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Celso Lopez

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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Can Everyday Arguments be Valid?

CELSO LÓPEZ

*Facultad de Filosofía
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Av. Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul
Santiago, Chile
celsolau@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT: Arguments must be convincing. Therefore, we must provide some criteria to decide about this matter. Some people think that this is not possible. In that case, it would be impossible to solve controversies. I would like to revisit the criteria of relevance, sufficiency and acceptability, proposed by Johnson & Blair and to test their applicability to everyday controversial arguments, especially, their flexibility to adjust to context.

KEY WORDS: acceptability, argumentation schemes, context truth, evaluation criteria, informal logic, sufficiency, relevance

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Johnson and Blair's conception of informal arguments, and the general perspective that these authors have of informal logic. More specifically, my intention is to discuss the consistency of the criteria that they provide for the evaluation of informal arguments.

From the start, the authors state that informal logic is concerned with *real life arguments*; that is, with arguments that occur in our daily interactions with other people about topics of interest to everyone.

Following Johnson and Blair, we can state that informal arguments have two important characteristics: (a) in this type of arguments it is not possible to arrive at a definitive conclusion, and this is due to the fact that these arguments depend on the context in which they are formulated. More precisely, they depend on the context and the knowledge that people have of said context; (b) since the knowledge of the context may vary, discussion about which type of information is more adequate or complete is inevitable. However, the participants of such discussions have the possibility of resolving the conflict by appealing to a reasonable dialogue.

In real life, we can also find formal arguments and fallacies that require formal criteria of validity, and this is especially the case when we deal with prejudices. Let us consider the following example:

Mrs. Olson was saying, "Let me tell you something, Mrs. Stotlmeir. That Mrs. Bates, who just joined the PTA, every day I see her go into the liquor store. Now, you know how concerned I am about those unfortunate people who just can't stop drinking. Every day, I see them go into the liquor store. Well, that makes me wonder whether Mrs. Bates is, you know..."

-Whether Mrs. Bates is like them?" Harry's mother asked politely. [...]

-“Mrs. Olson”, Harry said, “just because according to you. *All people* who can't stop *drinking* are people *who go to the liquor store*, that doesn't mean that *all people who go to the liquor store* are *people who can't stop drinking*”. (Cf. Lipman 1985: 4)

From a methodological standpoint, my intention is not to question the authors' restriction to the consideration of informal arguments. On the contrary, what I intend is to limit my own inquiry to informal arguments, in a strict sense, and to not consider the formal arguments that may occur in everyday life.

RECONSIDERING JOHNSON AND BLAIR' S CRITERIA

In order to clarify my own position on this topic, I propose an inversion of the order followed by Johnson and Blair (1993) in their exposition. Instead of making fallacies as the starting point of my research, I prefer to first examine the argumentative schemes that underlie the discussion of evaluation criteria for both informal arguments and informal fallacies. Moreover, as I suggested before, I would like to emphasize the importance of the dialogue that takes place each time we apply these criteria to specific arguments. Subsequently, I intend to establish in what sense informal logic differs from formal logic, and which are the logical principles that must be satisfied by informal logic.

The problem of the truth, of course, have a crucial role in this analysis, if we accept Johnsons'suggestion (Johnson, 1999: 411-415) that a concept of truth is presupposes in the application of the other criteria. If is this so, the important criteria of acceptability is inadequate.

My proposal is to assume the Johnson and Blair's criteria and to show that it is possible to analyze these criteria in a separate way.

As we know, after to introduce the concept of informal argument, the authors discuss the criteria to evaluate informal arguments. These criteria are: relevance, sufficiency and acceptability. It is not totally clear, however, the foundations of these criteria, that is to say, how do they justify? Or, how do they identify the source of them? They seem to appeal to the intentions of the person who proposes the arguments (protagonist), and his intention is to convince to the other person (the antagonist) that the conclusion should be accepted, based upon the reason that the protagonist proposes. Besides, the reasons had to provide a route or some way that connect the reasons and the conclusions. In other words, from the very beginning, Johnson and Blair presuppose that an informal argument has a basic structure: an informal argument must be composing of a controversial conclusion and reasons that support such conclusion.

The conclusion must be controversial otherwise it doesn't make any sense to provide reasons to support it. On the other hand, the capacity of the reasons to provide a route that leads to the conclusion could be consider as a reasonability "principle" because of the fact that fallacies don't satisfy this requirement, and this is precisely the reason we consider these arguments are not reasonable. They are in fact, very little convincing. Moreover, without this connection with the reasons the conclusion is just a mere opinion and, in consequence, is a mere assertion that lacks the force to convince the interlocutor.

It follows from this, that we never can provide an informal argument without premises (premises 0) or false premises, even though both alternatives are possible in formal logic arguments.

We can discuss now, Johnson and Blair' criteria to evaluate informal arguments: relevance, sufficiency and acceptability. These criteria apply to the basic structure of the informal arguments, That is to say, premises that support a controversial conclusion. We must bear in mind that, in accordance with my view, we must apply in the first place to the argumentative scheme and, in a second place, to

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the fallacious arguments. So we have to analyze the basic argumentation schemes: They are three: symptomatic argumentation, causal argumentation and analogical argumentation. (Cf. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992). The existence of these schemes is also consistent with the research that I have developed in my academic work since 1987. In such work, Johnson and Blair textbook "Logical self-defense" have had a crucial role. My next step then is to apply the criteria of evaluation to the argumentation schemes.

Johnson and Blair don't refer explicitly to these schemes; nevertheless I consider that they not violate the sense of their conception. Even more, I consider that they are implicit in their discussions upon fallacies.

For instance, the general explanation that they provide about the criteria of relevance is based on an example that can be considered as an example of symptomatic argumentation. Through the example we can reconstruct the schemes of argumentation and, I consider, that the symptomatic argumentation it is very similar to the type of argumentation that Gouvier (1992: 308-313) called conductive arguments. Nevertheless, the authors don't make clear how to apply the criteria to causal argumentation and analogical argumentation. In both cases, we must appeal to the analysis that Johnson and Blair provide for the fallacy of false cause to understand the scheme of causal argumentation and the analysis of analogical fallacy to understand the scheme of analogical argumentation.

My next step is to describe, in accordance with my personal view, how could work Johnson and Blair criteria for the other two type of argumentation.

As we mention, the criteria de relevance is explained through an example (the Kellogg's corn flakes and the milk example). They pointed out that in this case a premise is irrelevant because it is unable to provide a support for the conclusion. They reinforce their view through a counter example (the salt and meat example) and, in general, it follows that anything we add to a nutritious food (a specie form instance) are not necessarily nutritious just for this fact. They need to be nutritious by it.

It is possible to draw some important conclusions about the role of relevance for the argumentation scheme, since if we have an irrelevant premise we don't have support for the conclusion and so, we lack the basic structure that it is crucial to reconstruct an informal argument and, we can conclude that the conclusion is not convincing.

In Johnson and Blair's words we lack a nexus between the premises and the conclusion.

In some sense, an irrelevant premise introduces a sort of incoherence that can be identified for any reasonable person. This is very important to my view. We cannot go beyond the context to derive the relevance from a more general principle. But we can appeal to "an impartial judge", that is to say, a person that doesn't have any specific interest in the topic, and so, he can see this kind of incoherence. Of course any participant of the discussions can also be that impartial judge if they can put aside their personal interest.

From my view, the relevance of the premises is the first element to develop the basic structure of the argument.

So, if we have a relevant premise, then we have the first important element to support the conclusion and to convince our antagonist of the force of the conclusion. With respect to this problem Johnson and Blair stated that neither true nor falsity of an irrelevant premise has any influence upon the conclusion. If we have an irrelevant premise, even if it is true, the conclusion is still not convincing.

I think, for my own purposes, to suspend our judgment about the true or falsity of the premises and tried to define relevance appealing to the structure of the argument. Johnson and Blair make some suggestion about this. So, we can say that a premise is relevant if we can establish a specific relationship between premises and conclusion. In this specific case, such relation is concomitance or correlation. Thus, if the premise is correlated with the conclusion the premise is relevant, and the conclusion is convincing (in a provisory way). If there is not correlation, then the premise is irrelevant and the conclusion is not convincing.

Besides, we must consider, in the case of the symptomatic argumentation, that there are premises that play the role of contra symptoms. This means that, if they are correlated with the conclusion, the conclusion is not convincing. For instance, some sickness arises without fever. So, if we can verify that a person has fever, then the possibility of such sickness (conclusion) is less probable or less convincing. In order to decide this possibility we can appeal to the context or, more precisely, to the information available or our own experience. Certainly, we can discuss about the relevance of a specific premise, and we can have a lot of disagreement, but a reasonable dialogue can help to decide the problem.

The criteria of sufficiency are easier to apply, because we already have a basic argumentation structure. We can consider that sufficiency is a second step that reinforces the conclusion and make it more convincing. The criteria of sufficiency are more clearly dependent upon the context. For this reason is the most common source of disagreement and discussions. This is so, because, as we say before, informal arguments depend upon the context, and the knowledge that the participants have about the context. The people have different knowledge of the context and, in fact, some people have better information than others.

In this way, it is unavoidable a dialogue between the participants of the discussions, and if it is not possible to decide the question, at least we got a better understanding and a more reflective view about our position. We can consider the sufficiency criteria is second level consideration about the argument because we already have a relevant premise (or a set of relevant premises) and we have to consider them very carefully in order to balance the conditions of a relevant premise, for instance to judge if they consider the contra symptoms. Besides, and this is the most important point in this case, it is necessary to decide if the arguments consider all the relevant premises. Of course, we can have some discussions about to consider or not a specific premise. But we need to consider all the relevant premises in the context of the argumentation. In this point, I think a reasonable dialogue between the participants can resolve the dispute. Specifically, we can appeal to the impartial judge, since the argument must be convincing for a person not because the protagonist have manufactured for him. The argument is convincing because it is convincing for any reasonable person that is able to put in the context of the dispute. The main purpose of this mechanism is to eliminate any personal interest that can make difficult to evaluate the argumentation.

The last of the criteria is acceptability. The conclusion of an argument even with sufficient premises, could be still very little convincing if the premises are not acceptable in the context. A good argument seems to require true premises. Nevertheless, from my view, it is enough to show that the premises are not problematic in the context of the argumentation. How does it work this criteria?

We can consider that a premise is acceptable if because every reasonable people consider as acceptable. It is a common sense assertion, for instance "Christmas is December 25th". If the premise could be legitimate questioned, then we have to

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provide a reason to support the assertion. I am aware that this alternative could generate an infinite process, since the reason provide could also be questioned and the conclusion can stay unconvincing. It is necessary to find reasons that decide the matter. This is not always possible.

Unfortunately, there are cases in which this situation which happens. This is the case when the information available in the context cannot decide the solution in one sense or another. It seems to me that, in the Chilean context, very often occur with controversy that imply moral values, for instance, in controversies in which the topic is abortion or euthanasia. In this type of situations, the ultimate premises refer to some different conceptions of what do they mean concepts like human being or human dignity. In a pluralistic society we cannot eliminate these incompatible conceptions.

There isn't, in fact, a unique conception of what mean human being.

We could try, of course, to establish a moral or value conception acceptable for every reasonable person. However, this attempt will be always considered unacceptable for the people that have a strong belief about these problems and the reasons provide are not able to remove this deep beliefs. The matter must necessarily remains as unsolved.

It is true that this type of discussion is very useful to make clear our own beliefs and reflect about them. But this reflection doesn't have any influence about the conclusion.

In others cases, acceptability is easier to establish because is part of our knowledge of the context, we know by experience, for instance, that things happens in such specific way and we can explain this. Or, we can verify directly that something is true through a method that we know it works. Nevertheless, is not an absolute concept, since this knowledge depends upon the context of the discussion. What we accept as reasonable in a moment could be unreasonable to accept in another moment. The context varies and also varies the knowledge that we have of the context. In general, the acceptability arises from an agreement between reasonable people that consider different ways to say something is true or not in the context of the discussion.

Now, we can consider how does work Johnson and Blair's criteria for the other two schemes that remains. What happens with causal argumentation? How it is possible to apply to them the criteria of relevance? In their example about the change of the measure system from Fahrenheit to Celsius and his eventual influence on the change of the climate, Johnson and Blair indicate that the simple fact that an event precede another event precedence another event not necessarily establish a causal nexus. From this situation we cannot decide that one factor make arise a specific effect. We can consider then, that to establish a causal relation we have not only an order of precedence but a comprehensible connection. The relation between causes an effect has to be understandable for the people. In a causal argumentation a premise is relevant if establishing a reasonable nexus between cause and effect. In other words, it is necessary to provide an explanation that make understandable why such factor produces such specific effect. Obviously, this explanation depends on the knowledge we have upon the context and our past experience. We could provide many explanations that are irrelevant. For instance, superstitious connections such as "don't pass the salt in the hand of another person". We consider this irrelevant because we don't understand why this fact could produce bad consequences. Of course, this is a contextual consideration, because it is possible to consider that with a new knowledge, or a new context, we could understand why this fact does produce bad consequences. Nevertheless, while it is not possible understand the nexus we can

consider an irrelevant connection or superstitious connections. Even though this superstitious is very common in “chain letters” or “pyramidal letters”. So, the relevance in causal argumentation is tied to the context and it is not an absolute fact, since the context may vary.

With regard to the sufficiency, it is also possible to obtain a general criteria through the examples provide for the authors. It is very common that when we face some problems, especially social problems, there are many factors that are relevant, and so, they could produce the effect, since all of them provide a comprehensible relation between the cause and the effect. I we considerer the most simple case, that Johnson and Blair called “particular causal claim”, it is necessary to decide which factor is the most probable cause of the effect. In general, we do that by choosing the factor that is most probable in producing the effect. We rely, of course, in the past experience to make the election and the factor elected make more convincing the conclusion. That is to say, the more powerful factor that produces the effect or the consequences that follow from the causal connection.

The criteria of acceptability for causal argumentation are easier to apply, at least, in theory. Because we can reduce the acceptability to the verification of the existence that some events in fact occur and they have the capacity to produce specific effects. Of course, this is also a contextual consideration than can vary in a different situation.

The analogical argumentation is more complex, since it is more difficult to distinguish between relevance and sufficiency. However, Johnson and Blair provide some examples that can facilitate this task. They consider an example of a bad analogy, that we can consider an example of irrelevant analogy. The example refers to a simple comparison between two events: “like a group of bystanders unconcernedly gazing at a mugging, the world’s democracies stood to one side last week as one of their number was brutally beaten to death”. (The example refers to the CIA-backed military coup led by General Pinochet against the Allende social-democratic regime in Chile). (Johnson and Blair, 1997: 106-107)

Why this comparison it is not a good analogy? The reason is that it deals with events in a mere descriptive way. From it we can not get some properties that can lead to a conclusion. So, the comparison is not able to provide a basic scheme of premises and conclusion. Without this scheme, according to my view, it is not possible to make an evaluation of the argumentation.

We must considerer that we have an analogical argumentation only if it is possible to make a comparison of a specific relation that leads to a conclusion. So, what follows from a situation A (a very well known situation) also follow from a situation (an unknown situation) because en both situations we can define the same relation. For instances, in different situations we can observe that exist some sort of dependence between a superior an inferior. So we can infer that, if in one situation the inferior cannot take decisions, in the other situation the inferior also cannot take decisions.

In summary, an analogy has relevant premises if we can establish the same relation, even though the situations could be totally different.

On the other hand, an analogy is insufficient if, even we can observe the same relation in both situations, but it could occur that in some of the situations, in general the unknown situation, there are elements that are omitted or ignored to attempt to persuade with insufficient premises. The consideration about the sufficiency of the analogy is the problem that produces more discussions and, in some cases, is very difficult to appreciate which are the elements that are absent. Nevertheless, a patient

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and reasonable person can find out the flaw. The general criteria are, then, to decide if all the relevant elements of the relation are be considered such as the comparison requires.

The acceptability criteria require verifying that the elements of the comparison can be, in fact, considered as legitimate components of the relation.

THE PROBLEM OF THE TRUTH

Now, I have to consider the important Johnson' objection that the criteria of evaluation presupposes the truth. If this is correct, then it would be impossible to evaluate argument, since in this case we would need from the beginning a definition of truth and this, at least at first sight, seems to be contradictory with the sense of informal logic that always start with everyday arguments.

First of all, we must take in account that, according to my view, the criteria don't apply to the premises or the conclusion but to the scheme of the argumentation. The scheme allows us to maintain our analysis in the frame of the context of the argumentation, and so, we can generate evaluation criteria that are comprehensible for every people.

My proposal is to analyze my view of the criteria, and to show that the presupposition of truth only play an important role in the analysis of acceptability. To understand what I am saying I will analyze the criteria step by step to decide if we need the truth requirement.

What do we have to do in order to decide if a premise is relevant or not? As we saw we don't follow the same strategy for the three schemes. Nevertheless, what we do is to make judgment about relations: correlations, causal nexus, and comparisons.

The problem then, is to understand what we do when we verify if two people or object have a specific relation. For instance, how do we verify that "John is taller than Peter"? The answer would be just looking at them and to apply some measuring criteria, previously approved. For instance, to take a measuring stick and to consider which number is greater to decide which one is taller. Or, to make some marks in the wall, above the head of each person, and observe which mark is upper in order to decide which one is taller.

If we have to decide if "John is brother of Peter", it is, obviously, not sufficient to observe. We have to look after new criteria. But always we rely in criteria previously established and we don't question them. Not even the existence of John and Peter is a problem, since we can decide who is taller for fictitious being. In some cases we can also say: "it seems to me that John is taller that Peter" without to be sure about that. In a real situation, of course, we need that John is a real person and Peter is a real person and the specific relation really applies to John and Peter. Otherwise, we cannot decide if John is taller than Peter. In judging if some people are cases of a sort relation what is the focus of our attention is the meaning of the relation, the criteria to verify if the people fulfill that requirements. But the truth is not a requirement to verify the relation. I will make clear this problem later on.

Which are the consequences of the verification of relevance? In a symptomatic argumentation we have to decide if we can establish a correlation between two events, that is to say, if two even increasing o decreasing in a concomitant way. We know how to do this based on the past experience or the common knowledge and we don't question its validity. Of course, we must be wrong, what we consider correlated now, could be not correlated in the future and vice versa. Nevertheless, this is a posterior

step. Otherwise, we never could judge if two events are correlated and we never could get an argumentative scheme to evaluate such argument.

In the first step we judge that a premise is relevant if the can correlate the events, and we do that based on the available knowledge. In a second step, we revise this relation. I refer to the second step later on.

Something very similar occurs with causal nexus. From the available knowledge we can judge if it is comprehensible that an event can produce another event. If it is not, we can say that such nexus is a superstitious connection. We only need to understand what does mean causal relation.

In the case of comparison, we must to analyze if the relation between two situations is identical. Besides, such relation of comparison must lead to a consequence (conclusion).

The second criteria, the sufficiency condition, are more clearly based in our actual knowledge of the context. In the symptomatic argumentation, we have to decide if all the relevant premises have being considered, and all the irrelevant elements have being ruled out. This judgment can be reconsidered in a second step.

In the case of causal connections, we have to considerer the entire relevant factor and then, in accordance with our knowledge of the context, we have to choose which factor most probably produces the specific effect. It is important to mention that in this case we have considered the simple case: one single factor produces a single effect. Causality relation is more complex and we had to consider multiple factors. But, I think that the method is the same, even though the application could be more difficult and complex.

In the case of analogical scheme we have to consider if all relevant elements of the comparison relation have being take in account, at the same time we must considerer if there are relevant elements that have being ignored or omitted. We do this based on the knowledge we have of the comparison situations.

Now we have to consider the acceptability condition and to what extend is related to the concept pf truth. This concept seems to be absolute: an assertion only could be true or false. Nevertheless, in the sphere of the everyday arguments, as I pointed out, it is not possible to take of an absolute conception of the truth, in the sense truth vary if the context changes. And the context is always changing. We should talk of “truth relate to a specific context”. So we have to considerer what is acceptable in a context, and we can manage this appealing to the knowledge of the context. Nevertheless, to apply the criteria of acceptability is more complex, since it could be considered a sort of third level analysis. The first level, relevance, allows as organizing the argumentative scheme. The second step, sufficiency, presupposes relevance, and allows us reinforcing the structure of the argument. The acceptability is a third level of analysis in the sense it applies not only to premises but to the entire argumentative structure. In other words, we have to decide if the premises are acceptable and the connection between the premises and the conclusion is also acceptable.

In the first case, to establish the truth of the premises imply to decide if they are acceptable in the context of the argumentation, and this require to appeal to our experience or the knowledge that we have of the context. Obviously, many discrepancies can arise, but we always can appeal to the figure of an impartial judge. So, we convince our interlocutor or an audience that something is acceptable, not making use of eloquence or any kind of consensus, but through the basic reasons we propose to support our view. We convince our interlocutor because any reasonable person can consider by himself the acceptability of our reasons. To be reasonable

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means precisely to appeal to the impartial judge we have inside and decide in an independent way, putting away our prejudices or personal interests. Of course, this is a provisory truth, because, as we have repeated, the context may vary, and to change in a radical way our appreciation of things.

With regard to the second case we can say the following: in formal logic we say that an argument is valid if it is valid in all possible worlds. In informal logic, we could say that an argument is acceptable if consider all possible worlds that are meaningful in the context of the argumentation. So, in this level of analysis we can observe a more selective consideration of sufficiency.

For instance, we can say that if the roof of the houses is covered with snow, it means that snowed overnight. (This is true in the context of mi city, Santiago of Chile). We can make this inference since if snow in Santiago is an extraordinary fact, and happens each five or ten years. Besides, the experience show that the snow melted in no more than one day. In others context, could happens something totally different.

From a formal logical point of view, we could say that under extraordinary conditions, in an ideal world, the roof of the houses could be covered with snow, without previously snowing. This is so, because we don't know all possible conditions that make possible that the roof of the houses could be covered with snow. The inference is not universally valid. It is precisely this way to appeal to ideal conditions that are out of our context what, according to my view, are unable to decide the acceptability of an informal argumentation.

In our example, if the roof of houses is covered with snow, only mean that it snowed overnight. In our context, in accordance with our knowledge and experience, there is not another possibility. The inference is informally valid.

In general, it is true that acceptability presupposes the concept of truth, but it refers to a contextual truth. All the people who are in the context can realize that there is snow in the roof of the houses. If this is still controversial we appeal to an impartial judge. A more clear example is to decide if it raining or not, because we can have some controversial cases. However, I this example there is a problem of limits, because if we are a reasonable person, we never would agree with the assertion "It is raining", if the day is sunny. Acceptability also applies to the argumentative schemes. In this case, we verify that the particular relations are applies in a correct way. Of course, such as the example of the snow we have to refer these considerations to the context of the argumentation.

If this is so, we can still to respect some traditional logical conditions. For instance, an informal argumentation cannot propose contradictory, problematic or circular premises because in any context that premises provide a real support for the premises. If we think carefully, with that kind of premises we can not get an argumentative scheme in order to be evaluated. If something says "the person A was out of the city when the fire start and then he say that A was, in fact, at the city", then we don't have a fact we can judge and the argumentation is paralyzed.

On the other hand, we have a different consideration of the argument called "argumentum a contrary sensu". For instance, if in a bar there is a signing stating that "if you are under eighteen years, you cannot drink alcoholic drink". We can infer, from an informal point of view, that if I am older, I do can drink. In the context of every day arguments, we presuppose that if something is nor specifically prohibited, then are permitted. Nevertheless, from a formal logical perspective this argument is a fallacy (negation of the antecedent).

[link to commentary](#)

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