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Commentary on David Godden's "The Epistemic Utility of Toulmin's Argument Fields"

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David Godden's paper touches upon a crucial insight for argument assessment: the power and reach of substantive arguments rests upon the evaluation of the strength of their warrants. Whether that evaluation is based on epistemic requirements such as truth or principled criteria for acceptability, informal logic must offer an account of the strength of warrants if it is to retain normative force. The alternative here is worse than relativism, it is impotence in the face of an essential goal of argument evaluation.

Godden addresses this issue by offering an analysis and critique of Toulmin's notion of field dependence, which he sees as tending dangerously towards relativism. He cites recent work by Hitchcock and Pinto as offering an alternative via the evaluation of warrants:

A key feature of warrants is that they can be evaluated according to their truth conductivity or reliability. While measures are entirely objective, preventing the slide to relativism, they can be applied in such a way as to make them relative to an arguer's goals or purposes, thus allowing for the situationalism and pragmatism that seem to follow as general mores of evaluation from Toulmin's work. (p. 7)

Unfortunately, Godden goes no further in elaborating the position. But the role of warrants is far from obvious. Short of assimilating warrants to universal generalizations and subsuming inferences as instances of formal logic, the function of warrants raises significant theoretic issues (Weinstein 2006).

I agree whole-heartedly with Godden that it is warrants that do the heavy lifting in arguments and have offered an account of warrant strength compatible with Toulmin's agenda (Weinstein 2006a). My notion of warrant strength is based on the depth and breadth with which a warrant supports argumentation in a field. This yields a correlative cross-field principle to Godden's notion of an 'arguer's goals or purposes.' The strength of a warrant is a function of the context of warrants that constitute the field within which the argument sits. In my view the goal of inquiry is to generate the most comprehensive set of warrants consistent with the purposes for which knowledge in the field is required. So the central questions for Godden are, can we determine an arguer's goals and purposes and in so far as these goals and purposes are relative to individuals (or even groups) isn't

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this relativism at its worst? And the challenge for argument theory is to develop an account that is adequate to the fact that fields of inquiry afford relatively objective ‘goals and purposes’ and so move us to at least inter-subjective assessments of arguments in light of normative structures that constitute accepted warrants and permissible procedures in the various fields of inquiry.

Godden agrees that warrants are central to assessment and sees their assessment to be a field independent aspect of logic, but it is an open question whether warrants can be assessed independent of the field in which they occur. From my perspective, claims about the relation of a warrant to its field is, relatively speaking, field independent, relatively speaking since although the claim occurs within a field, argument theory, the claim purports to be general in respect of many other argument fields. For argument theory, like other theories of inquiry, take other fields as the object of their concern, are self-referential and potentially universal in their scope. But although claims in argument theory apply to arguments across fields, Godden and I differ as to whether warrants can be assessed in field independent ways. I don’t think they can, which is another field independent claim in the sense just put forward. So I have two non-relativistic claims. First, for any non-trivial argument for which substantive knowledge is required the evaluation of the argument requires the assessment of the strength of its warrants. Second, warrants take their strength from the context within which they sit (the field in which they are put forward).

Godden concedes the possibility of modest field-sensitive arguments, but thinks the notion of field is controversial and not needed:

suppose that fields are disciplinary. At first glance, the idea that the probative merits of an argument, or the acceptability of a claim, can vary from one discipline to the next seems to make some good sense. An argument about the chemical composition of a rock sample might be quite adequate in geology and quite inadequate in gemology. Yet should this be the final word on how the relative merits of arguments can be evaluated? Are there not some arguments of which we want to say that they are (no) good no good no matter what discipline belong to or are offered in? (p. 3)

Let me concede his final point immediately, relative to standard logic, there are some arguments that are hopeless and some that are beyond dispute. But that doesn’t affect the enormous body of arguments that are neither, that is arguments whose epistemic force relies on the strength of their warrants. Can such arguments be evaluated in field-independent ways? The key to answering both questions is a concept that Godden omits from his discussion, Toulmin’s notion of backing and the correlative notion of a field as being a set of commitments to methodological standards and the set of interrelated warrants that are accepted in light of such standards, reflecting the goals and purposes of inquiry within the field. That there are such fields seems beyond question, although the boundaries may be difficult to ascertain and are subject to evolution. The backing answers the question, “why in general this warrant should be accepted as having authority” (Toulmin p. 95). The general answer speaks to already accepted warrants and permitted procedures. But accepted warrants and permitted procedures points to the context within which the argument is put forward, and for most substantive arguments accepted warrants and permitted procedures are defined in terms of a body of literature and related practice. And, as Godden admits, such procedures vary radically as a function of discipline, if only because in the sophisticated knowledge environments within which

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substantive arguments occur, not all epistemic postures are created equal. Students of physics define the available warrants and the standards for ascertaining them as a function of professional reflection upon successful practice. It is patently obvious that the requirements for warrant acceptability and the procedures for drawing inferences are different across fields and the burden of proof is upon those who would support a general account. I have argued fields can be differentiated as a function of subject matter and methodology (Weinstein 1990). For example, physical chemistry is a unified field both in terms of subject matter and methodology, modern biology has a clear subject matter and is a composite of a number of pre-existing fields each with a coherent methodology (physiology, broadly construed, organic chemistry and evolutionary theory), psychology although having an over-arching concern with human thought is composed of various disparate sub-fields, yet to be unified by a common methodology or even common agreement as to whether thought is mental or behavioural, history has a common subject matter with divergent, yet, complementary methodologies, English literature has alternative, yet possible complementary methodologies despite the vehemence of methodological disputes in the field, similarly for economics and sociology.

Godden sees the available accounts of fields to yield relativism.

If the evaluative properties of arguments in fact depend on any of the psychological, sociological, anthropological, disciplinary, conceptual, linguistic, or symbolic, features of arguments then it seems that there is little prospect of avoiding the problem of equal validity (p. 4).

Godden offers no argument for the claim that such considerations lead to relativism and doesn't unpack what these various features might mean in relation to argument. Earlier he distinguishes the following versions of what fields are in the literature:

Ontological: *Fields are subject matter domains* [...] Anthropological: *Fields are communities of arguers or audiences* [...] Linguistic: *Fields are domains of discourse* [...] Epistemological: "knowledge structures" [...] "the propositional context of a disciplined rational enterprise with an epistemological purpose" [...] Logical [...] Sociological/Psychological [...] Disciplinary [...] Symbolic Structures: "collections of communicative rules" [...] Purely Psychological (and Pragmatic: Fields are practices (which covary according to their pragmatic utility in problem-solving). (pp. 3-4)

Fields are all of these, certainly they relate to subject matter (ontology), to claims, especially generalizations, that support explanations and understanding (epistemology), they reflect the social psychology of the members, they are productive of disciplinary norms that may be stated in terms of communicative rules (norms for publication and the like) and most essentially, they are practices, that is, they have been developed in response to characteristic human concerns and conceptual and practical problems. But all of these descriptions fail to capture what Godden is after "whether, and to what degree, the truth of their premises establishes or demonstrates the truth—or likelihood—of their conclusions." (pp. 4-5). But what Godden seems to miss is that, however construed, fields are normative, that is they function to control and constrain knowledge claims based upon accepted information and permissible procedures. Short of a general account of how truth is transmitted from premises to conclusion (that is short of a formal logic) it is to such disciplinary practices that we must turn to evaluate arguments, by ascertaining the truth (or likelihood) of warrants and the logical adequacy of inferential relations in light of

permissible operations. With the demise of formal logic there just is no theory of how this is done in general. There is no completeness proof for informal logic, and so there is no logical filter to evaluate the truth of premises and the validity of inferential relations. We can do no better than to rely on the disciplinary practices that have proved their worth over time, that is to say, to use the disciplinary norms encapsulated in the fields of inquiry to determine the adequacy of warrants and inferential apparatus in arguments proffered. And we can certainly do quite a bit worse, for example, rely on the intuitions of informal logicians to evaluate the strength of the warrants in arguments of all sorts.

[Link to paper](#)

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