a *constitutive* norm which entails that we must only assert what we believe is true. The norm is constitutive in the sense that it applies to all assertions and only to them—so assertions can be characterised as those speech acts that fall under the domain of application of that norm. There is some disagreement about exactly which norm governs assertions: for example, according to Williamson (2000, p. 249), one must only assert *p* when one knows *p*; and, according to Whiting (2013), one must only assert *p* when *p* is true. But what all the proposals have in common is that, in order to conscientiously comply with the norm, one must at least *care* whether what one asserts is true or not. Non-compliance with the norm—which characterises liars—does not threaten the practice of assertion as long as speakers agree that such a norm is in place; however, in the case of bullshit, the problem is not simply non-compliance but *indifference to the norm*. This, I believe, does threaten the practice of

assertion because it leads to the dissolution to the very norm that *constitutes* it.

The same can be said of argumentative bullshit. As I argued in (Gascón 2021, p. 301), an argument can be understood as a speech act governed by an essential condition. Following Bermejo-Luque's (2011) account of the speech act of argumentation with small modifications, I proposed the following essential condition (Gascón 2021, p. 302):

Adducing reasons R with such and such pragmatic force commits the speaker to the belief that R supports a target-claim C.

Regardless of whether one agrees that an argument is a speech act, or that its essential condition can be stated as above or otherwise, justifying claims with reasons undoubtedly occupies a central place in argumentation. If arguers are indifferent to whether their reasons justify their claims, the practice of argumentation becomes unrecognizable. Fallacious arguments and manipulative strategies are surely detrimental to the quality of argumentative discourse—just as the proliferation of lies is detrimental to epistemic trust. Nevertheless, as long as arguers at least *pretend* to fulfil the essential condition of the speech act of arguing—as long as they pretend to be committed to the belief that the reasons they put forward genuinely support their claims—the practice of argumentation is not necessarily threatened. This is why argumentative bullshit "reveals a deeper flaw—or, rather, a deeper perversion of argumentative standards" (Gascón 2021, p. 290).

Given that bullshit (argumentative or not) is so damaging to epistemic and argumentative practices, why is it produced? When Frankfurt presents his famous example of the 4th of July orator who bullshits about the greatness of his country and the divine guidance of its Founding Fathers, he explains (2005, p. 18):

[...] the orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. What he cares about is what people think of *him*. He wants them to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our country, who appreciates the importance of religion, who is sensitive to the greatness of our history, whose pride in that history is combined with humility before God, and so on.

The point of the orator's assertions is not, therefore, to convey some truth, but they surely have a purpose. The orator is interested in what his assertions reveal about himself, in the *ethos* that he constructs in the minds of his audience through

³ I emphasise that this is a tentative claim about what *appears* to be the case. As Frankfurt himself admitted (2005, p. 62), it is impossible to know whether the proportion of bullshit in public discourse has increased.

his speech, rather than in whether his assertions are true of false (see Tosi and Warmke (2016) for a similar phenomenon in ethical discourse). But bullshit can also have other purposes: sometimes the point is to issue an opinion about a political matter, whatever the opinion is and regardless of how informed the speaker is (Frankfurt 2005, p. 64); other times the point is to humiliate an opponent in a competitive debate (in politics or in law, for example); or, finally, bullshit can be used to overwhelm the audience with purported facts.

The same is true of argumentative bullshit. The arguer who produces argumentative bullshit is not really interested in whether she has good grounds for her beliefs. Rather, the argumentative bullshitter's main concern is portraying herself in a certain light, winning a contest, appealing to religious or political sentiments, denigrating her co-arguer, or even making a humorous pun, among many other possibilities. This is what makes her disregard the connection between the reasons that she puts forward and the claim that she is supposedly trying to justify. She is pretending to argue without taking seriously the arguments that she presents.

Let us focus now on argumentative bullshit and sum up what we have seen so far. Argumentative bullshit arguably is the greatest threat to argumentation—even more than fallacies and vices such as dogmatism or timidity—because it involves an indifference to a norm (the essential condition of the speech act of arguing) that is constitutive of argumentation. As such, the attitude behind argumentative bullshit can be said to be the greatest argumentative vice. And what characterises an arguer with such an attitude is that she does not *care* about argumentation in itself. Instead, the argumentative bullshitter merely pretends to be arguing in order to achieve other ends (that are external to argumentation) about which she *cares* much more.

If I am right about that, I believe that it gives us a clue about the essence of argumentative vices and virtues. Perhaps we can identify the main feature of argumentative virtues, what characterises them, by considering the opposite of the vicious attitude that I have described. If the greatest argumentative vice is an indifference to argumentative norms, because it erodes the practice of argumentation, then arguably what characterises virtuous arguers could be that they care about the argumentative practice and are disposed to sustain it when they argue. They believe that argumentative norms are valuable in themselves and they strive to maintain the practice of argumentation in good condition in their community. Let us explore this possibility in the next sections.

3 The Value of Argumentative Virtues

When an arguer distorts the claims of her interlocutors and attacks a straw man, or refuses to pay attention to their arguments, or plays with the meaning of the words in order to confuse them, that arguer is behaving viciously. Why is that? A possible answer is that those behaviours prevent the achievement of the end (or ends) that argumentation produces. Cassam (2019) has proposed such an account in the case of epistemic vices. According to his *obstructionist* theory, epistemic vices are vices because they are obstacles to “the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge” (p. 12). Epistemic virtues, on the other hand, are conducive to knowledge. Given that knowledge is quite clearly the end of our epistemic practices, it makes sense to conceive of epistemic virtues and vices in that manner. Perhaps a similar view could account for the nature of argumentative virtues and vices?

The proposals that have been made of explanations of argumentative virtues follow that line of reasoning. Aberdein (2010) assumes that virtues are supposed to *track* something—by which he presumably means that they reliably produce something. Just as ethical virtues reliably lead to the performance of good actions and epistemological virtues reliably lead to the acquisition of true beliefs, argumentative virtues are supposed to make arguers reliable in producing some result. Aberdein's proposal is that argumentative virtues serve to propagate truth: “virtuous arguers are disposed to spread true beliefs around” (p. 173). The outcome of an argument between virtuous arguers would then be a wider distribution of true beliefs.

Building on Aberdein's proposal, Stevens (2016) argues for a broader conception of the end of argumentative virtues. She agrees with Aberdein that argumentative virtues are conducive to the propagation of truths but, according to her, that is only part of the story. Argumentative virtues, she argues, also lead to “clarifying positions, gaining understanding, reinforcing justificatory connections” and other ways of improving one's belief system (p. 377). Thus, assuming such a broad conception of the improvement of belief systems, her proposal is (Ibid.):

The virtuous arguer is the arguer who is disposed (and regularly acts on this disposition) to engage in argumentation in such a way that his contribution will, overall, further the improvement of the belief-systems of those that participate in the argumentation or get influenced by it in some other way.

And, finally, as is well known, pragma-dialecticians see argumentation as the way to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits. The “basic function” of argumentation is “the

management of disagreement” (Eemeren 2018, p. 20). The point of pragma-dialectical rules is to facilitate such a resolution of disagreement in a reasonable way. So, presumably, in a pragma-dialectical framework, argumentative virtues would be those traits that contribute to the reasonable resolution of a difference of opinion.

I believe that there is much truth in all these theoretical proposals. Successful argumentation often leads to the improvement of the belief-systems of the arguers and sometimes (but not always, or even often) to the reasonable resolution of a difference of opinion. However, I do not think that such an *instrumental* account of virtues—which characterises virtues as conducive to certain good ends or effects (Battaly 2015; ch. 2)—is as plausible in argumentation as it may be in epistemology or ethics. In those fields, it is more or less clear—probably clearer in epistemology than in ethics—what end is pursued. Ethics is concerned with the good or with good actions, while epistemology is mainly interested in knowledge or truth. Thus, ethical virtues must lead to good actions and epistemic virtues must lead to knowledge. But what is the end of argumentation?

Some time ago, Goodwin (2007) argued that argumentation has no specific function. Contrary to what many current theories of argumentation posit, she argued that the function of argumentation cannot be rational persuasion or the reasonable resolution of disagreements, since arguments rarely have that effect. The function of argumentation should be a consequence that arguments reliably have, so if one insists that argument must have a function then “increased hostility” seems to be a promising candidate (p. 76): “The most salient consequence of the joint activities involving arguments is to make the participants mad: this is at least a widely held ordinary view of the function of argument.” That certainly happens more often than persuasion and resolution of disagreements.

Moreover, proposals such as rational persuasion, the spread of truths, or improvement of belief systems cannot cover the whole range of argumentative activities. Hence, those proposals would exclude the possibility that someone could argue virtuously in certain contexts. Think, for example, of competitive debates in college or high school, where the goal is not to convince one’s co-arguer of some truth, to resolve a disagreement, or even to clarify positions. Even if some of those results is eventually achieved, that is not the point of the contest and it is not to be expected. The participants may even have to be insincere if they want to win. Rather, the goal is simply to exercise one’s argumentative skills—to present strong arguments, make poignant objections, and ask the right questions. In that case, it seems that argumentative virtues would have no place, according to the instrumental accounts that we have seen.

Another possible context in which often the truth or the resolution of a difference of opinion are not the immediate concern of the arguers is the law.⁴ Lawyers often need to argue strategically and not worry too much about the truth, especially when defending a client. Usually, the defence counsel must not focus on what really happened, but on what the evidence allows us to conclude. Remember, for example, Johnnie Cochran’s famous defence of O. J. Simpson, centred on the fact that the glove did not fit. In those cases, lawyers can hardly be said to be interested in improving the belief systems of the participants in the discussion or in resolving a difference of opinion, so they could never be virtuous according to the previous accounts. However, I believe they can be. As long as they are seriously presenting evidence and other considerations as reasons that support their claims—that is, as long as they seriously commit themselves to the belief that there is a supporting relation between the reasons and the claims—they are not producing argumentative bullshit. After all, if the glove does not fit, that is plausibly a good reason to doubt the defendant’s guilt.

In the previous section, my analysis of the threat that argumentative bullshit poses suggested a different story from that of the instrumental accounts. The main reason why argumentative bullshit is so damaging to argumentation, I argued, is not that it obstructs the achievement of certain ends, but that it reveals an indifference to the constitutive norm of argumentation. When people cease to care about whether they are providing good reasons for their claims, the activity of argumentation is distorted to the point of being unrecognisable. So, if the most vicious attitude that one can find in argumentation is a lack of care for argumentative norms, the virtuous attitude must also have to do with caring for argumentation. It may well be true that argumentative virtues reliably lead to certain worthwhile ends, but ultimately the way to characterise those virtues must be grounded on the arguer’s attitude towards argumentation: the virtuous arguer cares for argumentative practice.

This suggests an account of argumentative virtues and vices based on the *motivations* and *dispositions* of the arguers.⁵ Virtuous arguers are motivated and disposed to respect, sustain, and improve the practice of argumentation through their participation in it. Vicious arguers, on the other hand, lack those motivations and dispositions. They usually resort to argumentation simply because (and when) they feel that it is the best available means to achieve their ends, but argumentation for them is nothing more than a means. As a consequence, they are willing to adopt an argumentatively vicious behaviour—to be dogmatic, arrogant, manipulative,

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

⁵ I thank Christoph Lumer for reminding me of the importance of dispositions.

heedless of other people's arguments, or whatever—when that serves their interests. If it is widespread, the result of that behaviour in the long run might well be the disintegration of the practice of argumentation.

The problem with vicious behaviour in argumentation, then, is that it damages the argumentative practice. If argumentation is seen merely as a means to achieve other, more valued ends, and if argumentative norms are respected only when (and if) it is beneficial to do so, it is plausible to expect that the argumentative practice will decay—just as the propagation of bullshit in the current post-truth era has eroded the value of assertions. In the worst-case scenario, argumentative discussions might even no longer be recognisable as such, but rather resemble quarrels, public spectacles, or what have you. By contrast, virtuous arguers *sustain* the practice of argumentation. They care about it and maintain it in good condition. Whatever the purposes that virtuous arguers have when they argue—and they usually have a purpose, just like everybody else—those purposes never override the value of argumentation. Virtuous arguers care about argumentative norms, about proper argumentative conduct, about listening to the points of view of others and trying to understand their reasons, and so on.

Notice that the external ends which, in the minds of vicious arguers, override the concern for argumentative practice, do not have to be frivolous or censurable. They might even be quite admirable. The following example will show some implications of my proposal—and why, admittedly, it may be controversial. Imagine a person—let us call her Lucie—who works for a non-governmental organisation in a region that has just been devastated by a hurricane. The organisation delivers food and medication to the affected people. But, of course, in order to do that, they need funding. Lucie has a meeting with a representative of a cooperation agency that will be crucial to secure more funding, so she must persuade the representative that they need it and that the money will be well invested in their organisation. Let us suppose that Lucie already knows the person, including which chords to strike to persuade him. With just a couple of argumentative stratagems, which would not be entirely honest, Lucie could easily get the funding that her organisation needs. On the other hand, she could just put forward the arguments that she finds stronger and most convincing, and hope that the representative will come to see things her way.

That is a clear case in which respect for argumentative practice may clash with external ends. Here, it is not clear what one should do, or perhaps some readers will find it intuitively obvious that argumentative norms should be disregarded in this case. But I will not get here into the issue of what Lucie should do, *all things considered* (although I will address it briefly in the next section). However, I think it is fair to say that, if Lucie finally decided to abandon her

intellectual scruples and use deceitful tactics with the representative, she would not behave *argumentatively* virtuously. Clearly, she would not show respect for argumentative practice and its standards of excellence. Her concern for certain external ends would have led her to disregard argumentative norms. (Again, notice that whether or not that is what she *should* do in the situation, all things considered, is another matter.)

Thus, according to my proposal and contrary to instrumental accounts of argumentative virtues, the value of those virtues can be understood independently of the value of argumentation. Argumentatively virtuous arguers may or may not reliably produce the goods to which the practice of argumentation is supposed to lead—whatever they are. That is not what characterises them. Hence, in order to explain what argumentative virtues are, it is not necessary to postulate a specific goal of argumentation. The continuous practice of argumentation in a community can be argued to lead to more knowledge, better decisions, or resolution of differences of opinion. That is an empirical matter. But what argumentative virtues surely do is to sustain the practice of argumentation—and, insofar as the argumentative practice is worth sustaining, therein lies their value.

4 A MacIntyrean Approach

The account of argumentative virtues that I sketched in the previous section helps explain why many of us feel that someone who shows a blatant disregard for argumentative norms and produces argumentative bullshit is more vicious than someone who is too timid to object to other people's arguments or who fails to listen properly to them. The latter no doubt lowers the quality of the discussions in which she participates, and in that sense she lacks virtue, but the former puts the very existence of argumentative practice at risk. The situation is similar to that which Frankfurt described in the case of assertions: if widespread, bullshit could erode the very practice of giving testimony and asserting purported facts. In the same way, argumentative bullshit is a manifestation of absolute indifference to argumentative norms and its proliferation could make the practice of argumentation impossible—and, for this reason, it is the greatest vice. Perhaps something like that is already happening in certain contexts, such as social networks, where reasonable arguers are increasingly frustrated by the impossibility of engaging in fruitful discussions and are deciding to stop trying or simply leave the social network.

In this section, I suggest a framework in which such a conception of argumentative virtues and vices could make much sense. It is MacIntyre's (2007) theory of ethical virtues, based on his idea of a *practice* with *internal goods*

that argumentative virtues help achieve. He distinguished between the internal and the external goods of a practice, the former being those goods that can only be recognised and achieved by participating in that practice. External goods, on the other hand, can be obtained through other means and correspond roughly to what here I have been calling “external ends.” In order to understand the difference between internal and external goods, as well as the roles of the virtues, MacIntyre discusses the example of a child who begins to learn chess in order to get candy as a reward (p. 188). The child is no doubt motivated to play and even to win—because each time she wins she will get more candy. Her motivation, however, is not based on the goods of chess themselves, but on other goods external to chess. If she could achieve those goods without excelling in chess—for instance, by cheating—she would have no reason not to do it. With time, however, the child may (hopefully) begin to appreciate the activity itself and the goods that are internal to it, such as the analytical skills and strategic thinking that are characteristic of chess, and then she will begin to make an effort to win in order to excel in the game, not just to get some candy. At that point, the child will begin to play virtuously.

We can see in MacIntyre’s example how my proposal of argumentative virtues as characterised mainly by valuing the practice of argumentation in itself and being disposed to sustain it fits into his conception of the virtues. The goods that are external to a practice are contingently attached to it by the circumstances of the moment—just as candy is accidentally linked to chess in the previous example. External goods can always be achieved by alternative means that do not involve participating in the practice in question. Thus, when someone is only interested in external goods, she uses the practice merely as a means to achieve them. Internal goods, on the other hand, are constitutive of the practice and can only be attained by engaging and trying to excel in the practice. The achievement of internal goods requires valuing the practice for its own sake.

Thus, practices, as MacIntyre understood them, are activities that possess internal goods (p. 187):

By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

A MacIntyrean practice, then, is a social activity that has internal goods. The goods internal to a practice can only be achieved by participating in it and, importantly, trying to excel in it. The standards of excellence of a practice are partially constitutive of that practice. Some examples of practices that MacIntyre offers are football, chess, architecture, farming, physics, chemistry, biology, history, painting, and music (Ibid.).

Finally, in that framework, virtues are the traits that help us achieve excellence in a practice and therefore attain the goods that are internal to that practice. As MacIntyre defines them (p. 191):

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.

I believe that this is a useful framework that could help us make sense of the activity of argumentation, of argumentative virtues, and of argumentative bullshit. If argumentation is seen as a practice in that sense, we can understand why an argumentative discussion can be successful even if it does not lead to the spread of truths or to the resolution of a difference of opinion, why argumentative virtues can be valuable even if they do not reliably lead to any specific end or effect,⁶ and why the lack of care characteristic of argumentative bullshit is the most vicious attitude.

I have repeatedly emphasised that argumentative bullshit is so detrimental to the practice of argumentation because it erodes the very norms that constitute the practice. Other vicious behaviours, such as dogmatism, aggressiveness, or the use of deceitful tricks, are surely damaging to argumentation as well—since they prevent the achievement of its internal goods. However, the widespread production of argumentative bullshit would not only be a threat to the achievement of argumentative goods, but also to the most basic argumentative norms that constitute the practice itself. In a world full of argumentative bullshit, the practice of argumentation would steadily disappear—just as, in a world full of Frankfurt’s bullshit, the practice of making assertions would eventually vanish.

Furthermore, the distinction between internal and external goods can help us understand why a successful discussion can take place between virtuous arguers, in which no truth is conveyed from one arguer to the other and no resolution of the disagreement is reached. MacIntyre insisted that the goods internal to a practice can only be identified

⁶ Cohen (2009) has argued, for example, that open-mindedness “can be detrimental to the pursuit of knowledge” (p. 57) and yet it is “an important argumentative virtue” (p. 59).

and achieved through participation in that practice. Clearly, however, truths can be spread and belief-systems can be improved by a variety of means other than argumentation. One can learn a lot from just reading a good book or attending a fine lecture by an expert—where, to be sure, one will find some arguments, but they are the exception and by no means form part of an argumentative discussion. As for differences of opinion, it may be harder to envisage a situation in which they are resolved by means different from argumentation, but we must just think that a disagreement will be solved as soon as one party is persuaded of the other party's claim, and persuasion can happen for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the antagonist comes to have an experience that makes her change her mind about the issue in discussion, for example. In that case, the disagreement would have been solved on its own, so to say.

It follows that improvement of belief-systems and resolution of disagreements are goods *external* to the practice of argumentation. Even if argumentation was the best (i.e. most advisable) means to achieve them, as sounds plausible, it is not the only means. Readers of MacIntyre may find this surprising, given that, when he talks about external goods, he only provides examples of rather frivolous goods such as fame, money, or candy. I believe this was a mistake. External goods are *goods*, after all, and there is no reason why they should not be worth-pursuing. They are incompatible with argumentative virtue only when the arguer cares so much about them that she ignores the standards of excellence of the argumentative practice.

However, the hard part of this proposal is to say something useful about what the internal goods of the argumentative practice are. That issue, as important as it is, cannot be solved here. Given that, as MacIntyre insisted, the goods that are internal to a practice can only be *recognised* through engaging in that practice, it is very difficult to spell them out. Nevertheless, some suggestions have been made in the literature about argumentation. Johnson (2000) also argued that argumentation can be conceived of as a practice,⁷ defining it as “the sociocultural activity of constructing, presenting, interpreting, criticizing, and revising arguments” (p. 12). He suggested the following as its internal goods (p. 155):

The goods internal to that activity are generally an increase in rationality and specifically a deeper understanding, and-or being rationally persuaded, and-or coming closer to an acceptable position.

Vega Reñón (2015) did not propose a MacIntyrean conception of argumentation; however, he did write about the “values” of argumentation in a way that makes them very

similar to what I regard here as the internal goods of argumentation. According to him (p. 272):

The values of argumentation include, for example, full mutual understanding; respect for oneself and one's interlocutors as autonomous and competent discursive agents in the activity of giving and asking for reasons; the full assumption of the responsibilities acquired by one's own intervention in the course of the argumentative conversation; the effective control of public or shared information and knowledge. These values represent a kind of ideal or rational maximisation of the possibilities of argumentative action that commonly practised argumentation tends to realise, even if they are only more or less realised as a matter of fact.⁸

These all seem to me plausible possibilities. Other goods that we could also consider are the maintenance of coherence among assertions, the discovery of logical or evidential relations among propositions, full understanding of different points of view, reasoned dialogue, and the development of a critical mind. However one describes them, argumentation does surely provide a range of specific goods that can only be obtained by engaging in the practice with the aspiration to excel.

5 The Problem of self-absorbed Arguers

Before concluding, I need to address a concern that arose in Sect. 2, when I presented the example of Lucie, the non-governmental organisation worker. A worry that is likely to arise regarding this account of argumentative practice and virtues is that it portrays virtuous arguers as people so obsessed with argumentative norms that they do not care much about anything else. My account—it could be said—runs the risk of disregarding any other important thing in life, putting argumentative norms above all else. A similar worry was voiced by Kvernbekk (2008) in a response to Johnson's conception of argumentation as a practice. According to Kvernbekk, MacIntyre's concept of practice does not quite fit argumentation, because if it did, then argumentation would be a *self-serving* and *self-regarding* activity solely concerned with its own internal goods. As she put it (p. 270):

While the notion of internal goods may capture a number of important things about an activity, the same notion makes a practice close in on itself and become inward-looking. [...] If argumentation is a practice, then arguers argue for the sake of arguing, for the sake

⁷ Johnson's conception, however, departs from the one proposed here because he sees argumentation as a *teleological* practice.

⁸ The translation from Spanish is mine.

of perfecting an argument, for the sake of satisfying the standards of excellence.

Admittedly, such a view of argumentation might not fit well Johnson's conception of argumentation; for, according to him, argumentation is a teleological activity whose *telos* is rational persuasion. That is, in Johnson's view, argumentation has a constitutive purpose that (arguably) lies outside itself. He also holds that argumentation is not an activity that exists for itself, but rather because of the benefits that it provides "to the state, the public, and the individual" (2000, p. 24).

Kvernbekk argues that such a teleological conception of argumentation is unavoidable if one does not want to turn it into a self-absorbed activity. But, in that case, argumentation can no longer be regarded as a MacIntyrean practice. The reason is that, according to Kvernbekk, MacIntyre conceived of practices as self-contained, which means that their whole point consists in the achievement of their internal goods (2008, p. 274). If argumentation was a practice in that sense, arguers would easily fall into self-indulgence and ignore the purpose for which they are supposed to be arguing.

There is no doubt that argumentation is commonly practiced in order to achieve some external end: spreading knowledge, resolving a disagreement, winning a court case, winning the presidential elections, managing a personal conflict, or what have you. As such, it usually has an external end. That, however, does not mean that it cannot be considered as a practice with internal goods. The point is not whether argumentation can be a means for something else, but whether it can be *more* than a means. As I emphasised in the previous sections, what characterises vicious arguers is that they regard the argumentative practice *merely* as a means. Virtuous arguers, then, can practice argumentation as a means to obtain an end—and they usually do—but argumentation is never for them just an instrument whose value is limited to what one can achieve with it. Argumentation is also valuable in itself. As a result, virtuous arguers will not flout or disregard argumentative norms when doing that serves their interests. The argumentative practice and its norms matter—independently of the result.

In fact, however, I believe that one of the best reasons to consider argumentation as a practice is that it *can* be (and it is) practiced for its own sake. Just think of competitive debates or the practice of *disputatio* in medieval universities. Those are clear examples of argumentation that is not practiced in order to attain some external good, such as knowledge or resolution of a difference of opinion—they are designed so that the participants should focus on the internal goods.

Yet, a worry still remains: what happens when argumentative norms clash with other norms or with certain external goods? This will not be a problem when external goods are frivolous ones, such as fame or money (for oneself), but here I am also regarding many worthwhile goods as external. Whenever argumentative norms prevent the achievement of some external good or clash with any other norm—be it ethical, political, or of whatever kind—the present account of argumentative virtues seems to entail that a virtuous arguer should fanatically follow argumentative norms and pay attention to nothing else.

In order to properly address the kind of quandaries that may arise, let us consider another example in which the crucial value of a certain external good is even more vividly felt.⁹ Imagine a person who is about to jump off a building out of despair about the prospects of her life. John finds her just before she jumps and he has the chance to have a chat with her. As a matter of fact, the circumstances of her life are really grim and there is no hope to improve them or alleviate her suffering in any way. There seems to be only one way to save her: to bullshit her into desisting from her intention to commit suicide. Having no good enough arguments to rationally persuade her that her life is worth-continuing, John's only option may be to resort to trivial and empty claims such as "everything will be ok," "there is a reason for everything," and "trust your destiny." That is, John's only resource may be argumentative bullshit—and that might work. What should the virtuous arguer do in that situation?

Certainly, if one insisted that putting forward fallacious arguments or producing argumentative bullshit is *never* justified, not even in a life-or-death situation like that one, then one would be easily exposed to Kvernbekk's accusation that the virtuous arguer is a self-absorbed and self-indulgent individual. It would make it seem as if the virtuous arguer should always be more concerned about her own virtue than about the well-being of any other person or of the society in which she lives. In Sect. 2, I pointed out that disregard of the internal goods of argumentation for the sake of a certain external good *always* shows some disrespect for argumentative practice and hence is not *argumentatively* virtuous behaviour, but I remained agnostic as to whether sometimes such a behaviour is what one *should* do. This may sound paradoxical—how could there be any doubt about whether one should be virtuous or not? But the paradox is only apparent: here we are talking only about *argumentative* virtues, which can come into conflict with other kinds of virtues and sometimes must even give way to the exercise of other virtues that may be more important given the circumstances.

During the course of our lives, we usually participate in more than one practice. Nobody is *just* an arguer, but each

⁹ I owe the gist of the following example to Claudio Michelon.

of us is also at the same time a lawyer, a scientist, an artist, a doctor, a husband, a parent, or whatever. Each practice will have its own internal goods, which we should appreciate and aspire to achieve. But practices might occasionally require of us conflicting behaviours. Saving someone's life—the person at the edge of the building—may be “merely” an external good in relation to the argumentative practice, but it is certainly internal to our ethical practices. So, in deciding whether to argue well or to produce argumentative bullshit in order to get that person out of the edge, we are actually stuck between the requirements of two practices. MacIntyre acknowledges the “tragic” possibility of such conflicts (2007, pp. 196–197):

[...] just because of the multiplicity of human practices and the consequent multiplicity of goods in the pursuit of which the virtues may be exercised—goods which will often be contingently incompatible and which will therefore make rival claims upon our allegiance—conflict will not spring solely from flaws in individual character.

In fact, MacIntyre admits that an excessive focus on a practice can corrupt, for he writes (p. 200):

And it is at once obvious that any of these [practices] may under certain conditions be a source of evil: the desire to excel and to win can corrupt, a man may be so engrossed by his painting that he neglects his family, what was initially an honorable resort to war can issue in savage cruelty.

How can this be avoided? MacIntyre's solution is to remind us that the practices are but the *first* logical step in his conceptual explanation of the virtues. Reference to a practice cannot be the whole story for virtues. A complete conception of the virtues must also include “an overriding conception of the *telos* of a whole human life, conceived as a unity”¹⁰ (p. 202). At this second step, the question is not “what should I do *as an arguer*?” but “what should I do *as a person*?”. The issue of how I should behave, all things considered, with the person who is about to jump off the building cannot be answered solely by reference to the argumentative practice. It is an ethical question and the answer should involve weighing the relative value of the argumentative practice against our obligations toward others and a

whole conception of the human good. In other words, the answer cannot come from argumentation theory—which is interested only in the argumentative practice.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have relied on an analysis of the concept of argumentative bullshit to draw some conclusions about argumentation as an activity and about the nature of argumentative virtues. Just as, according to Frankfurt, bullshit poses the greatest threat to our epistemic practices, I argued that argumentative bullshit is the greatest corruption of our argumentative practices. The fundamental reason is that arguers who produce bullshit do not care about argumentation, focusing instead on the achievement on other, external goods. If this is correct, then the distinctive characteristic of virtuous arguers could simply be that they care about argumentation and are disposed to sustain it when they participate in it. Such a conception of argumentative virtue fits with an interpretation of argumentation as a practice in MacIntyre's sense, as an activity with internal goods that can only be appreciated and achieved by participating in it and trying to excel.

This conception of argumentative virtues and of argumentation as a practice does not entail the denial of (the value of) external ends, nor does it demand that virtuous arguers must be self-absorbed individuals who only care about their own virtue. It simply considers virtuous arguers as individuals who, whatever the interests and purposes that move them to argue, *still care* about the quality of arguments in which they participate. Obviously, they very often engage in argumentation in order to achieve some further (sometimes very valuable) goals, but argumentation is never a *mere means* for them. They will not twist, flout or disregard argumentative norms simply because that might benefit them. They may admit that sometimes it is not appropriate to engage in argumentation, but when they do argue, they care about doing it right.

Argumentative bullshit is the antithesis of all that. Bullshiters show absolutely no respect for argumentative practice and simply attempt to fake it. As such, it probably is the most vicious behaviour that one can find in argumentation.

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¹⁰ MacIntyre's conceptual explanation of virtues proceeds through three stages (2007, p. 273): “a first which concerns virtues as qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices; a second which considers them as qualities contributing to the good of a whole life; and a third which relates them to the pursuit of a good for human beings the conception of which can only be elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition.”

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest related to this publication.

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