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Commentary on Lopez

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Commentary on Celso López: "Can Everyday Arguments be Valid?"

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is flattering to have one's work given the thoughtful attention that Mr. López devotes to the criteria of good argument introduce in *Logical Self-Defense*. As I understand Mr. López's paper, what motivates it is that view that in order to resolve controversies by *reasonably* convincing others, we need criteria that can be used by disinterested parties to assess arguments. He thinks that Johnson and Blair's criteria of relevance, sufficiency and acceptability (RSA) can serve this role, provided that they are applied to arguments as instances of one or another of the three basic schemes introduced by van Eemeren and Grootendorst in their presentation of the Pragma-Dialectical theory of argumentation, namely, symptomatic argumentation, causal argumentation, and analogical argumentation. In the comments that follow I have picked out just a few of López 's points for discussion. I start with the connection between the RSA criteria and argumentation schemes, then turn to relevance, and end with some comments about truth and acceptability. In an appendix I discuss the test for relevance, and add some miscellaneous critical comments.

2. CRITERIA AND ARGUMENTATION SCHEMES

In Mr. López 's discussion of our criteria for evaluating arguments—relevance, sufficiency and acceptability—we encounter his view that these criteria must apply in the first place to the argumentative scheme in question, and only thereafter to the argument that might turn out to be fallacious. So what lies behind his view that the three schemes are implicit in our discussion of fallacies? Well, if van Eemeren and Grootendorst are right that every argument is an instance of one these schemes, then they should be implicit even if we don't make reference to them. Now that is true only if these three schemes are by definition mutually exclusive and exhaustive, and I have to say that I'm not persuaded that they are. Symptomatic argument, for instance, seems to me to be a special case of a causal argument—an argument from an effect to its cause, or from a correlate to a cause—so I don't see the symptomatic and the causal as mutually exclusive argumentation schemes. And it seems to me that there are argument schemes or patterns that do not, on the face of it, fit this tripartite classification. Consider the appeal to authority or the argument from testimony. You might try to argue that an expert's or a witness's say-so is a "symptom" of the truth of the claim the expert of witness vouches

for, but that is stretching the notion of symptom beyond recognition. So I don't see these three schemes as exhaustive either.

However, Mr. López is right that the idea of argument schemes—if not just these three—is implicit in *Logical Self-Defense*. By the third edition and the first American edition, the former of which he cites, Johnson and I are explicit that at least some fallacious arguments are misuses or abuses of patterns of reasoning or argument that have non-fallacious instances. These patterns are, in later terminology, argument schemes. We are just not committed to van Eemeren and Grootendorst's tripartite classification.

So I think I see what Mr. López is getting at. In order to determine that a piece of discourse contains an argument, he thinks one must identify the occurrence of an instance of an argument scheme in that discourse. Having determined that an instance of an argument scheme is present, the next step is to decide whether it is cogent or fallacious. If that just means that we must establish that there is an argument present before we can judge its virtue, I have no objection. But if it means that we have first to determine whether some particular argument scheme is present, whether one of the big three or another one, I don't see why that's so or that Mr. López has shown why it is.

3. RELEVANCE

To determine that an instance of an argument (or argument scheme, as Mr. López wants to say) is present, one must identify a claim that is contentious and other claims that are relevant as support for the contentious claim. Relevance, thus, is a criterion of the presence of argument. As Mr. López puts it, "the relevance of the premises is the first element to develop the basic structure of the argument." Once it is determined that an argument is present, one turns to examine the sufficiency and acceptability of the premises deemed relevant.

Mr. López says that in some sense an irrelevant premise introduces a sort of incoherence (that a reasonable person can identify). I think this is an important insight. In effect, the argument breaks down. Someone is trying to argue, but by virtue of its irrelevance, the premise in question cannot be part of the argument. So there is a pragmatic inconsistency here. Arguing means offering reasons, and the arguer is trying to offer a reason, but by virtue of its irrelevance the consideration adduced is not a reason and consequently the arguer in that respect fails to make an argument. There is an inconsistency between act and intention, which is a kind of incoherence. So we must distinguish between what the author intends to produce and what the author actually produces. To talk of an argument with an irrelevant premises is to refer to the speaker's intended product and pass judgement on it. It's like referring to a joke that isn't funny. It's not (after all) a joke. To judge an arguer's proposed premise to be irrelevant is to judge it to be no premise at all.

Mr. López says that the relevance of the premises is the first element to develop the basic structure of argument. I think this is importantly right too. To identify claims as relevant support for a position at issue is to identify an argument; and establishing how those claims support that position is to develop the basic structure of the argument.

So there are three levels of analysis. Mr. López says that the first is relevance, which allows us to organize the argumentation scheme and which I have discussed. The second, sufficiency, presupposes relevance and allows us to reinforce the structure of the

argument. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that an analysis of sufficiency allows us to judge how well reinforced is the structure of the argument. Third, there is acceptability, which Mr. López says applies not only to the premises but to the entire argumentative structure—in other words, we have to decide of the premises are acceptable and the connection between the premises and the conclusion are acceptable. Now, this is a mistake. Relevance and sufficiency are the criteria of adequacy of the connection between the premises and the conclusion. If the premises are judged relevant and sufficient, their support for the conclusion has thereby been judged adequate.

4. TRUTH VS. ACCEPTABILITY

Mr. López takes Johnson's later contention that the RSA criteria presuppose truth to raise a serious problem, since to employ such a criterion we would need a definition of truth and having to establish such a definition in order to evaluate arguments is at odds with informal logic's ambition to be a practical tool for everyday argument evaluation.

Mr. López's solution, as I understand it, is that the RSA criteria apply to the argumentation scheme, not to the argument's premises or conclusion, and since considering the scheme involves making the analysis relative to the context of the argument, truth is not a desideratum and so the difficulties attached to bringing truth into the picture can be avoided. Is the point here that in any particular context, what is at issue is what the protagonists take to be true—that is, what they are prepared to accept—so what is true does not come into the picture?

I would respond to Johnson's point differently. I think Johnson is right that the concept of truth is at work in the deployment of the evaluative criteria relevance, sufficiency and acceptability, but wrong that this implies that the criterion for logically good premises should be that they be true.

However, I think there is a deeper issue in play here that Johnson's article quoted by Mr. López doesn't expose, namely a conflict between two concepts of acceptability and, correspondingly, two conceptions of argumentation. One the one hand, treating argumentation as the Pragma-Dialectical theory does, the objective is disagreement resolution by reasonable means, and acceptance is a move in a dialectical exchange. An "acceptable" premise is thus one to which an arguer will explicitly commit in an argumentative exchange, or can commit to, given his or her other expressed commitments. The test is utterance consistency. On the other hand, treating argumentation as someone like Alvin Goldman does, the objective of argumentation is true beliefs, and so an acceptable premise is one that it is reasonable to believe, which is to say, reasonable to think to be true. The test is whatever test of truth may be appropriate to the claim in question. In *Logical Self-Defense* Johnson and I had not appreciated this distinction. As I see it, when he now defends "truth" over "acceptability," Johnson is declaring himself for what has come to be called the basic epistemic function of argumentation and against the purely dialectical function—which is not to deny, what both Goldman and Johnson explicitly assert, that epistemic argumentation has important dialectical dimensions. My own view is different. I think argumentation can serve either function, and which one of them is appropriate depends on the circumstances.

But I also think that in responding, as its targets, to the argumentation encountered in everyday life, often our interest lies in believing what is true rather than in resolving a

disagreement, so treating everyday arguments as functioning epistemically rather than dialectically is often appropriate. In that case, ideally our premises will be true and we will want others' premises to be true too. That much granted, I cannot see how we can demand more of ourselves or others than the test of what it is reasonable in the circumstances for us or them to believe to a given degree. (Other attitudes than beliefs can play a role in arguments, but I don't need to go into that complication here.)

Taking "acceptable" to person S in circumstances C to mean '"worthy of S's epistemic acceptance in C—that is, reasonable for S to believe to a given degree in C," and using relevance and sufficiency as the other criteria of a logically good argument, I can explain why I don't think the acceptability criterion applies to anything but the premises, and not, as Mr. López proposes, "to the entire argumentative structure" including "the connection between the premises and the conclusion." There is an ambiguity of "acceptability" at work here, which I think is behind what Mr. López says. He is certainly right that the premise-conclusion link relied upon in an argument must be acceptable in the sense that it must pass the appropriate test for logical virtue. According to *Logical Self-Defense*, that is to say that the proposed premises must be relevant to the conclusion and they must provide sufficient grounds to justify us in accepting the conclusion on the basis of them. Similarly the argument's premises should be acceptable in the sense that they too must pass the appropriate test for logical virtue. According to *Logical Self-Defense*, that is to say that the proposed premises must be acceptable. Unless we are to go in circles, in saying that to be acceptable premises must be acceptable, we must be using the term 'acceptable' in different senses in those two occurrences. My proposal is that for the epistemic use of arguments, we should treat the premises as "acceptable" in the sense of counting as good premises just in case they are "acceptable" in the sense of being reasonable to believe in the circumstances. For the purely dialectical use of arguments, I think we should treat the premises as "acceptable" in the sense of counting as good premises just in case they are consistent with what the speaker has committed to in the exchange already.

5. CONCLUDING REMARK

While I am delighted to discuss with Mr. López how the RSA criteria apply in the interpretation of discourse and the evaluation of arguments in it, both of us need to be cognizant of criticisms of these criteria. On the one hand, it's been argued that relevance is not necessary, since it is already presupposed in judgements of sufficiency. On the other hand, it has been argued that these criteria are not sufficient, since they lack both a dialectical and a rhetorical dimension, both of which are essential for the interpretation and evaluation of arguments. I think we can handle the first objection—and Mr. López has already pointed the way: relevance is a criterion of the presence of argument, not of the merits of an argument already identified. I am more concerned about how we might deal with the second objection.

6. APPENDIX

(a) *Test of Relevance*

What is the test of relevance? Johnson and I propose in *Logical Self-Defense* an informal truth-value test, which is really not very helpful. Mr. López offers a different test, namely to see whether the relation of the alleged or possible premises to the conclusion is one of concomitance or correlation.

Let us see how this test might work with an example from a recent news item. The McDonald's fast-food chain in the United Kingdom is apparently challenging the Oxford English Dictionary to change its definition of the word 'McJob,' which was popularized by Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel, *Generation X*. According to a news report (*The Globe and Mail*, Friday, May 25, 2007 in a report taken from a story by Rebecca Smithers in the *Guardian News Service*), McDonald's U.K. branch is protesting against Oxford's definition of 'McJob' as "an unstimulating, low-paid job with few prospects, especially one created by the expansion of the fast-food industry." A McDonald's officer is quoted as arguing that this definition "is out of date, out of touch with reality, and most importantly, is insulting to those talented, committed, hardworking people who serve the public every day in the U.K."

I think that being out of date or out of touch with reality is a flaw in a dictionary definition, because a dictionary definition is supposed to describe actual current usage, so those reasons are relevant, but the implication of a dictionary definition that the use of the word is insulting to the people to whom it is applied is not a flaw in the definition, and so that reason is irrelevant.[1] Now how does Mr. López's test work? Being out of date should correlate with or be concomitant with being a poor dictionary definition. And the word's use, so defined, implying an insult should not correlate or be concomitant with being a poor definition. That works, but I don't see that it's much more helpful that the test proposed in *Logical Self-Defense*. For deciding that these things go together, or don't go together, is logically equivalent to deciding that the first is probatively relevant to the second.

The reason that the correlation test seems to work with symptomatic argument schemes is that a symptomatic argument just is an argument from correlation. X is a symptom of Y if and only if X is positively correlated with Y.

(b) *Miscellaneous Comments*

Mr. López says at the beginning that he intends to discuss the consistency of the criteria introduced in *Logical Self-Defense*. He also says he will establish in what sense informal logic differs from formal logic. I have to say that I don't see that he does either of these things in the paper.

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[1] To be sure, if a definition is flawed, then the fact that it makes uses of the word insulting is a reason to change the definition sooner rather than later, but I don't think that's what the McDonald's official was arguing. He claimed the insulting effect of the definition was an even stronger reason to change it than its being out of date and out of touch with reality, not that it was a reason for a different point—that the definition should be changed promptly.

According to Mr. López, Johnson and I talk about informal arguments, and we say about them that (a) it is impossible to arrive at a definitive conclusion, because the arguments depend on the knowledge people have of the context, (b) discussion about which type of information is more adequate or complete is inevitable, because knowledge of the context may vary. Johnson and I actually never use the term "informal argument." These properties might be true of them, but we don't make such a claim. Perhaps we are committed to it, but Mr. López needs to show that.

We don't use the term "formal arguments" either, and we don't hold that no everyday argument is formally valid, a view Mr. López seems to attribute to us since he produces a counterexample to such a claim. In fact, the criteria we introduce in *Logical Self-Defense* are satisfied by deductively valid arguments, so on pain of inconsistency, we have to allow for that possibility. Our contention is not that no everyday argument is formally valid, but that many every arguments are formally invalid yet logically good. Today these are called defeasible arguments.

By the way, Mr. López claims that there can be formal arguments without premises. We need to know his definition of 'argument.' The way Johnson and I use the concept of argument, it is true by definition that there can be no argument of any kind without at least one premise and at least one conclusion.

In passing, Mr. López suggestions symptomatic arguments are similar to conductive arguments that Govier discusses. I'm dubious about that. Consider one of Wellman's[2] examples: "You ought not to have spoken so harshly because your words hurt her deeply." We can construe the hurtfulness of the words used as a *symptom* of the wrongness of having spoken so harshly, but only if we take "symptom of" to be equivalent to "reason for"—in which case any reason will be a symptom, and the usefulness of the category "symptomatic argument" to pick out one type of reasoning or argument from amongst others is lost.

[link to response](#)   [link to paper](#)

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[2]   Carl Wellman introduced "conductive reasoning" and "conductive argument" in *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1971); the quote is from page 52.