

Reducing Arrogance in Public Debate

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Abstract: Self- affirmation techniques can help reduce arrogant behaviour in public debates.

This chapter consists of three sections. 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 section offers empirical evidence why we should expect self-affirmation to reduce defensiveness and thus the manifestation of arrogance in debate.

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In many countries we are witnessing clear signs that debates about important political issues are becoming increasingly ill-tempered and polarised. This situation has coincided with an increase in arrogance and closed-mindedness in discussion. Assuming that humility and open-mindedness in debate are worth cultivating, whilst arrogance and closed-mindedness are best avoided, there is a pressing need to develop interventions to ameliorate the current

state of affairs. This chapter proposes that self-affirmation techniques can help to address this issue by reducing arrogant behaviour. It consists of three sections. 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 section offers empirical 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 in discussion. 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 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 heads or roll their eyes. They may also ignore a speaker's contribution to a conversation and behave as if it has never been made.

These behaviours exemplify a form of disrespect for other participants in discussion. 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 speakers to defend the point of view that they have put forward in conversation. 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 the appropriate epistemic standing vis a vis the

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 one's 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.

content she asserts.² Second, this same person is conveying to her audience that she is prepared to answer reasonable challenges to her claims. 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 being someone on whom others can rely for the truth of what is 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

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 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, however, be enormously controversial to say that an account of the nature of assertion consists in detailing these two commitments.

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 on 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

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.

have attempted to 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 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 from the answerability commitment that must be undertaken by all speakers. Since this claim to an exemption is an unwarranted arrogation

⁶ 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.

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 receives uptake, in the case of testimony an audience must recognise what the speakers say 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

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

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 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 (perhaps separately) 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 is known as attitude content (Maio & Haddock, 2015).

Attitudes are often said to have functions. These are individuated by the needs that the attitudes satisfy. For example, a person may dislike chocolate because she wants to belong to a group of skinny people who abhor fattening foods. This person's negative evaluation of chocolate serves the need to be socially accepted by her elective group. Attitudes that satisfy this need are said to have a social-adjustive function. There is no consensus on the number of functions served by attitudes, but there is a broad agreement on some. These include: satisfying the need to make sense of the world (knowledge function); the need to express one's values (value expressive function); the need to defend the ego against real or presumed

threats (ego-defensive function) as well as the need to be socially accepted (social adjustment function). Each attitude may serve more than one function (Maio & Olson, 2000a).

Most important for my purposes here is the ego-defensive function in addition to the need to be socially accepted introduced above. Attitudes 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, 2000b).

Attitudes can be strong or weak. There are several different notions of attitude strength. First, attitudes are strong when they are highly accessible. An attitude is strong in this sense when the representation of the object and the positive or negative valence are strongly associated so that the activation of the first automatically triggers the second. When attitudes are highly accessible they are ever present in one's interactions with the attitude objects; these attitudes are predictive of one's behaviour in relation to that thing in a broad range of situations (Maio & Haddock, 2015).

Attitudes can also be strong in other senses of the term. For example, they can be extreme when one has a highly negative or positive view of something. Some attitudes are strong in sense of being central or important to the person because the attitude is part of one's self-conception. Finally, attitudes are said to be strong when they are held with certitude because the person is certain that some statement conveys her attitude (clarity) and/or because she is sure of the accuracy of her evaluations (correctness) (Petrocelli et al., 2007).

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 satisfy a specific need. Thus, one may have a form of defensive self-esteem because one's self-evaluation assesses the worth of the self for its ability to protect itself from threats. That is, this kind of high self-esteem consists in a positive evaluation of the self that satisfies the need for self-enhancement. 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 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

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

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.

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). Given that individuals with high defensive self-esteem are characterised by extreme defensiveness in their attitudes (Haddock & Gebauer, 2011), it is plausible to conclude that their positive attitude toward the self, as explicitly measured, possesses an ego-defensive function.

Individuals with defensive high self-esteem exhibit a range of behaviours that are characteristic of arrogance. These include: arrogant responses to threats (McGregor et al., 2005); tendencies to self-enhancement (Bosson et al., 2003); boasting (Olson et al., 2007); higher levels of prejudice toward members of other ethnic groups (Jordan et al., 2005); heightened defensiveness (Haddock & Gebauer, 2011); being prone to anger (Schröder-Abé et al., 2007); higher levels of self-deception in general than those whose high self-esteem is congruent (Jordan et al., 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 (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 models will lead to improvement via emulation (Zagzebski, 2010, 2015). This approach is unlikely to be successful to reduce arrogance.

Human beings engage in social comparisons as a way of gauging their abilities. These comparisons are extremely frequent. We evaluate others by comparing them to us (Dunning & Hayes, 1996) and evaluates ourselves by comparing us to others (Mussweiler & Rüter, 2003). Defensive individuals are motivated by self-enhancement and their social comparison judgements are guided by this motive. Therefore, these subjects prefer to engage in comparisons with individuals whom they judge to be inferior to themselves (downward comparisons) (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). When making these judgements individuals test

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

the hypothesis that they are different from these inferior others. Since human beings are prone to confirmation biases, testing this hypothesis leads them selectively to consider evidence in its support whilst giving insufficient weight to contrary evidence (Corcoran et al., 2011). When forced to engage in comparisons with high status exemplars (upward comparisons), defensive subjects formulate and seek to test the hypothesis that they are already similar to the model. Because of confirmation biases, in these cases subjects will overestimate the degree to which they already possess the admirable features characteristic of exemplars (Corcoran et al., 2011). In addition, individuals whose high self-esteem is defensive are especially prone to malign envy when engaging in upward social comparisons (Smallets et al., 2016). That is, because these subjects find such comparisons threatening, they judge the exemplars with whom they compare themselves as possessing negative features such as arrogance and as deserving to fail (Smallets et al., 2016).

These empirical findings strongly suggest that exposure to positive exemplars is unlikely to reduce arrogance and promote intellectual humility. This methodology presupposes that the individuals it targets recognise themselves as being deficient in some respect and also feel admiration for the positive features of the exemplars. Unless these presuppositions are in place, there will be no propensity to emulate the role models. Since existing empirical evidence strongly indicates that these assumptions are unfounded, one must conclude that exposure to exemplars is counterproductive because it is likely to strengthen arrogant people's conviction that they are already special or their tendency to derogate other people's achievements.

The hypothesis that defensive high self-esteem lies at the root of arrogant behaviour points in the direction of a different strategy to reduce its prevalence. What would be required are interventions that address subjects' defensiveness. Self-affirmation techniques are one promising approach. They involve different tasks such as 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.¹¹ Alternatively subjects may be encouraged to reflect on a life experience in which an important value played a significant role. Self-affirmation helps to make participants more secure in themselves and thus less defensive (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 2010).¹²

There is reason to believe that self-affirmation techniques work because they make one's temporary self-conception more capacious (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Through self-affirmation individuals are able to focus their attention on those things that are central to the self and constitutive of their self-concept. In this way subjects become aware of their multiple values and thus, at least temporarily, realise that there is more complexity and variety to their self-concept than they have implicitly assumed. In turn, this awareness of the breadth of the self makes the perceived threats, responsible for the subject's defensiveness, seem narrow by comparison. Consequently, such threats appear less threatening because they leave untouched numerous facets of the self. If this is right, self-affirmation works to reduce defensiveness by drawing attention to the fact that there are self-defining aspects of the self which are not under threat.

Thus, the techniques in their standard applications rely for their efficacy on individuals' ability to understand themselves well enough to know that there are many valuable things that

¹¹ Therefore, self-affirmation techniques are not the same as the kind of positive affirmation aimed at self-enhancement that involves telling oneself that one is great and getting better everyday. The usefulness of the latter kind of affirmation for individuals suffering from low self-esteem is dubious.

¹² See McQueen and Klein (2006) for a systematic review of the variety of self-affirmation techniques in the current literature.

define them.¹³ It is possible, however - or perhaps it is even likely – that individuals who have a defensive high self-esteem may, when asked to self-affirm, be unable to reflect on those values which are genuinely central to their self-definition. Instead, they may narrowly focus on those aspects of the self which they feel are under threat. If this occurs, since self-affirmation would fail to expand one's current conscious conception of the self, it would be ineffective to reduce defensiveness and the arrogant behaviour it generates. It may, therefore, be necessary to develop enhanced self-affirmation techniques to promote a genuine appreciation of the breadth and complexity of the self even in those who are extremely defensive. That is, in the case of extremely defensive subjects self-affirmation interventions may require prior identification of the most important aspects of the self-concept to allow for more personalised self-affirmation manipulations targeting aspects of the self which subjects do not perceive to be under immediate threat.¹⁴

The idea that self-affirmation can reduce arrogant behaviour is counterintuitive since one may think that arrogant people need to be taken down a peg. Instead self-affirmation proposes that we reduce arrogance by making people who already think they are special feel good about themselves.¹⁵ 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

¹³ It also presupposes that subjects are able to value a broad range of things.

¹⁴ Self-affirmation is thought to work best if the aspect of the self which is affirmed is distinct from the aspect that is thought to be threatened.

¹⁵ Self-affirmation is also an effective means to reduce closed-mindedness in negotiation (Cohen et al., 2007). It is plausible that it may also facilitate open-mindedness in conversation. If so, self-affirmation is doubly effective in addressing some common obstacles to respectful and knowledge-conducive debating behaviour.

that if we adopt interventions that can make them feel less threatened and more secure in themselves, they will respond 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.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For more information on this research project visit

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