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Willingness to Trust as a Virtue in Argumentative Discussions

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The virtue of critical thinking has been widely emphasised, especially the habit of calling into question any standpoint. While that is important, argumentative practice is not possible unless the participants display a willingness to trust. Otherwise, continuous questioning by one party leads to an infinite regress. Trust is necessary in order to allow for testimony and expert opinion, but also to exclude unwarranted suspicions that could damage the quality of an argumentative discussion.

KEYWORDS: authority, deliberation, expert opinion, testimony, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity to scrutinise arguments and to call claims into question is doubtless a fundamental quality for a virtuous arguer. Argumentation theory and critical thinking—the word 'critical' is symptomatic here—have correctly emphasised the importance of that skill. Moreover, the extent to which criticism and doubt are allowed in an argumentative discussion is an indication of the quality of the process. For this reason, for example, one of the rules of the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion states that (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 144):

> Rule 6:
> b. The antagonist may always attack a standpoint by calling into question the propositional content or the justificatory or refutatory force of the argumentation.

However, van Eemeren and Grootendorst explain that, although rule 6 gives the antagonist the *right* to call into question any standpoint, the antagonist is not *obliged* to do so (2004, p. 151). Indeed, such an

obligation would easily lead to a dead end in the discussion. If the opponent calls into question every reason that the proponent puts forward, both arguers will be unable to make any progress in the discussion. In order to avoid this problem, of course, argumentation theorists consider the notion of *shared premises* or *common ground*, a "zone of agreement" on the basis of which it could be possible to "conduct a fruitful discussion" (p. 60). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst recognise that (p. 139): "A critical discussion is impossible without certain shared premises and without shared discussion rules."

Nevertheless, even if the arguers do not share enough common ground, this fact only does not prevent an argumentative discussion from being possible and fruitful. The common ground may often be sufficiently broad to allow engagement in successful discussions, but sometimes it is not. In those cases, other resources can make the discussion possible. For example, arguers frequently present testimonies and arguments from authority as reasons in support of their standpoints. Such reasons are *not* part of the common ground, but they frequently pave the way towards agreement. The effectiveness of testimonies and appeals to authorities depends on a fundamental component of argumentation: trust.

Even though the actual practice of argumentation largely relies on trust—and trust is given great value in studies on mediation—this component is not frequently present in philosophical accounts of argumentation. Furthermore, Daniel Cohen (2013) argues that argumentation theory is biased toward scepticism. According to Cohen, argumentation theory, by having as a fundamental principle that everything is arguable, and by promoting a set of skills that can be easily abused, might make it too easy for the sceptic to reject knowledge. A virtue approach to argumentation, suggests Cohen, with "its focus on *how* arguers argue, its distinction between *skills* and *virtues*, and its embrace of the difference between *rational* and *reasonable* arguing," (pp. 10-11) can help us understand these biases and learn from them. I believe Cohen is right and I will present one of the virtues that, in my view, could make arguers more reasonable: *willingness to trust*.

In this paper I intend to show why the presence or absence of trust is crucial in every discussion, how it influences the course of the discussion, and why it is so important that arguers be willing to trust each other. Obviously, trust is not the same as credulity, and being willing to trust does not mean being open to believe anything and anyone. Therefore, an explanation of the virtue of willingness to trust must address the question of when it is wise to trust and when it is not. In the following sections, I attempt to cast some light on those issues.

2. WHAT IS TRUST?

Trust is a more widespread attitude than we might think, even though sometimes we are willing to trust when we should not, or are not willing to trust when there is no reason for suspicion. We not only trust friends, with whom we have a very close relationship and share past experiences, to tell us the truth; we also trust our doctor, whom we might barely know, to be genuinely concerned about our health and to have the necessary knowledge to treat us. When we ask for directions to a complete stranger in the street, we trust him or her to be sincere. We only worry about trust when our expectations are not fulfilled and someone disappoints us, but usually the presence of trust is not noticed when everything goes as expected.

People's views on trust are enormously varied, and unfortunately there is also a large variety of academic views on trust—views from philosophy, psychology and sociology. However, the good news is that here we do not need a general account of trust, but rather an explanation of the presence and importance of trust in argumentative discussions. For this reason, I will use only those theoretical concepts that are relatively uncontroversial and can help us understand why willingness to trust is an argumentative virtue.

What most conceptions of trust have in common is that they characterise it as an *expectation*, that is, a belief or attitude (Asen, 2013, p. 4; Govier, 1997, p. 32). The psychologist Julian Rotter defined interpersonal trust as "a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on" (1980, p. 1). This might be a useful characterisation of trust for argumentation theory, which suits better our present needs than other definitions that make reference to beliefs about the general goodness of people or to optimism about the future—even though those definitions might be in general preferable because they capture the open-ended character of trust (Govier, 1997, p. 13).

It is also commonly accepted that trust involves beliefs about the other person's *competence* and *motivation* (Fricker, 2007, p. 45; Govier, 1998, p. 6; Hardin, 2006, p. 36). When we trust someone, we believe that he or she is competent enough to do what we expect him or her to do, and that he or she has the appropriate motivations—that, for example, he or she is not acting *entirely* in his or her own interests and this benefits us by chance (Hardin, 2006, p. 67).

It is also useful, regardless of the account of trust one adopts, to think of trust in terms of *commitment* (Hardin, 2002, p. 5). Suppose I expect a friend to meet me at the airport tomorrow morning, but I have not told him so and he is not aware of my expectations. Or suppose I

have the unrealistic expectation that my friend—a nurse—will cure my chronic illness, even though he has repeatedly told me that he cannot do that. In both cases, my friend cannot be said to have disappointed me if he does not do what I expect him to do. The reason is very simple: *he has not committed himself* to do that. This is also the reason why people can be trustworthy in areas where their knowledge is limited, so long as they know their limits and do not commit themselves to do what they cannot do.

Finally, virtually all theorists agree that trust involves a *risk*. Even though this condition leaves out some uses of "trust"—such as when somebody, probably a poet or a philosopher, says "I trust the sun to rise tomorrow"—it seems that trust entails uncertainty. As Hardin says (2002, p. 12): "More generally, one might say trust is embedded in the capacity or even need for choice on the part of the trusted." It does not make sense, for instance, to say that I trust my sister not to spend all my money on a ridiculously expensive car if she does not have access to my bank account. Trusting involves being vulnerable to some extent (Hardin, 2002, p. 46): "If I trust you to act on my behalf, I set myself up for the possibility of disappointment, even severe loss."

Trust, then, is an attitude based on beliefs about a person. It is therefore a cognitive concept (Hardin, 2002, p. 10). This has important implications: since we cannot freely decide to believe or not a proposition, it follows that we cannot choose whether or not to trust. Of course, I can decide to cooperate with someone I do not trust, or to *pretend* that I trust him or her, but that does not make trust more real. Thus Hardin argues (2002, p. 59):

> I just do or do not trust to some degree, depending on the evidence I have. I do not, in an immediate instance, choose to trust, I do not take any risk in trusting. Only actions are chosen—for example, to act as I would if I did in fact trust or to take a chance on your being trustworthy beyond any evidence I have that you will be trustworthy.

While Trudy Govier includes not only beliefs but also feelings in her characterisation of trust, she also claims that we cannot choose to trust (1997, p. 45):

> Trust is based on beliefs and feelings that, though sometimes alterable after critical reflection and deliberation, cannot be created or abolished at will.

Actually, this fact can be seen as a reason in support of a virtue-based normative account of trust. We cannot choose to trust someone to do something *in an immediate instance*, as Hardin says. However, our trusting or not largely depends on our character—apart, of course, from the other person's trustworthiness—so we *can* cultivate a character that make us trust the right people in the right situations. We *can* become sensible to what the other person's knowledge and motivations are, of his or her commitments, and of the risks involved. Klemens Kappel, who also rejects the idea that we can decide to trust, acknowledges that (2014, p. 2026): "I can, of course, decide to *cultivate* epistemic trust in you, or at least I could decide to *try* to cultivate a certain pattern of epistemic trust."

Moreover, even if we could choose to trust in a particular situation, there are just too many factors to be taken into account by general rules or principles. If willingness to trust is to be studied from a normative perspective, a sensibility to the specificity of every situation seems more appropriate—the kind of sensibility that is entailed by virtue. In addition, if—as we have seen—trust is based on beliefs, then we can benefit from the insights provided by virtue epistemology.

3. IS IT WISE TO TRUST?

In the last section it was pointed out that we cannot choose to trust or not in a particular situation. There is an additional limitation regarding trust: in the real world it is impossible for any of us *never* to trust *anybody*. As Trudy Govier says (1997, p. 62): "There is no real alternative to trusting other people for the truth." From the moment we are born, trust is a precondition of knowledge and even of our having any experience at all. Govier says (p. 61):

> Such trust can be argued to be a priori because there is a sense
> in which it is logically prior to experience itself. It is prior
> because it is a *condition* of experience.

Without trust, we could not even be sure of information as basic as our birthday or our real name, for we do not have direct evidence of that— we must trust our parents, our doctor, the institution that issued our ID card, or what have you. Children are predisposed to unquestioningly trust their parents and other people, and that makes them grow and learn (Govier, 1998, p. 68). Govier even places trust at the foundation of meaningful communication (p. 8): "we must believe that the other says what he means and means what he says."

Of course, the fact that we cannot dispense with trust altogether does not imply that we must childishly believe everybody. As Hardin notes (2002, p. 71), "infant trust would be stupid in an adult." As we grow up, we learn to question some—perhaps many—of the beliefs that we have acquired. We develop the capacity of reasoning and of asking ourselves whether someone is *trustworthy*, and by asking questions about the people's trustworthiness we obtain knowledge that determines our *degree* of trust (Hardin, 2002, p. 71). As we grow up, then, our unquestioning trust becomes a more nuanced and reasonable capacity for trust.

Apart from the degree of trust, we must also take into account *what* we trust the other person to do. Trust not only involves a truster and a trusted, it also takes place in a particular situation or action. Nobody trusts anybody without restriction. We might, for example, trust a friend to take care of our car, but do not trust her to give us back two thousand dollars if we lend the money to her. Therefore, trust can be considered as a three-part relation: a person trusts someone *to do X* (Hardin, 2002, p. 9).

When we have a virtuous willingness to trust, we are sufficiently sensitive to know who we can trust, to what degree, and to do what. Here I will focus on the kind of trust that several argumentative settings require. As we will see in the next sections, this includes believing the claims of trustworthy experts and witnesses, accepting the arguments of trustworthy arguers, and being willing to cooperate with trustworthy partners in a deliberation.

Trusting in this sense will be wise if it involves a prudential assessment of the components that we saw in the previous section, especially the "sort of person the other is, with regard to motivations and to competence" (Govier, 1997, p. 4), and the risks involved in the particular situation. Our past experience with the other person is, of course, useful as well; for example, we will not continue to trust someone who repeatedly disappoints us (Hardin, 2002, p. 72). Sometimes, however, we will have no past experience with the other person, as when we deal with complete strangers. The most obvious example is asking someone for directions in the street. In those cases, we tend to believe the information that the strangers give us because the risks involved are very low—the worst-case scenario would be for us to get lost. If, however, we are the editors of a journal, we would not accept a stranger's paper in the street, for the risks are higher—our reputation is at stake.

As Trudy Govier puts it, "trust makes a leap" (1997, p. 47). Whether or not we are willing to make that leap depends on the elements mentioned above, but in any case we will be vulnerable to

some extent. For this reason, our willingness to trust also depends on our character, on whether we are "self-confident and secure enough to cope with disappointments and adapt to changing circumstances" (Govier, 1997, p. 29). The question, then, is not whether or not it is wise to trust, but when and to what extent.

4. TRUST IN ARGUMENTATION

4.1. Appeals to expert opinion and testimony

Are arguments from expert opinion legitimate? Is it wise to trust experts? Recently, Moti Mizrahi (2013) argued that arguments from expert opinion are *all* weak, in the sense that their premises provide little or no support for their conclusion. He cites several studies that show—among other things—that, statistically, experts' predictions are only slightly more accurate than mere chance, and that experts' findings are likely to be refuted after a few years (p. 64). Therefore, given that the fact that an expert holds a claim p does not make p significantly more likely to be true, all arguments from expert opinion must be weak.

Mizrahi's article was followed by a response from Markus Seidel (2014). Seidel points out that our dependence on expert opinion is so strong that arguments in support of the absolute rejection of appeals to expert opinions, like Mizrahi's, are self-undermining. He argues that, even in order to support the conclusion that arguments from expert opinion are weak, we need to resort to some kind of argument from expert opinion (p. 213):

> Mizrahi is relying on the expertise of others in conducting empirical studies on expertise in order to come to his claim that there is empirical evidence for the conclusion that arguments from expert opinion are weak arguments.

I believe Seidel is right. As Trudy Govier points out (1997, p. 54): "We can check some claims and reports made by other people, but only by relying on the claims and reports of still other people." But Mizrahi's contention is actually a little more complex and interesting than that. Mizrahi makes clear that, according to him, arguments from expert opinion are those which do not rely on empirical evidence or even agreement among experts *at all* (2013, p. 71):

> In other words, once we take into account considerations of evidence for p and whether or not p is consistent with common knowledge in a field, then an argument from expert opinion is no longer just an appeal to expert opinion. Rather, it

is an appeal to expertise, evidence, and agreement among experts.

Hence, it seems that, according to Mizrahi, an argument from expert opinion relies *solely* on the expert's claiming that *p*, and taking into account any other consideration would entail adding premises to the argument and therefore rendering it a different type of argument. This, however, is a rather limited conception of the argument from expert opinion. It seems to lead us away from reasonable trust and closer to blind faith. Moreover, I believe it is misleading in two respects. Firstly, it overlooks the fact that, even if the expert opinion is based on empirical evidence, *some degree of trust is still required* for the argument to be convincing. Thus, for example, Mizrahi did not personally conduct the studies he cites in support of his position (2013, p. 76): "Granted, I did not conduct any experimental studies on expertise. Luckily, I don't have to. Others have done the hard work already." How do we know that the research was properly conducted? And that the results are not forged? Results often admit of several interpretations, why should we accept the author's interpretation as the best? Responses to this questions always depend partly on our degree of trust in the expert. Of course, trusting does not mean blindly believing anything any expert says; but, as Seidel holds, "reasonably scrutinizing authorities should not lead us to a rampant scepticism about expertise" (2014, pp. 192-193).

Secondly, the fact that issues about empirical evidence and agreement among experts are taken into account does not mean that the argument put forward is not a genuine appeal to expert opinion. Those components can be an intrinsic part of the *strength* of the argument from authority, even though they are not premises of the argument. For example, Douglas Walton proposes the following scheme (1997, p. 210):

E is an expert in domain *D*.
E asserts that *A* is known to be true.
A is within *D*.
Therefore, *A* may (plausibly) be taken to be true.

Walton takes into account further information in the critical questions he proposes for the evaluation of the strength of the argument from authority (p. 223):

Expertise question: How credible is *E* as an expert source?
Field question: Is *E* an expert in the field that *A* is in?
Opinion question: What did *E* assert that implies *A*?
Trustworthiness question: Is *E* personally reliable as a source?

Consistency question: Is *A* consistent with what other experts assert?
Backup evidence question: Is *A*'s assertion based on evidence?

Critical questions, then, are not part of the argument scheme; they are not premises. Instead, they are part of the dialectical framework for the evaluation of arguments from expert opinion (p. 158). This shows how we can consider empirical evidence and agreement among experts as relevant components of the strength of the argument from expert opinion, without necessarily incorporating them into the argument as premises and, contrary to what Mizrahi claims, without turning it into a different type of argument. By doing this, we can better understand that appeals to expert opinion involve both reasonable scrutiny and trust.

Similar considerations support the legitimacy of arguments from testimony. Govier (1993, p. 93) defines testimonial claims as "those which describe or purport to describe a particular person's observations, experience and related memories." The epistemologist John Hardwig (1991, p. 698) argued that beliefs based on testimony might be not only unavoidable but also *epistemically superior* to beliefs based on empirical evidence. The reason is that, individually, we cannot gather all the necessary empirical evidence in support of every one of our beliefs. Therefore, if only first-hand empirical evidence should be taken into account as reasons in support of our beliefs, most of our reasons would be very poor. However, we all have very good evidence for at least some of our beliefs—especially if we have witnessed an event or are experts in some domain—that constitutes our reasons. If we take into account testimonial evidence, that means that we take into account other people's reasons, including the experts' and witnesses', so we will have much better reasons that justify our beliefs. Thus, Hardwig states his *principle of testimony* (p. 697):

If *A* has good reasons to believe that *B* has good reasons to believe *p*, then *A* has good reasons to believe *p*.

A will not believe that *B*'s testimony gives him or her good reasons to believe *p*, Hardwig adds (1991, p. 700), unless *A* trusts *B*.[1] But, actually, Hardwig was not referring to testimonies of common people, or to laymen's trust in experts, but to the very scientific enterprise (p. 706):

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[1] Kappel (2014) proposes a reliabilist interpretation of Hardwig's ideas, according to which epistemic trust implies the existence of a reliable belief-forming process that is discriminating and defeater-sensitive. However, he is concerned with the conditions for justification and the definition of knowledge, and here I focus on internal traits that make an individual virtuous.

"Often, then, a scientific community has no alternative to trust, including trust in the character of its members."

The question, then, is whether or not to trust a person that presents his or her testimony in a particular situation. An argument based on testimony belongs to the kind of arguments that Douglas Walton names *arguments from position to know*, and the critical questions that he proposes—where *a* stands for the other person and *A* stands for what he or she claims—are (2006, p. 86):

> Is *a* in a position to know whether *A* is true (false)?
> Is *a* an honest (trustworthy, reliable) source?
> Did *a* assert that *A* is true (false)?

Hence, Walton's critical questions for arguments from authority as well as for arguments from position to know provide helpful guidelines for deciding whether to trust someone in a particular situation. Note, though, that critical questions are neither clear-cut rules nor an algorithm that yields a unique answer. They are very useful as a guide, and they are questions that the respondent can ask to the proponent, but they cannot remove the need for practical wisdom and sensibility to particular situations. Willingness to trust is, after all, a virtue.

4.2. Arguments that rely on trust

The acceptability of the conclusion of certain arguments, then, is a matter of trust—and, I would add, this also happens sometimes with some premises in *any* kind of argument. But in some cases the inference relies on trust as well. In his response to Bowell and Kingsbury (2013), who argued against the legitimacy of a virtue approach to argumentation, Andrew Aberdein (2014) claims that facts about the arguer are sometimes relevant to the evaluation of his or her argument. Bowell and Kingsbury themselves provide a compelling example (p. 27):

> Suppose someone tries to convince me that Tom is not fluent in German, on the grounds that Tom is a New Zealander and only 2% of New Zealanders are fluent in German. This looks like a good enough inductive argument. However, there could be information that I lack which would undermine the argument without falsifying the premises; for example, the information that Tom is the New Zealand ambassador to Germany. Given this, facts about the arguer might matter. [...] Is the arguer the sort of person who would tell me if he knew that Tom was the New Zealand ambassador to Germany, or is he the sort of person that would delight in tricking me into

thinking that the New Zealand ambassador to Germany doesn't speak German?

Bowell and Kingsbury argue that either the argument put forward is inductively strong regardless of whether information is being hidden, or it actually contains the unstated premise "There is nothing unusual about Tom that bears on the likelihood of his speaking German". However, when discussing arguments from expert opinion, we saw how the strength of the argument can be assessed without including every criterion as a premise in the argument. This case is very similar in this regard. In particular, here the strength of the argument depends in part on our trusting the arguer not to hide information from us.

The great majority of arguments we normally use are defeasible, that is, their conclusion is *plausibly* true and the inference may lose its strength if *new evidence* appears. For this reason, virtually any defeasible argument will be more convincing if it is put forward by someone whom we trust to share *all* the information he or she has with us, even if that information could undermine his or her own position. One and the same argument might be more convincing if presented by a trustworthy arguer than if presented by someone untrustworthy—and for good reasons.

Consider another, probably more realistic example. A petroleum company intends to extract crude oil in a populated region, and after some empirical research it publishes a report supporting the conclusion that there will be no undesirable consequences for the population or the environment. Some of the inhabitants read—and understand—the report, and although the data is consistent with other, impartial reports and they have no other information about the possible environmental impact of the extractions, they distrust the company's arguments. They do not accept them because of the company's obvious interests and because that company has omitted relevant information from its reports in the past. Perhaps they are not convinced that there will be undesirable consequences either, but they suspend judgement instead of accepting the conclusions of the report. The inhabitants do not accept the arguments because they do not *trust* the company—and, in this case, surely it is not their fault.

4.3. Deliberations and trust

Deliberations are a kind of argumentative dialogue that is intended to resolve on a course of action or a normative issue. Robert Asen (2013, p. 5) defines deliberation as "an encounter among interlocutors who engage in a process of considering and weighing various perspectives

and proposals for what they regard as issues of common concern." I will discuss certain dimensions of trust that are probably more crucial in deliberations than in other kinds of argumentations.

Trust is doubtless an essential basis of successful and satisfactory deliberations. However, trust should not be considered as a necessary condition for deliberations—they benefit from trust, but they can also take place in the absence of trust and subsequently *foster* it. As Asen holds (p. 15): "People need not wait for trust to deliberate. Instead, deliberation itself may serve as a means by which we come to trust others, and our trust may become stronger with practice." Several factors, circumstances, or behaviours promote trust. In this section, I will present them as *signals*, that could warrant our trusting someone in the context of a deliberation, and to which we should be sensitive.

Whether or not to trust our partners in a deliberation is not so much a matter of the outcomes of the process as of the process itself. If the process of deliberation is conducted in a way that makes everyone involved feel included, recognised, and respected, the deliberation will very likely be satisfactory to all. Thus (Asen, 2013, p. 8):

> Relations of trust may enable affirmative answers to questions that participants regularly confront in deliberation: Can I believe what other people say? How shall I evaluate their evidence? Are they listening to me? Will the other people involved in the deliberation heed our decision? Trust strengthens deliberation not by ensuring an outcome, but by committing participants to the process of producing a deliberative outcome, namely, a judgment.

Asen (2013, p. 9) proposes four attitudes that help build trust in deliberation: flexibility, forthrightness, engagement, and heedfulness. Firstly, it seems intuitively correct that a participant in a deliberation who is *flexible* about his or her beliefs and proposals conveys a sense that he or she is genuinely concerned about reaching an agreement. Flexibility allows the arguer to acknowledge the others, to form his or her views in collaboration with them, and to recognise different positions as reasonable and justified (p. 10). Secondly, *forthrightness* means that the arguer is honest, that he or she means what he or she says, makes plain his or her motives and goals, offers reasons in support of his or her position, and does not deceive or hide information. This is perhaps the quality that is most directly relevant to trustworthiness, for it is the arguer's honesty what is often called into question in deliberations—for example, by accusing him or her of having a hidden

agenda. Thirdly, trustworthy arguers try to *engage* each other's perspectives, learning about (p. 12):

> different perspectives, including understanding why people
> hold their beliefs, how these beliefs may be different from and
> similar to one's own, how people may take a different route to
> a shared judgment, and how similar starting points may lead
> to different interpretations and judgments.

And, finally, when an arguer displays *heedfulness* by truly paying attention to what the others have to say, he or she shows that deliberation matters and that, for example, it is not just a means of trying to "provide political cover for a decision that already has been made", and that he or she will not "conduct their future actions without any reference to relevant deliberations" (pp. 13-14).

5. THE DANGERS OF UNGROUNDED DISTRUST

Why speak of the dangers of distrust? Is it not more dangerous and more frequent to overly trust people? Gullibility is no doubt a vice in argumentation, but perhaps it is only indicative of the absence of the virtue of critical thinking. When discussing the virtue of willingness to trust, the related vice, I believe, is not gullibility but ungrounded distrust or suspicion. Rotter explains (1980, p. 4):

> If trust is simply believing communications, then high trust
> must be equated with gullibility. However, if we redefine trust
> as believing communications in the absence of clear or strong
> reasons for not believing (i.e. in ambiguous situations) and
> gullibility as believing when most people of the same social
> group would consider belief naïve and foolish, then trust can
> be independent of gullibility.

Actually, there are reasons to define trust as independent of gullibility. Rotter continues:

> In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is the low truster
> who is taken in by the disarming dishonesty of the con artist
> and is the frequent victim of con games.

Thus, surprisingly, it seems that one of the dangers of distrust is that it could lead to gullibility. Actually, there might be a very good explanation for that. As has been argued, absolute distrust is not a real alternative; we all need to trust in some people in order to have not only knowledge,

but also most of our beliefs and experiences. For this reason, low trusters cannot distrust *everybody*; instead, they do not trust in most people. They trust in a small number of people only, and that makes them dependent on fewer sources of knowledge and therefore they cannot check the reliability of many of those sources (Govier, 1997, p. 130). Low trusters are, then, more uncritical and more prone to error.

Consider the case of people who do not trust scientists. When arguing with someone who does not consider scientific opinions as expert opinions, he or she will not accept any appeal to those authorities. In reality, however, those people are bound to trust other—alleged—authorities. Complete distrustfulness, as has been argued, is impossible. So what usually happens is that those people—so-called low trusters—put their trust instead in homoeopaths, astrologists, religious authorities, or the like. This means that they put their trust in *fewer* people, becoming more dependent on them than high trusters are on the *more numerous* people they trust. This path is even more manifest in the case of people who believe in conspiracy theories. Ironically, an initial attitude of low trust leads to gullibility.

A second danger of ungrounded distrust does not directly affect the arguer himself or herself—as happens when it causes gullibility—but the others. The problem arises when we distrust certain people due to prejudice and stereotypes. When this distrust is widespread, those people's voices are silenced in practice and there is a real risk that their experiences, beliefs, and proposals are not taken into account. Feminist authors have drawn our attention to this problem, which has been called *rhetorical disadvantage* (Govier, 1993) or *testimonial injustice* (Fricker, 2007).

We frequently deal with strangers or hear their testimonies and opinions—for example, on television and in newspapers—and we have to decide whether or nor not to trust them without much evidence. In order to make a judgement in such circumstances, we commonly resort to stereotypes, which function as heuristics and are not necessarily bad (Fricker, 2007, p. 32). Some of those stereotypes, however, are unreliable, are maintained in the face of counter-evidence, and undermine the speaker's credibility. They are *prejudiced judgements* that distort the hearer's perception of the speaker (p. 36). According to Miranda Fricker, the testimonial injustice that results from prejudiced judgements "excludes the subject from trustful conversation" (p. 53), but unfortunately it is "a normal feature of our testimonial practices" (p. 43).

Trudy Govier (1993) explains that prejudice and stereotypes can act in any of the four different levels of assessment of testimonies. First, one can dismiss a testimony because it is assumed that the speaker is

not *serious*—he or she is just joking or being ironic. Presumably the prejudice here involves our own ways of communication (p. 97): "Standards of rationality, seriousness, and maturity incorporate norms that are not neutral as regards age, gender, race, class, culture, and style." In the second place, assuming the speaker is serious, he or she may be considered *not to be truthful* on the basis of stereotypes regarding the social group to which he or she belongs. Thirdly, some stereotypes can similarly attribute a lack of *competence* to that social group, and hence to the speaker in question. And, finally, even assuming that the speaker is serious, truthful and competent, one can ultimately decide *not to accept* his or her testimony because it contradicts some of our beliefs. While it is normally a good practice to question beliefs that somehow contradict our own—and, of course, to question our own beliefs at the same time—Govier explains that this norm can make us reject the testimonies of people who have different experiences (p. 98):

> To the extent that A is a person different from B in experience, social standing, gender and so on, B is likely to have established beliefs and preconceptions different from those of A. Ironically the very features that make A's testimony necessary, intellectually interesting, and important to B may also serve to render it unbelievable.

If general principles and norms might cause those problems, what can be done? Prejudices need not be conscious beliefs from which we *infer* that certain speaker is not trustworthy. Instead, they are often a sort of "background theory" that affects our *perception* of people's credibility (Fricker, 2007, p. 71). Fricker argues that the "model for judgement" in the testimonial sphere "is perceptual, and so non-inferential" (p. 72). For this reason, Fricker advocates a virtue approach to epistemic testimony, which does not rely on sets of rules but on "a sensitivity to epistemically salient features of the situation and the speaker's performance" (*Ibid*.). Rules and norms might, of course, be useful as general guidelines, but they are not the whole story. For example, among other things, virtue involves feeling the appropriate kind of emotions. I conclude with Fricker's own words (p. 80):

> When it comes to epistemic trust, as with purely moral trust, it can be good advice to listen to one's emotions, for a virtuous hearer's emotional responses to different speakers in different contexts are trained and honed by experience. The feeling of trust in the virtuous hearer is a sophisticated emotional radar for detecting trustworthiness in speakers.

6. CONCLUSION

I have emphasised the importance of being willing to trust and the different dimensions of trust in argumentative situations. Yet, of course, trusting *anyone*, trustworthy or not, is not wise. In fact, it could be dangerous or even morally wrong. Trusting a complete stranger to take care of a baby would be not only foolish but also reprehensible. When referring to the problem of declining trust, discussed by many scholars, Hardin says (2002, p. 30): "Commonly, the best device for creating trust is to establish and support trustworthiness."

It is also very difficult—and probably a bad idea—to have even slight trust in some especially dangerous circumstances. The degree of trust that one can afford, as has been said, depends on the risks involved, and some particular situations might dramatically raise the risks of even small degrees of trust. Trudy Govier presents a particularly extreme example (1997, p. 134):

> If relatives simply disappear, if one is starved, beaten, and tortured, if friends and colleagues may be spies for a brutal regime, people are unlikely to be high trusters, and a recommendation to trust more makes little sense.

Therefore, in the absence of trustworthiness or in risky situations, willingness to trust *the trustworthy person* will not make any difference. Why not focus on trustworthiness then? The reason is that trustworthiness alone is not sufficient; a *sensibility* to trustworthiness, or disposition to believe the trustworthy person, is also necessary. As has been explained, ungrounded distrust can seriously harm the course of a discussion, and trustworthiness cannot solve this problem.

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Commentary on Gascón's Willingness to Trust as a Virtue in Argumentative Discussions

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1. INTRODUCTION

We try to inculcate in our students, our children, our readers, our colleagues even, the proper balance between credulity and skepticism. No one can, on pain of inconsistency, believe everything. Nor can anyone function in the world or communicate with others if one doubts everything, so we must find the right balance. It should also be uncontested that the proper balance is situationally sensitive. We are rightly less skeptical of a literal claim such as "I saw Cristiano Ronaldo walk across the street today" and more skeptical of a literal claim such as "I saw Cristiano Ronaldo walk on water today" (regardless of what Real Madrid fans, or Portuguese fans, or Ronaldo himself might think). Another example: as the risk associated with believing falsely goes up, so does our tendency to double check sources that we might otherwise leave undoubted.

Since functioning in the world or communicating requires a (situationally influenced) balance between excessive credulity and excessive skepticism and arguing is a functioning in the world and communicating, arguing requires a (situationally influenced) balance between excessive credulity and excessive skepticism. None of this strikes me as controversial (or exciting or interesting), so what is the relevance to argumentation theory?

2. RELEVANCE?

Gascón says that "In this paper I intend to show why the presence or absence of trust is crucial in every discussion, how it influences the course of the discussion, and why it is so important that arguers be willing to trust each other." But, none of these things, with perhaps the exception of the last, happens—what does happen is a description of the uncontroversial core of trust, a Govier inspired defense of the claim that complete distrust is impossible, some examples of trust in

argumentation (which since it is inescapable, of course it appears in argumentation), and a final section on the dangers of ungrounded distrust which might be support for why it is important for arguers to be willing to trust each other.

Perhaps Gascón takes his discussion to be a counterbalance to the perception that some theorists (or practitioners) put too much weight on skepticism with the result that the theory (or practice) is skewed too far towards skepticism. Is it true that theory or practice has improperly skewed the balance towards skepticism? I grant that argumentation allows almost anything to be challenged (though not all at once). I grant that the attitude of challenging can certainly be carried too far to make arguings or discussions unfruitful—but is it true that argumentation theory or practice in fact promotes a too skeptical attitude? (See, for example, Cohen, 2013) I don't know. I don't know what the appropriate level of trust/distrust ought to be generally or particularly. I suspect that "critical thinking" teachers believe the general populous is too credulous. But do they overcompensate in the skeptical direction or not go far enough? Perhaps we should trust others (and ourselves) less than we do, even after a critical thinking course, (at least if we are interested in attaining the truth) given how much of our perception of the world, say of the color combination of a particular dress, or our own judgments about our own objectivity are mental interpolations and fabrications. We impute causation to mere correlations, we make explanatory patterns out of noise, we let irrelevancies anchor important judgments and decisions (see, for example, Kahneman, 2011).

Perhaps Gascón is trying to convince us that this balancing of trust/distrust is best understood as an argumentative virtue. I certainly grant that such balancing is consistent with being a virtue, though the virtue in question is probably not willingness to trust, but trusting appropriately. After all, Aristotelean virtues are supposed to have not one (the ungrounded distrust Gascón suggests), but two corresponding vices. Courage, for example, is the balance between recklessness and cowardice. Trusting appropriately would presumably be the balance between credulousness and excessive doubt. I certainly do not doubt that the ideal arguer has the property of trusting appropriately (given the evidence, the context, the goals of the parties, the risks involved as a result of cognitive error, etc.) But whether this property needs to be accounted for or explained as a virtue, I have no idea. I grant we can talk the virtue talk, but I have no idea whether we ought to talk this way in relation to the 'trusting appropriately' norm. For example a "maximize true belief, minimize false belief" advocate can argue that adhering to the trusting appropriately norm will maximize true belief while

minimizing false beliefs without ever talking in terms of virtues and vices.

3. CONCLUSION

Whether we talk in terms of virtues or not, there certainly are the problems of determining (i) what the appropriate level of trust is in a given situation, (and in particular a given argumentative situation), (ii) whether cultivating the appropriate level of trust is something that can be taught or not (and if so, how), and (iii) whether trust plays a special role in some arguments.

Regarding this last, Gascón makes some provocative claims about "arguments that rely on trust". He writes of a particular induction example from Bowell and Kingsbury (2013):

> (1) "Here the strength of the argument depends in part on our trusting the arguer not to hide information from us."

and

> (2) "One and the same argument might be more convincing if presented by a trustworthy arguer than if presented by someone untrustworthy."

Taken literally, it appears that (1) is making a claim about trust making arguments themselves stronger (or weaker). My worry here is not to conflate *strength of arguments* with either the *convincingness of arguments or arguings*. Consider the sentence, "Cristiano Ronaldo walked across the street yesterday." Uttered by person A the sentence is either true or false. Uttered by person B the sentence is either true or false. The epistemic credence I put on the sentence will likely be influenced by my judgments of the trustworthiness of A and B. How convinced I am that the sentence is true depends upon how much I trust A and B to report truthfully. But how convinced I am is independent of the actual truth/falsity of the sentence. Similarly for arguments. A might utter the same argument as B and regardless of the actual truth/falsity of the premises or how much support the premises actually provide the conclusion, my judgments about the epistemic credence I place in the conclusion are likely to be influenced by my judgments about the reliability of A and B in uttering the truth or in providing sufficient reasons. But again, how convinced I am is independent of how strong the argument actually is. So while (2) is plausible, (1) is much less so unless it is really talking about the convincingness of the argument rather than the strength of the argument. And for someone who thinks convincingness is a property of arguings (as in "he argued convincingly"

and not arguments, then (2) will be false, since one and the same arguing cannot be done by two separate people.) But, unlike a claim about trust influencing the strength of arguments, there is nothing special about trust playing a role in the convincingness or epistemic credence placed in arguments or their conclusions.

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