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Comentary on David Hitchcock: “So”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In David Hitchcock’s paper, we may distinguish two theses. On the one hand, there is a proposal regarding the meaning of the word ‘so’ and related terms which are used to express an inferential relationship between two claims. On the other hand, there is a conception of the warrant of an argument as a general rule that justifies its inference-claim. Both theses are interrelated in Hitchcock’s account, because he aims to establish that the meaning of ‘so’ is equivalent to “the claim that some generalization of the argument’s associated negajunction is non-trivially true” (p. 4), and Hitchcock considers that

any such generalization is equivalent in force to a rule that claims an entitlement: ‘Data such as D entitle one to make claims such as C,’ i.e. what Toulmin (1958, p. 98) calls a warrant. (Hitchcock, p. 4)

Hitchcock says that warrants are specific rules that “act as support” for inference-claims (p. 4). That is, he conceives of Toulminian warrants as justifications for inference-claims.

The defence of these theses in “So” involves both a negative and a positive part. The negative part consists in criticising my thesis (Bermejo-Luque, 2006) that the inference-claim of an argument is the corresponding material conditional. The positive part consists in defending the above-outlined conception of inference-claims against a series of criticisms that I have raised here and there. Consequently, my tasks in this commentary should be the opposite: to defend the material conditional account of inference-claims and to outline the problems of a conception of warrants as justifications for inference-claims. But, because of space constraints, I will have to limit myself to the first of these tasks.

2. THE MEANING OF ‘SO’

Hitchcock says that

* My debt to David Hitchcock is unpayable: not only he has been so generous as to take into account the views of an almost beginner, but he has also helped me to develop my own ideas in several ways, always encouraging my efforts, even when they were against his own views. If this is not enough, he is the best editor that a non-native speaker can ever have!

Regarding the present work, I wish to thank also Prof. Bob Ennis: the three of us have had a great discussion about my “odd views” that makes me think that our field, Argumentation, is unique in its bringing about the easiest and most fruitful meetings, regardless of the academic status of the discussants.

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roughly speaking, a conclusion indicator like ‘so’ indicates that the sentence that it immediately precedes follows from the sentence that immediately precedes it, perhaps in combination with other sentences in the immediate context. (Hitchcock, p. 1)

I take it to be a good idea to consider that the inferential use of an inferential particle is tantamount to an implicit inference-claim, so that terms like ‘so’, ‘therefore’, ‘consequently’, and the like, when used to express inferential relationships, convey this claim. But let me underline, at this early stage, that I conceive of inference-claims as claims, that is to say, as speech acts of a certain sort. With Hitchcock, I take these claims to be implicit in the inferential uses of ‘so’, and to *mean* that from the reason(s) alleged the conclusion *follows*.

Now, it is commonly acknowledged that ‘mean’ is a rather ambiguous word. In particular, most philosophers of language distinguish between the pragmatic and the semantic conditions that determine the use of any expression. Let us then consider how the inference-claim of an argument manages to *mean* that the conclusion *follows* from the reason(s).

Hitchcock also says that

[the] conditional ‘If the premisses are true, then the conclusion is true’ ... clearly *is* the argument’s inference-claim (Hitchcock, p 2. His italics)

This is another point of agreement between Hitchcock and me: we both conceive of the inference-claim of an argument as an indicative conditional. But his thesis is that, in order to capture the ‘following’ sense involved in it, we should understand this conditional as the claim that some covering generalization of the argument’s associated material conditional is true. Thus, part of his goal in his paper is to criticise my thesis that the inference-claim of an act of arguing is just this material conditional—that is, a conditional whose antecedent is the premiss or the conjunction of the premisses and whose consequent is the conclusion.

In his paper, Hitchcock argues against my account of the inference-claim by exploiting the well-known paradoxes of material implication. Certainly, if we consider his examples, there seems to be something odd about an interpretation of inference-claims as material conditionals: no ‘following’ sense seems to be at stake in arguments like ‘Snow is white, so grass is green’, or ‘20,472 is divisible by 3, so 20,472 is divisible by 9’. Certainly, the common usage of indicative conditionals seems to suggest that truth-functionality cannot be their interpretation: under this interpretation, a proposition like ‘if you don’t like it, you can go’ would be true just in case ‘you like it’ or ‘you can go’, or both, were true. This consequence is indeed paradoxical: it seems wrong to say ‘if you don’t like it you can go’ in just the same circumstances as we would say ‘either you like it or you can go’. So we should dismiss any interpretation of indicative conditionals that brings it about that they are equivalent to the material conditional.

Yet, as is well known, in “Indicative Conditionals” Grice (1989) challenged this view. According to Grice, the truth-conditions of common indicative conditionals are properly captured by the material conditional. As he argues, this is something we can see in claims like ‘if you are the president, I’m the queen of France’, where the ‘following’ sense of the conditional is lost in favour of bringing about a pragmatic implicature like ‘it’s highly implausible that you are the president, just as implausible as it is that I’m the queen of France’. On Grice’s account, the paradoxes of the truth-functional interpretation of conditionals arise as a matter of violations of the Maxim of Quantity when putting forward an indicative conditional: the reason why, in

general circumstances, we should not put forward a material conditional when we mean that its antecedent is false is that merely putting forward the negation of the antecedent expresses the same proposition in a simpler manner. And similarly if we mean that its consequent is true.¹ If we just mean that the premiss is false or that the conclusion is true, to put forward an indicative conditional amounts to a violation of the Maxim of Quantity. That is the reason, according to Grice's account, for the oddity of claims like 'if tomorrow is Sunday, snow is white'. But there are cases in which it may be pragmatically sound to state an indicative conditional in order to mean either that the antecedent is false ('if you are the president, I'm the queen of France') or that the consequent is true ('you're not gonna drive it in this state, if my name is Jane').

Respecting argumentation, the assertibility conditions of the material conditional whose semantic content is the inference-claim's semantic content would convey the 'following' sense that we perceive in the implicit inference-claims of our arguments: in offering a reason for a conclusion, we assert the reason and we presuppose that we do not already know the truth-value of the conclusion. These pragmatic constraints are presupposed by the activity of giving and asking for reasons. Without them, either no argumentation would be really going on or its assessment would be senseless. That means that in determining the truth-value of the inference-claim of an argument, i.e. what I take to be the material conditional, we can assume neither that a reason is false nor that the conclusion is true. As a matter of fact, determining its truth-value under these constraints would involve considering the positive relevance of the reason(s) for the claim—that is, whether there is a causal, legal, moral, or formal, etc. consequence relationship between reason and conclusion.² Herein lies the 'following' sense of this claim. If we cannot find any positive relevance of the reason(s), or if there are actual rebuttals for such a positive relevance, we will have to take it that the implicit inference-claim is false. For sure, if there is no consequence relationship between reason(s) and conclusion, we can still know that the material conditional is true by coming to know either that the antecedent is false or that the consequent is true, or both. But in that case, we will have to say that, despite the fact that its inference-claim is true, it is a bad argument from a pragmatic point of view, its problem being that the reason is worthless as a means to show that the conclusion is true. In this case, the argument will be invalid, but not because its inference-claim is false, but rather because it is wrong: just as wrong as saying that there is a station a hundred metres in that direction when the car is out of fuel and we know that the station is closed, even though what we say may be perfectly true.

Consequently, the alleged counter-example to my position, '20,472 is divisible by 3, so 20,472 is divisible by 9', is not a good one: even though the premiss of this argument, when offered, is supposed to be true and we may have not yet determined

¹ There is a long literature on the interpretation of indicative conditionals. However, my thesis does not require a general answer to the question of whether indicative conditionals in English always stand for material conditionals plus some pragmatic constraints. Rather, for our purposes it is enough to make plausible that the most adequate interpretation of inference-claims is the one that Grice proposes for indicative conditionals in English.

² The validity of traditional formally valid arguments is easy to determine: the conditional whose antecedent is the conjunction of the premisses and whose consequent is the conclusion will turn out to be a formal truth (within the system according to which we say that the argument is formally valid). Also, the validity of conceptually valid arguments like 'He is a bachelor, so he is unmarried' will be straightforward: their inference-claim is a conceptual truth, so that we will not have to consider the truth-value of the reason or the conclusion in order to determine that the conditional is true.

whether the conclusion is true, the thing is that in order to determine that the corresponding material conditional is true we have to determine that the conclusion is true. So, on my account, the argument will be invalid, despite having a true inference-claim.

The fact that the inference-claim is true makes it necessary that, if the reason is true, the conclusion is true. So, on this account, the validity of an argument rules out the possibility that the reason is true and the conclusion false. But the truth of the inference-claim is not enough to say that the argument is a good one: certainly, there is something odd about the argument ‘Snow is white, so grass is green’. But, on my view, this oddity is due to the pragmatic constraints of argumentation.

Yet Hitchcock considers that:

The word ‘so’ implies, as part of its meaning and not as some pragmatic implicature of its ordinary use, that the statement preceding it is relevant to the statement following, in the sense that it helps to establish the truth of the conclusion (Hitchcock 1992). (Hitchcock, p. 4)

Thus, on his view, the indicative conditional that endorses the inference-claim of an argument is to be interpreted as the claim ‘the conclusion follows from the reason(s)’, so that an argument whose conclusion does not follow has a false inference-claim. And in support of his view, he adduces that if we assume that the inference-claim is the material conditional, the only invalid arguments will be those whose premisses are actually true and whose conclusions are actually false (p. 4). Yet, according to the above definition, this is not quite so: an argument will be invalid if we cannot show that the corresponding material conditional is true without assuming either that the conclusion is true or that the reason is false, or both.

At this point, we find the source of our disagreement: I do not think that the above definition of ‘follows’ constitutes the semantic content of the inference-claim. Rather, I think that the content of the inference-claim is the corresponding indicative conditional, whose semantic conditions are those of the material conditional, and whose pragmatic conditions convey the ‘following’ sense that is involved in this type of conditional.

My reasons for rejecting Hitchcock’s conception of warrants and inference-claims will have to await another occasion.

[link to response](#)

[link to paper](#)

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