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Reducing Arrogance in Public Debate

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Self- affirmation techniques can help to reduce arrogant behaviour in public debates or so I ague here. My paper consists of three parts. The first offers an account of what speakers owe to their audiences, and of what hearers owe to speakers. It also illustrates some of the ways in which arrogance leads to violations of conversational norms. The second argues that arrogance can be understood as an attitude toward the self which is positive but defensive. The final part offers evidence why we should expect self-affirmation to reduce defensiveness and thus the manifestation of arrogance in debate.

I

Arrogance in debate may take many different forms. Arrogant speakers often do not respect the implicit rules of turn-taking. They are prone to interrupting others when they speak. They may also speak at length and deprive others of the same opportunity. In addition, arrogant speakers do not like to be challenged. They respond with anger to genuine questions. They do not answer to objections; instead, they dismiss them without the consideration that they are due.

Arrogance is not the preserve of speakers since it can also be displayed by members of the audience. Arrogant listeners tend to treat speakers with disrespect. They may make a show of incredulity after a speaker's assertion; they may shake their head or roll their eyes. They may also ignore a speaker's contribution to a conversation and behave as if it had never been made.

These behaviours exemplify a form of disrespect for other linguistic agents. The person who interrupts another is in normal circumstances violating an obligation.[1] Each person is entitled to be able to finish her contribution to a conversation. That is, others owe it to her that she completes her speech act. Similarly, the person who does not answer legitimate criticisms breaks a norm governing conversation since people are entitled to ask us to defend the point of view that we have put forward in conversation with them. Similar considerations apply to all other characteristic displays of arrogance in discussion. They are disrespectful because they break norms governing what we owe to each other in debate.

The norms violated by the arrogant are likely to take different forms. My focus here is exclusively on the rules governing one kind of linguistic exchange, namely the giving and receiving of testimony through the use of assertions. In short, I shall be looking at cases where a person tells something to an audience. Further, these tellings are not intended as the sharing of speculations or guesses. The speaker in these cases is not sticking her neck out; rather she is making statements. In other words, she puts forward what she is telling as true.

There is no philosophical consensus on the best account of testimony but there is sufficient agreement on some aspects of this social practice. First, a person who is telling someone that something is the case conveys that she has some appropriate epistemic standing vis a vis the content she asserts.[2] Second, this

[1] There are of course exceptions. A person may interrupt to alert someone of an imminent danger. If so she has a justification for her behaviour. Also, someone may have not realised that the other person had not finished. In such a case, one has an excuse for the interruption. Finally, one may interrupt with an involuntary shriek that was not under that control. The involuntariness of the behaviour supplies an exculpation since the norms governing turn-taking only concern genuine speech-acts. However, barring justifications, excuses or exculpations, interrupting others is disrespectful.

[2] There are exceptions to this commitment since one may wish to transmit as knowledge something that one does not oneself believe. Jennifer Lackey famously has made this point noting that a teacher may teach evolutionary

same person is conveying to her audience that she will shoulder responsibility if they trust her and it turns out that she was wrong. The view that a speaker undertakes these two commitments when giving testimony by means of an assertion is reasonably uncontroversial.[3]

These two features of the practice of telling are commitments undertaken by speakers. I label the first the 'accountability' commitment, and the second 'answerability'. I will take these in turn. When making an assertion in the context of an act of telling the speaker essentially commits to be someone on whom others can rely for the truth of what is being said. For this reason, some have argued that telling is akin to making a promise or giving one's word that what is being said is true (Hinchman, 2005; Moran, 2006). When the speaker conveys that she can be relied on for the truth of what she says she is implying that her relation to the content she asserts is such that she is within her rights to make the claim. There is serious disagreement about the nature of the standing that the speaker must have in relation to her assertion for her asserting it to be appropriate. Some say that the appropriate standing must be knowledge, others that justification is what is required, still others defend the view that speaker's belief in the asserted content is sufficient.[4] I do not take a stance of this issue here.

My point is instead that whatever is required for an assertion to be proper, the speaker in telling something to another person undertakes a commitment to having met that requirement. This is what I mean by an accountability commitment. The speaker undertakes to be accountable for her claims. It is because she has made this commitment that she licenses other speakers to hold her responsible if, having trusted her, it turns out that what she said was false.

The answerability commitment is different from the accountability one. When making an assertion a teller also undertakes the commitment to address any reasonable challenges to her claims by answering them. Note that accountability does not entail answerability since a person may still be accountable for the truth of what he says without being required to defend it. This is true of individuals who have been conferred special kinds of authority. What I have in mind here are referees who do not need to answer players' challenges and judges whose verdicts are also not a matter of debate from the jury or the parties in the dispute. The same may be said of the Pope when issuing ex cathedra pronouncements which are also meant not to be open to being challenged by anyone on earth.[5]

In addition to speakers' undertaking commitments toward their audiences, listeners too owe something to speakers. What speakers are entitled to expect is, minimally, that what they have attempted communicate is acknowledged. Thus, listeners do not owe speakers that they are believed. In my opinion, but this is a matter of debate, hearers are not even obliged to speak up if they disagree with

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theory because it is in the curriculum without believing it herself and yet impart knowledge (2011). In this example we may think of the teacher as passing onto the institution that legitimises the curriculum the responsibility for having the right epistemic standing with regard to its content.

[3] It would be enormously controversial to say that an account of the nature of assertion consists in detailing these two commitments. This is not what I propose here since my exclusive focus is on telling whilst assertions can be made in the absence of an audience (Green, 2007).

[4] This debate is known as the debate about the norm of assertion. For a detailed treatment of the issues see Goldberg (2015).

[5] Usually, speakers when making an assertion also commit to being sincere. I do not discuss this matter here since it is not relevant to the issue of arrogance.

the speaker.[6] Speakers, instead, are owed uptake. They are entitled to expect that if they have done everything in their power to make themselves clear, and there no circumstances warranting justifications, excuses or exculpations, then the audience grasps what the speakers purports to communicate. In short, speakers are entitled to expect that hearers listen to them and understand what they have communicated.

We are now in a position to consider how arrogant speakers and listeners tend to violate the obligations outlined above. The problem with arrogant speakers is that they behave as if the commitments that must be undertaken by purveyors of testimony did not apply to them. Thus, arrogant speakers behave as if they were umpires or judges. They take it that they do not need to answer any challenges, because other people in their view lack the authority to question them. This is the reason why arrogant speakers respond with anger to perfectly legitimate questions. They interpret these challenges as an affront because they imply that others are as authoritative as the speaker.

The arrogant individual implies with his words and actions that he is epistemically superior to others. Hence, he takes himself to be exempt to the answerability commitment that must be undertaken by all speakers. Since this claim to an exemption is an unwarranted arrogation of authority, the arrogant speaker implicitly disrespects others because he treats them as his epistemic inferiors even though this treatment is not warranted.[7]

Arrogant hearers also disrespect speakers because they violate the norms governing the behaviour of those who receive a testimony. Since hearers owe to speakers that their word received uptake, in the case of testimony an audience must recognise what the speakers says but also that they are putting it forward as true. That is, the audience must acknowledge that the speaker has undertaken the accountability and the answerability commitments. The person who continues a conversation as if the interlocutor's claim had never been made fails to acknowledge that the speaker has put herself forward as someone who can be trusted because she has committed to her assertion having been properly made. Similarly, the person who stares in disbelief or rolls her eyes fails to acknowledge that the speakers has made a commitment to answer challenges. It is disrespectful to express one's disagreement by rolling one's eyes since this behaviour deprives the speaker of the ability to defend her viewpoint. As with the case of the arrogant speaker, the arrogant hearer behaves as if he is exempt from the obligations governing the behaviour of ordinary participants in conversation and debate. Thus, one way to think about what is wrong with arrogant behaviour is to note that it involves arrogating a special status for oneself and, as a result, behaving in ways which are disrespectful of others (Cf., Roberts & Wood, 2007).

II

In this section I turn to the psychological underpinnings of the arrogant behaviours discussed in the first part. In the view defended here this vice is the manifestations of attitudes (as these are understood in

[66] For my defence of this view see Tanesini (2016a). Section 1 of this paper is largely based on the more detailed discussion presented in that paper.

[7] Deeper forms of arrogance also involve arrogating exemptions from the accountability commitment. I discuss these in Tanesini (2016a).

social psychology) directed toward one's own intellectual character or cognitive make-up and its components. Arrogance, I argue, is an expression of defensive or fragile self-esteem.

In order to clarify my position, I need first to define what is meant in social psychology by an attitude and clarify the notion of attitude function. Attitudes in this sense are not propositional attitudes, they are instead summary evaluations of an object (Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010). Thus, one may be said to have a positive attitude toward some person or group, a value like equality, or any other thing whatsoever. Positive attitudes are akin to liking something and feeling warmly about it. Negative attitudes are dislikes. Attitudes are thus always evaluative. They can be thought as cognitive shortcuts because they summarise all the information one has about a given object. Thus, attitudes are formed by aggregating the plus or minuses that one associates with a given thing which are embodied in one's beliefs, desires, memories, past behaviours related to that object. The information from which attitudes are derived are known as attitude contents (Maio & Haddock, 2010).

Attitudes can be strong or weak. A strong attitude is not a strong like or dislike; hence, the strength of an attitude is not a measure of how positive or negative one feels about a thing. Instead, strength is a measure of accessibility. A strong attitude is one that is ever present in one's interactions with the object so that it is strongly predictive of one's behaviour in relation to that thing in a broad range of situations (Maio & Haddock, 2010).

More controversially, attitudes are said to have functions. The functions of attitudes are the needs served by them. Prominent among the needs served by attitudes are the needs to defend the ego (to feel good about oneself) and the need to fit in within one's elective social group (social-adjustive need). Thus, attitude serving the need for ego-defence are evaluations of an object based on one's informational basis with regard to how well the object satisfies the need to feel good about oneself. One has negative ego-defensive attitudes toward things that make one feel bad about oneself, and positive attitudes towards those things that have the opposite effect. Similarly, people have positive social-adjustive attitudes toward things that enhance their social acceptance, and negative toward things that promote their social exclusion (Maio & Olson, 2000).

In addition to attitudes about things we also have attitudes directed toward the self and toward features of our personality. In particular social psychologists think of self-esteem as an attitude directed toward the self.[8] High self-esteem is a positive attitude, whilst low self-esteem is a negative one, toward the self. In addition to being positive or negative one's attitude toward the self may also have been formed to serve a specific need. Thus, one may have a form of defensive self-esteem because one's estimation of the self evaluates it for its role in protecting the ego from threats. High self-esteem which is defensive evaluates the self positively but the estimation is based on how successful one has been in feeling good about oneself. In short, the person with high self-esteem thinks highly of himself. If his attitude is defensive, his high estimation of himself is not based on his actual achievements or abilities. Instead, his own self-assessment which makes him feel good about himself is based on how good he is at making himself feel good about himself. Hence, there is something inherently delusive about a positive attitude toward the self which is defensive.

Psychologists reserve the term 'defensive high self-esteem' for a special kind of discrepant self-esteem (Haddock & Gebauer, 2011). It refers to individuals who have high self-esteem as explicitly measured

[8] For discussions of various aspects of this attitude see the contributions collected in Zeigler-Hill (2013).

but low self-esteem as measured implicitly. There are two ways in which attitudes, including attitudes toward the self, can be measured. First, explicitly by means of questionnaires. A person is said to have high self-esteem as explicitly measured if they report that they think of themselves as able and like who they are. Second, self-esteem may be measured implicitly.[9] These measures include the name letter liking test where subjects are asked to rank how much they like letters. Those who don't like the first letter of their name are said to have low implicitly measured self-esteem (Sakellaropoulo & Baldwin, 2007).

Individuals with defensive high self-esteem exhibit a range of behaviours that are characteristic of arrogance. These include: arrogant responses to threats (McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005); tendencies to self-enhancement (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003); boasting (Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007); higher levels of prejudice toward members of other ethnic groups (C. H. Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2005); heightened defensiveness (Haddock & Gebauer, 2011); being prone to anger (Schröder-Abé, Rudolph, & Schütz, 2007); higher levels of self-deception in general than those whose high self-esteem is congruent (Christian H. Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003); a propensity to overestimate the extent to which other people agree with their views (McGregor et al., 2005); a propensity to react badly to negative feedback by derogating the views of out-group members (C. H. Jordan et al., 2005).

These manifestations of defensive high self-esteem make it very likely that the arrogant behaviour described in the first section of this paper is motivated by a defensive attitude that leads one to perceive most situations as threatening and to react to them in a defensive manner. Arrogance, therefore, is a fight response to a perceived, often non-existent, threat. Crucial to this fight response is the need to feel good about oneself which is often achieved by putting other people down so that one can excel in comparison.

In conclusion, arrogance appears to be a defensive response to perceived threats. The arrogant person attempts to feel good about himself by feeling superior to others. He enacts this sense of superiority by arrogating special entitlements. He arrogates exemption from the commitment to answering people's proper challenges of his views. He also deprives others of the ability to discharge the commitments they have undertaken. In particular, arrogant listeners by challenging speakers in a manner that cannot be rationally addressed deprive others of the opportunity to defend their views.

III

I have argued so far that arrogance in discussion is disrespectful. I have also looked at the psychological mechanisms that underpin these problematic behaviours. In this final part of paper, I propose that self-affirmation techniques, which require participants to reflect upon their values and on what makes them valuable, are effective in reducing defensiveness and therefore arrogance in debate.[10]

First, I wish to point out why a different intervention which is currently receiving attention is unlikely to be successful in reducing arrogance. It has been proposed that exposures to good exemplars or role

[9] There are several implicit measures of self-esteem and they do not correlate well. So implicitly measured self-esteem is not an unproblematic construct.

[10] I have developed these points in more detail in my Tanesini (2016b).

models will lead to improvement via emulation (Zagzebski, 2015). This approach is unlikely to be successful to reduce arrogance.

Human beings often engage in social comparisons as a way of gauging their abilities. As a result they represent themselves as similar or different from another person who is taken as standard (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011). Defensive individuals carry out comparisons for the purpose of self-enhancement. Therefore, they compare themselves for similarities to models to emulate and for differences to unadmirable individuals. Since human beings suffer from confirmation biases, those who seek confirmation that they are already very similar to role models are likely selectively to consider evidence in support of the hypothesis whilst giving insufficient weight to contrary evidence. In short, exposure to exemplars is not likely to work because instead of leading to change in behaviour, it will strengthen arrogant people's conviction that they are indeed special.

Self-affirmation techniques involve asking participants to think about what values are central to them. Subsequently, they are invited to write a short essay about these values, why they are worthwhile, and why they are important to them. Self-affirmation helps to make participants more secure in themselves and thus less defensive (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 2010).

The idea that self-affirmation may reduce arrogant behaviour is counterintuitive since one may think that arrogant people need to be taken down a peg. Instead self-affirmation would propose that we reduce arrogance by making people who already think they are special feel good about themselves. But the suggestion becomes more plausible if we consider that arrogance is ultimately a response that is characteristic of people who feel under threat. It is not surprising that if we adopt interventions that can make them feel less threatened and more secure in themselves, they will response by toning down their defensiveness and therefore behave in a less arrogant manner. Ultimately, this is an empirical claim that we are currently testing; we hope to report some concrete results later this year.[11]

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[11] For more information on this research project visit https://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/changingattitudes/.

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