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Conductive Argument: An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning
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This collection of sixteen essays is a result of a symposium on conductive argument, organized by the Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric (CRRAR, in Windsor, Ontario), in the spring of 2010. The notion of a conductive argument has been introduced by Carl Wellman in his book *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* (1971), and is also discussed in his *Morals and Ethics* (1975). In Wellman's view, the notions of induction and deduction do not deal adequately with the characteristics of ethical argumentation. The notion of conduction is needed to explain how ethical statements can be justified. His views have been brought to the attention of informal logicians and argumentation theorists by Govier (1979) and Hitchcock (1980). The book *Conductive Argument* aims to "launch conductive argument as a topic for the attention of theorists of reasoning and argumentation, informal logic and logic in general" (vii). It deals with: the concept of conduction, in part 1; the evaluation of conduction, in part 2; and with case studies and special topics, in part 3. The three parts are preceded by an introduction by Blair, and concluded with an afterword by Govier.

Outline of the book

According to Wellman, "[c]onduction can best be defined as that sort of reasoning in which 1) a conclusion about some individual case 2) is drawn non-conclusively 3) from one or more premises about the same case 4) without appeal to other cases" (Wellman, 1971, p. 52; quoted on p. 1). Wellman identifies three patterns of conduction. In pattern 1, "a single reason is given for the conclusion" (Wellman, 1971, p. 55; quoted on p. 3), for example: "You ought to help him for he has been very kind to you" (Wellman, 1971, p. 55). In pattern 2 "several considerations, each of which may be independently relevant, are brought together into a unified argument from which a single conclusion is drawn" (Wellman, 1971, p. 56; quoted on p. 3), for example: "You ought to take your son to the movie because you promised to do so, it is a good movie, and you have nothing better to do this afternoon" (Wellman, 1971, p. 56). Pattern 3 is "that form of argument in which some conclusion is drawn from both positive and negative considerations … reasons against the conclusion are included as well as reasons for it" (Wellman, 1971, p. 57; quoted on p. 3), for example: "Although your lawn needs cutting, you ought to take your son to the movies because the picture is ideal for children and will be gone by tomorrow" (Wellman, 1971, p. 57).

In the introduction. J. Anthony Blair maps the issues dealt with in the book, distinguishing between issues of defining conductive argument, issues of conceptualizing conduction, issues of analyzing conductive reasoning, issues of assessing conductive arguments, and issues of originality and historical connections. Blair observes that most (though not all) authors in the book drop the requirements 1, 3 and 4 of Wellman's definition, and deal with those non-conclusive arguments that exhibit pattern 3. Note that these are often referred to in the book as "pro and con" or "(on) balance of considerations" arguments. Blair contends that in order to develop a theory of conductive

argument or reasoning, each of the issues listed needs attention. He stresses the importance of making a distinction between conductive reasoning, in the sense of finding out what is conductively implied by data, and conductive argument, in the sense of justifying a claim conductively. In Blair's view, the authors in this book are "following Wellman in making nothing of this distinction" (p. 2).

In his chapter, Rongdong Jin surveys existing theories on pro and con arguments, among which Hitchcock's views on on balance of considerations arguments, and Govier's view on the role of counter considerations in conductive arguments. According to his proposal for visually mapping conductive argument, say the lawn-cutting-example introduced above, the pros ("this picture is ideal for children" and "This picture will be gone by tomorrow") are connected to the conclusion with straight arrows, whereas the cons ("Your lawn needs cutting") are connected to the conclusion with squiggly arrows (following an idea by Govier), and an "on balance consideration", claiming that the pros outweigh the cons, is pictured by boxing both the sets of pros and the set of cons, and making it visible that the pros "shunt aside" the cons (following an idea by Hitchcock).

Hans Hansen deals with many aspects of those balance-of-considerations arguments where, using Govier's distinction, the arguer *strongly* acknowledges counter considerations as acceptable and negatively relevant, rather than merely *weakly* as accepted and considered negatively relevant by others. Hansen explains that in such arguments, the counter considerations are claimed to be outweighed in an *on-balance premise* that remains typically implicit. According to Hansen's proposal, a typical conductive argument has two parts, which I shall (different from Hansen) illustrate with a revised version of the lawn-cutting-example: "Although your lawn needs cutting, and you don't feel like going to the movies,….". In the first part, the *pro considerations* ("The picture is ideal for children" and "The picture will be gone tomorrow") together with the *on-balance premise* ("The reasons in <The picture is ideal for children> and <The picture will be gone tomorrow>, taken together, outweigh the independent counter considerations to the conclusion, <the lawn needs cutting> and <you don't feel like it>, taken together") are linked premises for an intermediate conclusion of the form "A even though B" ("You should take you son to the movies, even though your lawn needs cutting and you don't feel like it"). In the second part, this intermediate conclusion supports the argument's final conclusion ("You should take your son to the movies").

Ralph H. Johnson contends that conductive arguments contain the counter considerations as part of their illative core. Objections, however, are raised by others in order to probe or sound out, or even to refute the arguer's argument. Responses to objections, then, are part of an argument's dialectical tier. Whereas a counter consideration is by definition negatively relevant to the argument's conclusion, an objection need not be negatively relevant, even though the objector supposes it to be so. Consequently, Johnson argues, "arguments with a dialectical tier are not reducible to "pro and con" arguments" (p. 61).

Christian Kock claims that the more an argument deals with practical issues, "the more will conductive argument be the natural and inevitable order of the day" (p. 63). He underlines Wellman's idea that the "weighing" of pros and cons should not suggest any mechanical or automatic procedure. Instead, individuals have to decide what relative weights to assign to the various considerations. Where Wellman considers the existence of diverging judgments to be consistent with ethical objectivism, requiring at least one more round of "challenge and response," Kock infers from the resistence of practical disputes the subjectivity of practical claims.

Frank Zenker examines the connections between deduction, induction and conduction, and aims at showing conduction to be more complex and richer than both induction or deduction. In particular, deduction and induction can be *reduced* to conduction, by satisfying additional

requirements. Induction can be seen as satisfying, among others, the additional requirement that the weights of the premises are equal. Deduction can be seen as satisfying an additional requirement to the effect that the information content of the premises is equal to the information content of the conjunction of the premises and the conclusion.

Thomas Fischer clarifies the kind of weighing involved in conduction, as non-numerical, comparative hefting, that starts from individual judgments and that aims at a more objective point of view. His account is the result of a critical examination of Govier's proposal to conceive of a reason's strength (or weakness) as a reason that has an associated generalization with a *ceteris paribus* clause, connecting the argument's reason with its conclusion, that admits of a narrow (or large) range of exceptions.

Robert C. Pinto explains in detail how we can weigh considerations pro and con, when evaluating a conductive argument. According to his treatment, the *force of a consideration* [for a conclusion] is a function of both the *risk* we take in relying on the consideration – produced by the fact that the consideration has been inferred from reasons with less than full strength –, and the *weight*, or importance, attached to the consideration. So, when considering to hire Clark, the *inference* from Clark's having an MBA from Harvard to Clark's future success as a manager has a particular strength, resulting in a particular risk if we were to rely on the consideration of Clark's prospective success. In addition, this consideration of prospective success has a particular *weight*. We might consider our reliance on Clark's future success as a great risk but regard this consideration as very important, and vice versa as a small risk but then of minor importance. The *weight* of a consideration is, in Pinto's analysis, a function of both the importance of the *feature* that makes the consideration a reason for adopting the conclusion, in this example the prospective success of Clark, and the degree to which this feature is present. This enables Pinto to answer Govier's question of what enables us to compare the relative (combined) force of the considerations pro and con: it is our ability (1) to estimate the degree to which the features at hand are present in a situation; (2) to determine the importance of those features; and (3) to estimate the degree of risk when relying on those considerations. Using such estimations, we can make comparative judgments, using rules such as: "A moderate difference in risk in favor of *a slightly weightier* consideration gives *slightly* more force to the weightier consideration" (p. 124).

According to Freeman, Wellman's insistence on conduction as being about a single case does not imply that generalizations do not play a role when evaluating such arguments, albeit not as premises but as *warrants* (inference rules). The connection adequacy of a conductive argument, then, can be evaluated by determining whether there exists an adequate, epistemic *backing* for the argument's warrant, either *a priori*, empirical, institutional or evaluative. In this way, Freeman aims at advancing the discussion beyond Wellman's contention that "By and large there is no way to judge the validity [of conductive arguments] ... but by thinking them through and feeling their logical force" (Wellman, p. 79; quoted on p. 133). Freeman proposes to deal with the acknowledged counter considerations, conceived of as *rebutting defeaters,* by framing the warrants comprehensively such that they take account of them. For example, to use a simplified example, if it is argued that "I use waste making energy, because I travel 350 miles a week, even though I write on both sides of a paper," the enriched warrant is: "From <x travels 350 miles a week & x writes on both sides of a paper > one can infer *ceteris paribus* that <x uses waste making energy>." The evaluation of the connection adequacy of the argument, then, depends on whether this warrant can be adequately backed, in one of the four ways.

Mark Battersby and Sharon Bailin offer twelve guidelines for using conductive reasoning. For example, according to one of these, you should "[c]onsider the full variety of objections to the various arguments and responses to the objections" (italic in original, p. 149). These guidelines, then, are used for identifying "fallacies of judgment." For example, a failure to follow the above guideline results in the "failure to consider objections," thereby weakening one's case.

Fred J. Kauffeld examines the role of considerations pro and con in the debates over ratification of the U.S. constitution. Anti-Federalists initially presented considerations regarding the constitution's threat to civil liberties as *overriding* considerations. Kauffeld explains how the *Federalist Papers*, by Hamilton, Madison and Jay, succeeded in reframing the debate by picturing the constitution as a necessity, and by recognizing the possible threats by building in safeguards. As a result, the threats to liberty came to be seen as considerations having a particular, but not decisive weight, commensurate with the pros. This case study stresses parity of ranking as a precondition for conductive arguments.

Derek Allen scrutinizes the reasoning of two judges on the Supreme Court of Canada, who deal with the issue of whether a provision of the Criminal Code, prohibiting hate propaganda, is constitutionally valid. Allen does so by applying Freeman's method of comprehensively framed warrants, and of determining to what extent those warrants can be properly backed. Interestingly, Allen observes that the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* requires the judges not to abstract from the issue at hand, and to evaluate their arguments only on the basis of the particularities of the case at hand.

Walton analyzes an longer example of conductive reasoning, in which no final conclusion happens to be drawn yet, as a contribution to a deliberation dialogue. Using argumentation schemes, the deliberation is visualized by constructing an argument diagram on the pro side, as well as an argument diagram on the con side. Walton underlines that Wellman does offer a method for evaluating conductive reasoning, despite his own misgivings about it. According to this method of *challenge and response*, a decision maker should reflect on his argument, formulate it as clearly as possible, consider objections to it, discuss their merit with others, and reflect once more (p. 205).

Harald Wohlrapp criticizes the way pro and contra arguments are conceptualized within the literature on conduction. Rather than merely seeing conduction in merely structural terms, for example as a relationship between sentences, he stresses the importance of the procedural aspect of an argumentative praxis. And rather than picturing conduction merely from an objective stance, for example in terms of its reliability, he stresses the pertinence of the subjective aspect of an argument, is being reliable for someone, for example. Although Wellman did acknowledge the relevance of the argumentative procedure, in Wohlrapp's view he underestimates it by failing to recognize that the set of pros and cons is itself the result of a process in which the considerations have been "collected, generated, checked, confirmed, criticised, replaced and thus transformed into a group which represent the "essential" arguments" (p. 220). And although Wellman conceives validity as the psychological force after criticism, in Wohlrapp's view he underestimates the subjective dimension by failing to recognize weight comparisons as being relative to subject (value) systems.

Using his historical-textual approach, Maurice A. Finocchiaro reconstructs meta-arguments by Wellman, Hitchcock, Govier and others, with which they support theoretical claims about conduction. These meta-arguments happen themselves to be often conductive arguments, Finocchiaro notices. A second connection between meta-argumentation and conductive argument, Finocchiaro contends, is that a conductive argument contains an (often implicit) balance-of-considerations claim "that must be implicitly made, explicitly formulated, or critically justified for the

construction, interpretation, or evaluation of conductive arguments" (p. 225), and this claim is irreducibly meta-argumentative for being *about* arguments. Finocchiaro also discusses scholars who studied conductive arguments under different labels, such as Mill (balancing conflicting reasons), Scriven (weight and sum methodology), Johnson (dialectical tier), Kock (deliberation), Eisend, O'Keefe, and Jacquette (one-sided and two-sided messages), and Galileo (open-mindedness and fair-mindedness).

In her afterword, Trudy Govier reconsiders her theory on conduction in light of the comments by the contributors. For one, she defends her view that the importance or weight of a reason for or against a conclusion must be assessed from a universal perspective, by considering the *ceteris paribus* associated generalization. Further, she takes account of Johnson's claim that an objection is different from a counter consideration. And she addresses the alternative proposals for analyzing and diagramming conductive arguments.

Comments

This valuable book discusss a great number and variety of issues that are pertinent to anyone with a philosophical or theoretical interest in argumentation and informal logic. I shall make some critical remarks about three of the essays that I consider particularly worthwhile.

Hansen's proposal for the logical structure of patterns 3 conductive arguments is interesting for having the final conclusion P, supported by an intermediate conclusion "P, even though Q", in turn supported by the pros and an on balance premise to the effect that the pros outweigh the cons. Nevertheless, I assume that this analysis is not in all respects adequate, for according to my reading of the typical examples of pattern 3 conductive argument, the on balance premise is not a basic, unsupported premise, and the pros have a role in supporting it. Though this is not the place to discuss matters in great detail, in my view, the on balance premise might be made more precise as expressing the denial of the counter considerations' undercutting the connection between the pros and the conclusion: "It is not the case that these cons show my pros to be insufficient ground for my conclusion" ("It is not the case that if your lawn needs cutting, the fact that this picture is ideal for children and that fact that you have nothing better to do, become insufficient ground for taking your son to the movies"). If so, genuine considerations pro might be seen as part of the support of this newly formulated 'on balance premise' (if it may still be called that way), because presenting these pros adjacent to the cons is a plausible way to show that it is a realistic possibility that the cons are true and, nevertheless, the pros suffice to support the conclusion. In other words, when unpacking the balancing metaphor, in such a way that it becomes plausible that the 'on balance premise' is not devoid of support. Moreover, the pros might be seen as having a double function: both supporting the conclusion, as well as being part of an attempt at showing that the counter considerations do not successfully undercut the connection between pros and the conclusion.

Finocchiaro offers lucid reconstructions of some of the complex meta-arguments that have been prominent in the discussion on conduction, thereby underlining Wellman's contention that conduction extends beyond the realm of ethics. An intriguing element in Finocchiaro's paper is the idea that all conductive arguments are meta-arguments, for the reason that the balance of considerations claim (premise) is *about* arguments, pro and con. Nevertheless, I am not fully convinced by this claim. The reason is that an on balance consideration hardly expresses more than that some propositions (the cons) are not showing other propositions (the pros) to be insufficient for accepting some conclusion (as indicated above). Labeling an argument with such an on balance claim

a *meta-argument* opens the door to labeling all arguments meta-arguments, for each argument contains, at least implicitly, a claim dealing with connections between propositions. Would it not be better to reserve the category of meta-arguments for arguments that much more indirectly add to the resolution of a particular difference, having as their primary focus strategic matters or alleged faults or fallacies?

Freeman extends the Toulmin methodology for analyzing and evaluating conductive arguments. His proposal to include counter considerations in his comprehensively framed warrants is useful and insightful. So, suppose Pa is a pro and Qa is a con, in regard of a conclusion Ra, then the comprehensive warrant is a rule to the effect that: “From Px and Qx one may infer Rx.” However, such a warrant abstracts from the distinct roles of pros and cons. It has not been Qa's merit that the conclusion has been drawn. As we have seen, the argument "Even though Qa, we can conclude that Ra, because Pa" might, alternatively, be reconstructed as "Ra, because Pa, and it's not the case that Qa undercuts the sufficiency of Pa’s support of Ra," in which case the warrant might be reconstructed as "From Px and it's not being the case that Qx undercuts the sufficiency of Px’s support of Rx, one may infer Rx." In other words, some version of the "on balance premise" (preferably, in my view, in terms of the lack of refutatory potential of the counter considerations) could also have been included in the enriched warrant, without losing track of the distinction between propositions that do and that do not support the conclusion.

One final comment. The book does not contain a dialogical account of conductive arguments that is more or less complete, although especially the papers by Johnson, Walton, Wohlrapp and Kauffeld offer interesting contributions to such an account. This is regrettable for theoretical reasons, because conduction seems to be inextricably bound up with a dialogue context, and because dialogical argumentation theory would profit from an account of a proponent’s acknowledging negatively relevant counter considerations within his argument. It is also regrettable for hermeneutical reasons, for Wellman was very explicit in locating conduction, and even all reasoning, “in those conversations in which one person is trying to defend some statement against the attacks of other people” (1971, p. 86). Another indication of Wellman’s dialogical stance towards reasoning is his view that justification of a statement consists in meeting the challenges actually made to it: "One obvious objection to my view (...) is that this is not sufficient; to justify fully one must meet all possible challenges. I argue that this is not so and that the data of ethical justification are simply any premises, arguments, or moves that are in fact accepted" (p. xii). Finally, he conceives of “valid” and “invalid” as words that “derive their meaning from the role they play in the process of criticism, a process of thinking and discussion which sustains or destroys the persuasiveness of argument. To say that an argument is valid is to claim that when subjected to an indefinite amount of criticism it is persuasive for everyone who thinks in the normal way” (p. 99). Therefore, among the manifold of responses that this book merits, is a dialogical account of conductive arguments, doing justice to Wellman’s dialogical intentions and to the dialogical features of conductive arguments themselves. I guess, such a theory should deal with the following four types of acknowledgement, rather than only with the first of them: (1) Acknowledging that a proposition is acceptable and negatively relevant but not that it is sufficiently refutatory; (2) acknowledging that a proposition is acceptable but not that it is negatively relevant (let alone sufficiently refutatory); (3) acknowledging that a proposition is sufficiently refutatory (and consequently negatively relevant) but not that it is acceptable; (4) and acknowledging that a proposition is negatively relevant but not that it is either sufficiently refutatory or acceptable.

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