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Commentary on Taeda Tomić: “Information Seeking Processes in Evaluating Argumentation”

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Taeda Tomić offers an interesting analytical approach to deal with argument strength. I'll restrict my commentary on three aspects of her paper:

1. The information problem as an indicator of a casuistic overload
2. The problem of transforming degrees of argument strength into similarity grades
3. The problem of separating “acceptability” from “effectiveness”

1. THE INFORMATION PROBLEM AS AN INDICATOR OF A CASUISTIC OVERLOAD

The information perspective captures a legitimate feeling of dissatisfaction with what might appear as a danger of casuistic overload within argument evaluation. But as far as the inherent complexity is concerned: there are substantial limits to satisfy complexity reduction needs as one would like to have it. A warning against being too optimistic may be drawn from the state of inductive logic, for instance. As Skyrms has put it:

There are no universally accepted rules for constructing inductively strong arguments; no general agreement on a way of measuring the inductive strength of arguments; no precise, uncontroversial definition of inductive probability (Skyrms 2000, p. 26).

2. THE PROBLEM OF TRANSFORMING DEGREES OF ARGUMENT STRENGTH INTO SIMILARITY GRADES

The author localizes problems on the argument classification level due to difficulties of classical categorization theory, because, according to her, several assumptions of the classical theory do not hold on the argument classification level:

- the assumption that all members of a category have equal status,
- the assumption that there is a fixed set of necessary and sufficient conditions,
- the assumption that category boundaries are fixed.

The prototype categorization approach suggested by Taylor is regarded as a solution. It introduces category membership as a graded concept with the grades reflecting degrees of similarity of a case to the prototype as the core or center of the category:

The prototype theory suggests that entities belong to a category not due to well defined necessary and sufficient conditions defining the category, but rather due to similarity that entities have with the prototype. Since similarity is a graded concept, the category membership is also graded. An entity may belong to a category in a higher or a lower degree (Tomić, p. 13).

Taylor's *prototype categorization* provides a categorization of arguments which is seen to offer a solution to the information problem by establishing information systems that meet the information needs of users better, because "the structures of categories for argument evaluation may be considered as such information systems" (Tomić, p. 14).

Unfortunately, it is not demonstrated how the prototype classification approach works in actu when it is applied to argument evaluation. Thus, there remain some questions open to me which may be answered with a few brush strokes:

If similarity is a graded concept :

How are similarity grades mapped to argument types?

Are the different argument types graded as types according to one and the same similarity measure?

Are the different degrees within one and the same type (degrees of inductive strength, presumptive strength etc.) mapped to grades of one and the same similarity scale?

Is the similarity scale unique?

Do degrees of strength of different argument types interfere with each other?

I suspect that what looks very attractive at the first glance will meet considerable difficulties when meeting implementation requirements.

3. THE PROBLEM OF SEPARATING "ACCEPTABILITY" FROM EFFECTIVENESS

In the last sections of the talk, the author proposes a second line of categorization beside (?) or beyond (?) prototype base similarity: the categorization according to the logical dimension and the persuasive dimension. This categorization pertains to argumentative strategies, not only arguments as patterns of logical relations. The two dimensions at stake are called the dimension of acceptability for the logical department and the dimension of effectiveness for the persuasive department.

[...] the category of acceptability is suitable for comprising all the evaluative concepts discussed in other categorization systems (e.g. deductively valid, inductively strong, presumptively strong or reasonably persuasive reasoning). The dimension of effectiveness evaluates persuasive strength of an argumentative strategy (Tomić, p. 15).

According to the author, both dimensions share a common property:

Both acceptability and effectiveness are explained as graded concepts that also allow indecisive cases. ((Tomić, p. 16)

The grades at stake seem to be similarity induced grades.

If similarity is a graded concept and acceptability and effectiveness are explained as graded concepts:

1. Are the grades of (or within?) *acceptability and effectiveness* due to similarity relations?
2. And if this holds for each dimension separately, does it hold also for combinations of both, for the interplay of both in what is called an argumentative strategy by the author?
3. How shall we classify argumentative strategies with a strong logical component and a weak persuasive component with respect to a similarity standard?
4. Or a combination of logically weak and persuasively strong?

These questions make sense only if one follows the author in separating effectiveness from acceptability. From a rhetorical perspective, this seems questionable because an argumentation which is not effective will not be accepted by the audience. The argumentation as a whole, the speech as a whole, is acceptable for the audience or not. Acceptability in this sense serves as a standard of successful adaptation to other minds, to an audience. Therefore it makes sense to set acceptability as a rationality standard of social rationality. Social rationality focuses on plausible reasoning within a social context subordinate to the standard of acceptability. Acceptability appears in two variants: as uni-directional, audience-directed acceptability in rhetoric and as mutual acceptability in dialogical settings.

Plausible reasoning under the acceptability standard addresses states of affairs where contingency dominates, a proposition and its negation are defensible simultaneously, and value-focussed reasoning is demanded. This has consequences for the analysis of the strength of arguments:

Degrees of strength of plausible reasoning in this context depend on social factors:

Thus the strength of an argument shows itself as much by the difficulty there is in refuting it as by its inherent qualities. [...]

Since the strength of an argument depends in large measure on its capacity for resisting objections, regard must be had to all that is admitted by the audience, even if it is something one has no intention of using but which could stand in the way of the argument. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971, pp. 461-2)

But the strength of plausible reasoning is not only affected by different degrees of strength of the evidence, but derives as well from relevant factors of the social context and from different degrees of the significance of values beside truth which affect the case at stake.

The influence of relevant social factors becomes visible and is expressed, for example, by a number of the so-called ad-fallacies comprising *ad verecundiam*, *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, *ad baculum*, *ad misericordiam* which capture different weight inducing strategies.

Value-focussed reasoning comprises a genuine, specific concept of argument strength that I'd like to mention here. I have serious doubts that this type of argument strength could and should be approached from the similarity criterion.

Value-focussed reasoning as an occurrence of plausible reasoning attaches significance to other values beside truth and invokes arguments whose strength are due to different degrees of significance of values within a social context of argumentation. The best and shortest available characteristic of value-focussed reasoning which I know is given by Aristotle in Rhetoric I 3.9 (Kennedy's translation):

Further, since all speakers, praising and blaming and urging and dissuading and prosecuting and defending, not only try to show what has been mentioned but that the good or the evil or the honorable or the shameful or the just or the unjust is great or small, either speaking of things in themselves or in comparison to each other, it is clear that it would be necessary also to have propositions about the great and the small and the greater and the lesser, both generally and specifically; for example, [about] what is the greater or lesser good or injustice or justice, and similarly about other qualities. The subjects about which it is necessary to frame propositions have [now] been stated. Next we must distinguish between each in specific terms; that is, what deliberation, and what epideictic speeches, and, thirdly, what lawsuits, are concerned with.

In these lines, Aristotle introduces the key ingredients of value focussed reasoning: the two value levels and their concatenation. The first level comprises scales with a positive and a negative pole: the good - the evil, the honorable - the shameful, the just - the unjust. The second level captures the greatness (*megethos*) of something, its significance or importance. Greatness is introduced as a relative measure of weight based on comparisons.

Degrees of *megethos* are expressed as the great and small or the greater and the lesser. Greater good, greater evil, greater wrong are assessments based on the concatenation of the two value levels. Degrees of *megethos* serve as sources of degrees of argument strength in value-focussed reasoning.

[link to paper](#)

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