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Commentary on Paglieri

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Commentary on Fabio Paglieri: "No More Charity, Please! Enthymematic Parsimony and the Pitfall of Benevolence"

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I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to comment on Fabio Paglieri's richly textured and well-argued paper. Concerning its main theme, there is little of consequence with which I disagree. Perhaps the best use of my role is to add some supplementary remarks designed to lend support to Paglieri's approach.

1. CHARITY

The Principle Charity has had a checkered history. Originally the coinage of N.L. Wilson (1959), it played a glancing role in Quine's proposal for handling the indeterminacy of radical translation (1960) and was given fuller articulation in Davidson's approach to the interpretation of alien tongues (1984). Thomas brought it closer to home, and made it a principle of argument-assessment in domestic languages (1977). Scriven gave it much the same providence (1976). Notwithstanding the common thread that runs through their conceptions of it, Thomas and Scriven apply the principle to somewhat different cases. With Thomas, the case is one in which there is some doubt as to whether a text should be interpreted as an argument. Charity here decrees that if interpreting it so makes it a bad argument it is best to consider that it is not an argument at all. In the cases considered by Scriven, Charity obliges us to withhold any interpretation which makes an argument a bad argument, save as a last resort. In other places, Scriven's admonition is much slighter, scarcely more than that arguments should not be interpreted unfairly. As it happens, for all its apparent triviality, this second version of Scriven's Charity contains an important insight, as we shall shortly see.

Let me now say a brief word or two about the Quine-Davidson project. Quine and Davidson are interested in general schemes of translation from wholly new languages to the translator's own. By the construction of the case, the translator has nothing to go on but the linguistic behaviour – some of it induced by the translator's gestures and inflections – of alien speakers, together with what he, the translator, knows of the world in general. Since there is a big gap between behaviour and meaning, the translator's problem is imbued with radical indeterminacy.

It is important to notice that what the translator seeks is a knowledge of utterance-meaning. He wants to know whether "Gavagai" means "Lo! a rabbit". The translator's target is not speaker-meaning, except in a quite ancillary way. "Gavagai" gets mapped to

"Lo! a rabbit" by what Quine calls a translation manual. Davidson imposes on translation manuals the general constraint that they not typically map sentences of the native language to false sentences of the translator's own; in particular, that they not do so with regard to that very large class of sentences whose truth values would be commonly known to competent individuals anywhere. In other words, one's translation manual must not make massive ignoramuses of native speakers. This reflects the twofold assumption that people everywhere have a stake in speaking truthfully in the general case and they have more or less equal access to the basic facts of human experience. Speakers enter this picture in two ways. They are generators of linguistic behaviour and they are a fulcrum for the leverage secured by Davidson's constraint on translation manuals.

Let us say that a speaker-intention problem is a triple $\langle S, U, M \rangle$, in which S is what a speaker means in making an utterance U, M is what U means and S and M are not the same. A solution of a speaker-intention problem is the specification of a meaning M' which is the same as S. For the most part, there is a weak compatibility between M' and M; M' neither implies nor is implied by M.[1] Our question is how, if at all, the Principle of Charity plays a role in specifying M'. Davidson and Quine take it for granted that by and large what a speaker means in uttering U is what the utterance U means. Accordingly, in the general case, a translation manual will usually tell us what a speaker means just by telling us what his utterance means.

A translation manual does not tell us what speakers mean in uttering a U with meaning M, when M is not what the speaker means. It tells us what U means in the translator's language. Reconciling speaker-meaning with utterance-meaning is not a *translator's* task. Ascribing to human beings a common interest in truth-telling and a common facility in recognizing the true is a claim about what human beings are like (and are good at) in the general case. This may be good or bad anthropology, but it is certainly not charity. In judging yon native to be like me in these respects, I am not being nice to him. I am showing that I know what human beings are like.

In the hands of Thomas and Scriven, Charity has the look of a principle of argument assessment. Its providence differs in two main respects from that of the Quine-Davidson variant. It applies to intra-linguistic speech, and so is not a principle of translation. It also applies to arguments one by one. What Charity now commands is that for any given argument in the appraiser's own language, it not be given an interpretation on which it is a bad argument, except as a last resort (Scriven). It takes no effort to see that this is absurdly promiscuous.

Quine-Davidson Charity makes the sensible assumption that natives aren't non-trivially worse at getting at the truth of the usual run of things and drawing appropriate conclusions from them than we ourselves are. So it lies in the spirit of Quine-Davidson that we not accede to Thomas-Scriven. Doing so would, in the particular case of argument-making, make us all much better at it than we have any reason to believe ourselves to be. Better, then, to restore the Quine-Davidson feature which makes Charity a principle of interpretation, not a principle of assessment, roughly as follows:

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[1] It is not an unvarying condition, however, that M' be compatible with M. As any married couple will know, Sarah's utterance of "No, I'm not tired; let's stay a while longer" may well assert "I am ready to drop. For God's sake let's dump this place!"

> Interpretation: *Let I be an interpretation manual for language L. Then if under I arguments in general turn out to have a particularly high failure-rate then I is not a satisfactory manual.*

A bad interpretation manual will, among other things, mistakenly compel faulty assessments of arguments. Charity tells us to reject such manuals, but it does not tell us how to recognize the goodness of a given good argument when interpreted as a satisfactory manual would provide. Suppose, then, that my interpretation manual is tested against a very large representative sample of arguments in English. Charity says that I must give it up if failure is too widely distributed at too high a frequency in this sample. By what means am I to determine whether this distribution and frequency of error is too high? For this I will need a separate procedure, perhaps itself regulated by its own version of Charity. At this juncture, assessment manuals re-enter the picture, and Charity provides that

> Assessment: *If an assessment manual generates an unduly high frequency and wide distribution of argumentional failures, it is the wrong manual.*

Charity, whether Quine's or Davidson's or Thomas's or Scriven's, is not a theological virtue,[2] but a generalization to the effect that human beings are better at arguing than not. It goes without saying that this new version of Charity – indeed of the induction it embeds – may well be the subject of vigorous contention, especially among sceptically-minded philosophers. This is not my concern here. It will be enough to consider a case.

Suppose that one's assessment manual finds fault with any argument that is invalid and/or inductively frail. What I mean here by invalidity what deductive logicians mean by it, and by inductive weakness is what inductive logicians mean by it. Deductive validity gives truth-preservation and inductive strength gives degrees of confirmation required for lawlike pronouncements of experimental/statistical reasoning. Suppose our assessment manual provides that these errors occur with very high frequency and in very wide distributions. Then, by the version of Charity presently in view, we would have to give up on that manual (which in the present situation is precisely the right ruling). Why is it the right ruling? Two facts make it so.

> Fact 1: *Faulty argumentation is not especially frequent or widely distributed in the argument practices of human reasoners.*

> Fact 2: *Most arguments made by human reasoners are neither valid nor inductively strong.*

The two versions of Charity now fall into fruitful concurrence. Since a good assessment manual will not as a general policy find fault with an argument on account of its invalidity or inductive weakness, it is necessary that our interpretation manual not assign to such arguments interpretations which motivate validity or inductive strength as legitimate general expectations. Accordingly, the conclusion-indicator "so" should

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[2] Although the other two lie closer to it. Thomas-Scriven Charity compels us to see real life argumentation as instantiating the Goody Two-Shoes Model, concerning which see, e.g., Gabbay and Woods (2001).

typically not be read as indicating either deductive or inductive consequence. It is here that we have an echo of Scriven's slighter principle, which says that one should not interpret arguments unfairly. Since most good arguments are neither valid nor inductively strong in the logician's technical senses of these terms, they should not be interpreted in ways that tie their goodness to these unrealistic standards. Doing so would be "unfair".

This brings me to the end of section 1. But before closing, it is necessary to point out that, if it is a fact that most good arguments made by real-life individuals are neither valid nor inductively strong, it is a fact recognized by the Quine-Davidson principle of Charity, but it is a fact explained by the cognitive make-up of individual reasoners, on which Fabio Paglieri lays rightful emphasis. Given what beings like us are interested in and good at, validity and inductive strength are rarely the right standards. For one thing, most of the things that we have an interest in knowing are not (pace the deductivists) validly deducible from what we already know. For another, even where validity is rightly not the requisite standard, it is hardly ever the case that the real-life individual has either the wherewithal or the need to hold his ampliative reasonings to the tough standards of experimental/statistical rigour necessary for successful drug-safety trials at Health Canada; so inductive strength is hardly ever the right standard either. It is therefore an attractive coincidence that the fact explained by our resource-bound cognitive agency is the norm mandated by Quine-Davidson Charity, never mind that they probably wouldn't have realized it.

2. ENTHYMEMES

If we take Aristotle as our guide, we see that

> The Enthymeme must consist of few propositions, fewer often than those which make up the normal syllogism. For if any of those propositions is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself. (*Rhetoric,* I, 2, 1357[a], 16-19)

This being so, there are no enthymeme-resolution problems. There is nothing to resolve. The missing proposition is so familiar that there is no need to mention it. It is so familiar that the hearer is able simply to add it.

Some will think that the wording of this passage from Aristotle leaves it open that there could be enthymemes whose missing parts lack the familiarity that would make it unnecessary to either mention or add them. If such there be, wouldn't they present genuine enthymeme-resolution problems? I think not. If they did, the problem would still be to produce a syllogism from an enthymeme. Enthymemes are special cases of non-syllogisms. In the case (usually considered paradigmatic) of a single missing premiss, an enthymeme has all the features of a syllogism consistent with that omission. Its contained premiss and conclusion contain the requisite number of terms, distributed in the appropriate way and preceded by the right quantifiers. Consider, for concreteness, the following enthymeme

All men are mortal
So, Socrates is mortal.

There is no more than one (non-equivalent) way of making a syllogism out of this. The missing premiss is

Socrates is a man

concerning which there are two points of familiarity. One is that Socrates' humanity is a familiar fact. The other is that anyone familiar with the construction of syllogisms will know that this is the proposition to choose. Accordingly, even if a missing premiss is not a familiar fact in the first sense, anyone familiar with the structure of syllogisms will select it.[3]

Considered as non-syllogisms that are as close to being syllogisms as is consistent with their missing a premiss, enthymemes present no resolution problems. Accordingly, there is no need for Charity under any interpretation of it in which it is an enthymeme-problem resolution strategy.

"Ah, yes", I can hear it being muttered. "This is all very well when enthymemes are taken in Aristotle's way. When they are taken in Aristotle's way, they come with so many structural cues that filling the gap is "a matter of course" (in Peirce's words about another matter). But what if they are taken in the modern way?" Very well; let's take them in that way. Let us say that an enthymeme is an invalid argument which is as close to being valid as is consistent with the omission of a single premiss. For generality, let

A_1

$\vdots$

$\underline{A_n}$
B

be any such argument. If the task before us is to convert this non-validity to a validity by the addition of a premiss, perhaps the obvious choice is to add the argument's corresponding conditional

If $A_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge A_n$, then B.[4]

It is well to note that there are no prior constraints on the selection of the missing premiss save that it validate the original. There is no requirement that the selected premiss be the logically simplest validator or that it not be question-begging, or whatever else. However, if we wanted to recover something of the spirit of the original meaning of "enthymeme", premiss-selection would be expected to meet a familiarity condition. And it does. Anyone familiar with the structure of modern validity will know that ⌜If $A_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge A_n$, then B⌝

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[3] As witness any enthymeme lacking in familiar propositional content: ⟨"All glerks are glark"/"Zonk is glark"⟩, whose missing premiss can only be "Zonk is a glerk".

[4] For one thing – to make a pragmatic point – anyone sincerely but incorrectly forwarding this argument as valid is, just so, committed to its corresponding conditional, if anything like a Deduction Metatheorem holds for natural languages.

validates $\langle A_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge A_n /B \rangle$, for any A_i and B. In other words, they know that *modus ponens* is a valid rule. Indeed it is the *paradigmatically* valid rule.

Of course, there is a problem with this. It provides that every invalid argument whatever has a valid completion. This being so, it would appear that we lack a principled distinction between an invalid argument made so by a missing premiss and an invalid argument whose premisses are all present and accounted for. From this we may think it necessary to require that, whatever the details, an invalid argument is an enthymeme only if it has a valid completion by a method that fails to validate every invalid argument.[5] Were it otherwise, we would lose the distinction between enthymemes and invalid arguments. Every invalid argument would be an enthymeme.

Still, banning the corresponding conditional as a completing premiss in any invalid argument denies us the comforts of *modus ponens*. Since this would be excessive, we have now handed ourselves the further challenge of determining in a principled way when the activation of *modus ponens* is an acceptable means of dealing with an enthymeme and when not. So our list of problems has grown to two:

Problem one: determining when an invalid argument is an enthymeme

Problem two: determining when it is allowable that an enthymeme's proper completion instantiates *modus ponens*.

Various additional constraints might be considered. One is to restrict the selection of corresponding conditionals to those that happen to be true. But this won't do as a general requirement. Any case in which the premisses of the enthymeme are all true and the conclusion false is one in which the corresponding conditional cannot be true. Since such cases are the most direct demonstrations of the enthymeme's invalidity, they are also the most direct demonstration that the true-corresponding-conditional rule is not consistently meetable rule in all cases.

Sometimes it is all right to complete an argument with its corresponding conditional, and sometimes not. This is of some help to us, but not much. Can we do better than this tentative romp down the *via negativa*? Let us see.

In the literature there is widespread acceptance, largely tacit, of the following correspondence:

Good completions as validating: *A good enthymeme-completion selection will be a premiss that validates it.*

Upon reflection, this cannot be true, as witness the following case:

If A then B
  So, A

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[5] We see in this restriction the influence of what we might call the Principle of Converse Charity. It provides that, if the means used in a given case to rescue an argument by furnishing a validating premisses would, if made a general policy, rescue every valid argument, then it should be suppressed in that given case.

Transparently invalid, it would also appear to be missing a premiss. Pretty clearly, this is a truncated version of Affirming the Consequent. If so, there can be no mystery about the premiss that completes it. The missing premiss is B; but upon addition, we transform an incomplete invalid argument into a complete invalid argument. What this tells us that traditional approaches to enthymemes conflate two quite different tasks. One is the task of spotting a premiss that completes an incomplete argument. The other is the task of finding a premiss that will validate it. We now have reason to regret that the tradition has run these features together. Better that we free the idea of enthymeme from the idea that completion is a validity-restorer. Better that enthymemes be incomplete arguments independently of their assessment-status after completion.

In light of our findings in section 1, this is a hugely liberating reorientation of a traditional muddle. Since it is not typical of real-life arguments that they are properly bound to the validity standard, it can hardly be typical of real-life enthymemes that they be properly completeable only by premisses that validate them. And if we generalize on our example of the incomplete instance of Affirming the Consequent, we have more liberation still.

> Good completions/bad arguments: *It cannot be typical of enthymemes that they be properly completable only by premiss that make them good arguments, in whatever sense of good fits the particular case.*

It is well to note that this is liberation that conclusively puts paid to Thomas-Scriven Charity as anything approaching a plausible general policy for enthymeme-completion. Completion is not amelioration. Completion is completion. Aristotle thinks that we all know how to do that as a matter of course. Paglieri thinks, and I agree, that the reason that incomplete argumentation is so prevalent in actual practice is that, since Aristotle is right about our facility at completion, it is more economical for us to proceed in this way, that it is a more prudent expenditure of cognitive resources made scant by our quite general bounded rationality. Paglieri also thinks, and I agree, that much of the time, if not typically, our knowing how to complete an incomplete communication is tacit, and that its tacity is often as much a trait of the communication's sender as its receiver. If this is right, it is a further thing that it is explained by the fact that we must all make our way in cognitive ecologies characterized by comparative resource-paucity. But if these things are indeed right, we must take seriously the suggestion that,

> Good incomplete arguments: *Just as some incomplete arguments are, in that very state, bad in ways that their proper completion will preserve, so too are some incomplete arguments are, in that very state, good in ways that their proper completions will also preserve.*

This lends substantial support to Paglieri's ecological explanation of the frequency of incomplete communications in real-life conditions. Not only are they cheaper to produce and process, these are large ranges of cases in which they are not improved upon by their completions.

Here is yet another reason to think that Thomas-Scriven Charity is just wrong for enthymeme-completion. But it is also a reason that blunts the force of Quine-Davidson

Charity. Quine-Davidson Charity requires that in the process of completion we not transform good arguments into bad ones. But, as we have it now, Quine-Davidson Charity is, for those large ranges of cases, not an applicable rule. For nothing is gained by the completions that it purports to regulate. I conclude, then, that when it comes to dealing with enthymemes, Paglieri's thesis that – depending upon the version of it that one has in mind – Charity has only an attenuated role (Quine-Davidson) or none at all (Thomas-Scriven) is deeply correct.

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