Commentary on Tempest Henning's "'I Said What I Said' - Black Women and Argumentative Politeness Norms"

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Tempest Henning takes a short piece by Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse and a certain thread in feminist philosophy of argument, pulling on their assumptions reveal tacit problems generally at work in argumentation theory. I agree with Henning's call for theorists to pay better attention to actual practices of arguing and that the failure to do so is both an ethical and epistemological problem with argumentation theory. However, I suggest that argumentation scholarship has resources that can be developed to address her concerns.

Aikin and Talisse address the role of *sarcastic or incredulous restatement* in arguing, naming its vicious operation as *modus tonens*. Their example is sarcastic or incredulous repetition of another person's claim about gun violence, and to my mind this is just the most explicit version of such gestures as eye-rolling that express disdain for another's claim or line of reasoning. Aikin and Talisse consider two ways that this functions in arguing, as dialectic and as oratory.

In dialectical context, Aikin and Talisse advise that incredulous restatement should not be taken to discharge dialectical obligations, likening it to the expression of outrage which also has no force to meet burden of proof. Certainly, expressed disdain can be an effective way to open an argument, *committing* the person who expresses disdain to doubting the claim in question, or *directing* the person who made the original claim to defend their position, and these commissive and directive uses also may coincide. The vice emerges from the directive to the original arguer to further defend their position when it implicitly indicates that arguer lacks the necessary resources, "cognitively downgrading" them. That directive can only be virtuous when it reflects a real cognitive subordination as when a teacher repeats a student's claim in a questioning tone to suggest that the student would benefit from further reflection or study.

Henning responds that this means of epistemic subordination may not be a directive speech act but commissive as in the case of "signification" in AAVE. Sometimes it expresses that the respondent *commits* to the play or style of discussion. Sure, signification may be

directive, assigning a status to another speaker, but it seems that momentum can be balanced by a prosocial commissive force which prevents it from derailing the argument.

The "Baby" example of indirect speech provides a rich contrast to the *direct* expression of dissent, person-to-person, that can be rude or uncivil in some contexts. Like Michael Gilbert (2014), Henning recognizes that direct arguing in many cultures constitutes rudeness, but Henning also presses us to recognize that viewing direct argument as valuable belongs to a particular discursive culture privileged in the Western academy. I don't know the right name for it and, while I'm certain it plays out in other languages, I think that "institutional English" accounts well for "talking like a man with a paper in his hand."

Using the "Baby" example, Henning shows us that the indirect oratorical context can be especially valuable rather than prone to viciousness. In oratorical context, Aikin and Talisse claim that *modus tonens* suggests that an actually symmetrical relationship is asymmetrical and claims the upper hand. Oratorical *modus tonens* expresses solidarity with the audience while subtly threatening to ostracize or lower the audience's status should they take the other person's position. This can polarize views and undermine the possibility of learning from each other, making it argumentatively and epistemologically vicious.

Such polarization seems less likely to fall out from disdainful restatement because it belongs to a recognized politeness strategy in AAVE and BAAWSC, specifically a "negative politeness," a way of avoiding more direct confrontation that can threaten the other person's public *face*. Aikin and Talisse recognize that sarcastic restatement can operate as a *negative politeness strategy* and this explains a lot about the "Baby" example because even though it involves jockeying for position, there seems to be no loss of face. Indeed, playing along is part of retaining status and bonding, as Henning explains, and moves the discussion along.

This is not to suggest that politeness explains away the significance of the "Baby" example because the activity of signification clearly plays a more affirmative role than simply allowing the other person to save face. As Henning describes it, a type of game is being played and that playfulness makes it a lot more transformative and open-ended than mere politeness. (There may be other cases of games played with politeness and Jane Austen comes to mind.)

The "Baby" example shows how arguing in AAVE and BAWSC serves purposes regularly neglected by argumentation theorists, including Aikin and Talisse. Argumentation theory attends generally to the directed speech of the Standard English that pervades the Western

academy and tends to ignore the diversity of purposes arguing can serve.

It deserves acknowledgement that some informal logicians (Michael Gilbert 2014; Douglas Walton 1995; 1996) and most if not all of the empirical researchers on argumentation (recently Marianne Doury, Jean Goodwin, Dale Hample, etc.) recognize that arguing serves purposes in addition to truth and negotiation. However, the particular cultural functions Henning points out have not received much attention, and they may be crucial for understanding how argumentation norms including politeness can function to include and exclude particular speakers. Argumentation theorists need to attend better to the sorts of commissive functions that Henning highlights. While Western academic contexts tend to simply assume a shared culture, other cultures of argumentation operate by different rules. This means the direct style of arguing lacks cultural neutrality and so its dominance can push the commissive elements to the background where they can be hard to challenge. An epistemology of ignorance seems to be at play in the academy reinforced by the presumptions of argumentation theorists about what functions of arguing deserve attention.

What counts as "vicious" or "derailing" in an argument depends on what we take to be the purposes for arguing. If we take ascertaining truth or reaching compromise as goals, Aikin and Talisse maintain that a sarcastic tone can to be fallacious. On the other hand, sarcastic tones can be quite useful if one of the purposes for arguing lies in ascertaining or testing group membership or rank, which explains why the "Baby" example works so well: being "the Baby" is a rank of a kind or multiple kinds that can be spread across different people, and ranks are subject to agreement.

Henning suggests the "Baby" example has implications also for Non-Adversarial Feminist Argumentation Theory that rejects the crude and obscene language and the indirect speech that play positive roles in AAVE. I think Henning tends to press this interpretation too far because authors such as Sylvia Burrow (2010) have greatest concern with the insufficiency of dominant politeness strategies in the academy for addressing argumentative injustices and little interest in promoting any particular culture of feminine politeness. Feminist criticisms of adversarial forms of argumentation address specific contexts, such as academic philosophy, and do not seem to me to apply to AAVE.

Nevertheless, Henning's concern with who argumentation theory serves remains important. Academic navel-gazing, including my own (2010), may reinforce rather than challenge structures of privilege and argumentation theory needs to take direction from and attend to marginalized discourses for its analysis to have substantial social and political significance.

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