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Comment on Marcello Guarini: “The Triple Contract: A Case Study of a Source Blending Analogical Argument”

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Marcello Guarini’s paper is full of interesting and suggestive ideas about the nature of analogical arguments, about the psychological phenomena that may underlie our reasoning by analogy, and about the debate over the so-called Triple Contract. He draws two primary conclusions. First, he argues for the existence of what he calls “source blended” analogical arguments, a form of argument by analogy that he says deserves more study. Second, he argues that the debate during the Middle Ages about the moral/legal acceptability of the so-called Triple Contract financial arrangement provides an example of a “source blended” analogical argument.

I find this second claim difficult to assess. I am not sure whether the defense of the Triple Contract he describes is indeed a source blended argument by analogy. But my uncertainty stems from a prior uncertainty about what exactly a source-blended argument by analogy is supposed to be. In part, this uncertainty derives from a more fundamental uncertainty about the nature and logical properties of analogical arguments themselves. What I have to say today is meant to help Guarini’s project by clarifying some of this conceptual ground for him.

Unlike a single-source argument by analogy, both multi-source and blended source arguments involve analogies between the target and more than one other thing. Here is an example of a single source argument by analogy:

- (1) Jones is a philosopher just like Peter. And Peter is a good critical thinker, so Jones probably is too.

Here is an example of a multi-source argument.

- (2) Jones is a philosopher just like Peter and Sarah. And both Peter and Sarah are good critical thinkers, so Jones is probably a good critical thinker too.

The strength of these arguments depend (inter alia) on whether being a philosopher is relevant to being a good critical thinker. (Set aside whether the premises are true, since this is irrelevant to the argument’s logical strength.) Suppose that being a philosopher is a relevant similarity and that there are no relevant dissimilarities. It follows that both arguments are logically strong. But isn’t argument 2 stronger than argument 1? Doesn’t

the fact that argument 2 involves two sources (Peter and Sarah) make it logically stronger than argument 1, which has but one source (Peter)? I am not so sure.

For argument 2 might be analyzed as consisting of two *independent* arguments for the conclusion, each one a single-source argument by analogy. If so, then each independent argument is just as strong as argument 1. The analogy between Jones and Peter on the one hand and that between Jones and Sarah on the other have nothing much to do with one another logically. A valid argument does not become more valid by adding premises that independently entail the conclusion. How could a logically strong argument become stronger just by adding more premises that independently provide strong support for the conclusion? So, it seems, if we analyze argument 2 into two independent arguments, it is no stronger than argument 1, even though it involves two sources.

The appearance that argument 2 is stronger may derive from the support that Peter and Sarah's being both good critical thinkers and philosophers provides for the proposition that being a philosopher is somehow relevant to being a good critical thinker. In general, the larger the sample size, the more representative it probably is. But even if this proposition is an implicit premise in arguments 1 and 2, this enumerative support for it has nothing to do with the logical strength of those arguments, since the logical strength of an argument has nothing much to do with whether its premises are true.

So one thing that needs to be clarified, it seems to me, is why multi-source arguments by analogy are not just multiple single-source arguments by analogy. Perhaps others here can help me to see this difference.

Marcello Guarini argues for the existence of a third form of argument by analogy, which he calls a "source blended" argument by analogy. In contrast to multiple source arguments by analogy, in a source blended argument "the sources are singly inadequate but jointly adequate for licensing a specific treatment of the target." He illustrates it using one argument in the very interesting debate over the Triple Contract. I take it that he would formulate that argument somewhat as follows.

- (3) The Triple Contract is a partnership just like the Societas, and it is an insurance policy just like any other insurance policy, and the Societas and insurance policies are morally acceptable financial relationships, so the Triple Contract is probably a morally acceptable financial relationship too.

I find this example problematic, in part because it seems to me to be a very weak argument, given the relevant dissimilarities between the Triple Contract and both the Societas and standard insurance contracts. In arguing for the existence of a certain kind of argument form, it would be better, I think, to provide an example whose logical strength is clear.

I hope Marcello will forgive me if I turn to a less interesting though simpler example. Consider the following.

- (4) Jones is a philosopher just like Peter, and he is a Canadian just like Sophie, and Peter and Sophie are good critical thinkers, so Jones is probably a good critical thinker too.

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As was the case in (2), Jones is here compared to two sources. But unlike (2), in (4) the relevant properties are different. Assuming again that being a philosopher and being a Canadian are relevant to being a good critical thinker and that there are no relevant dissimilarities, we can ask whether argument (4) is stronger than argument (2). Here I have the very same reaction I had with (2), namely that argument (4) is not really a source blended argument by analogy, but rather just a blend of single source arguments by analogy, each of which is best analyzed and evaluated on its own. It seems to me the same is true of (3).

In characterizing a source blended argument, Guarini said none of its analogical premises is singly adequate. I am not exactly sure what this means, but it suggests that the analogical premises are dependent on each other, in that none would provide logical support for the conclusion if any of the others were false. This is pretty clearly not the case in (4), where the two analogies have nothing much to do with one another. Any support each analogy provides for the conclusion would persist even if the other analogy failed to support the conclusion or to hold.

So what we need is a case where each analogy is weak on its own but where the analogies together constitute a strong case for the conclusion, in something like the way a legal case against a defendant might be strong even though each element in the case provides only weak support for the guilty verdict. An analogy is weak if there are relevant dissimilarities. So let me try one more example.

- (5) Jones is a philosopher just like Peter though Peter is much more reasonable than Jones, but Jones is also a Canadian just like Sophie even though Sophie is more reflective than Jones, so Jones is probably a good critical thinker.

Here Jones is relevantly like Peter in one respect (being a philosopher) and unlike him in another relevant respect (being reasonable). So this analogy by itself provides little support for the conclusion that Jones is a good critical thinker. Likewise, the analogy between Jones and Sophie provides little support for that conclusion, since the relevant dissimilarity (being reflective) counter weighs the relevant similarity (being Canadian). But does the argument as a whole provide strong support for the conclusion? I am inclined to say that it does not. This leads me to doubt that any argument of this form can be logically strong. But perhaps this is not the form Guarini has in mind when he speaks of source-blended arguments by analogy.

I have tried to draw attention to a few issues on which Marcello Guarini might be able to shed more light. To summarize, it would be helpful to know more about the relevant formal differences between single-source, multi-source and source-blended arguments by analogy, and it would be helpful to have an example of a source blended argument by analogy that is logically strong.

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