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Commentary pm Krabbe

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Commentary on: E. C.W. Krabbe's "The Pragmatics of Deductive Arguments"

       I agree with Professor Krabbe that there are deductive arguments and that deductive arguments require a pragmatics that often includes the interpolation of suppressed premises.

       For the sake of discussion, however, I want to emphasize some areas of disagreement in the details of how Erik proposes to weave together deductive and pragmatic considerations in the analysis of arguments in ordinary contexts and in philosophical applications. I would insist that there is both an art and science of analyzing reasoning, and that the work of interpreting and evaluating an argument is complex and interactive as between deductive and pragmatic factors. A great deal is at stake in getting things right in the study of arguments, where part of what complicates the analysis of arguments includes the analyzer's own conceptual commitments and limitations, philosophical presuppositions and prejudices, interests, values, and cultural predispositions.

       Let us, therefore, get down to cases. When Erik defines deductive arguments as '(single) arguments that invite an evaluation in terms of deductive criteria, even though they may not exclude the use of other criteria,' I might be thoroughly in his camp, depending on how we try to give specific content to what it means to *invite* an evaluation in terms of deductive criteria. An invitation is always issued by someone who is in a position to receive something, although admittedly the concept can also be used more loosely and metaphorically. In the case of arguments, I would assume that the way in which an argument invites evaluation by deductive criteria is by the argument author's intending the argument to be assessed in this way. If this is not true, and the invitation to apply deductive criteria rests instead with the evaluator, then I do not think that the definition will not serve to distinguish reliably between deductive and — if there are any — nondeductive arguments, since absolutely any argument can be evaluated by deductive criteria and any evaluator can consider him or herself to be invited to evaluate the argument in this way. In like fashion, if I am sufficiently obtuse or self-deceived, I might consider myself to be invited to any interesting event in which I may want to participate; let us say, to Queen Beatrix's private birthday party. I might, in other words, freely invite myself, just as I might freely invite myself to evaluate any given argument by specifically *deductive* criteria. If that is all there is to an argument's being deductive, then any and every argument is or could be deductive, a conclusion that, as a deductivist myself, I would be happy to accept, but that I do not think Erik would be willing to endorse.

       I am puzzled in this regard by Erik's further characterization of what he calls 'the simplest examples of deductive arguments' as 'those which are indeed deductively valid, and in which the validity is obvious to all concerned.' For I would have thought that such obvious deductive fallacies as affirming the consequent or denying the antecedent were also equally 'simple deductive arguments,' albeit unsuccessful deductively invalid ones. They plainly do not satisfy Erik's definition, however, although they might well satisfy my description if the arguments' authors (mistakenly) intended the arguments to be deductively valid or such that they

were *supposed* to be evaluated according to deductive criteria. Letting the chips fall where they may on this conception, these fallacies are genuine deductive arguments despite being deductively invalid. I think that any adequate definition of a deductive argument needs to reflect the possibility that a deductive argument can turn out to be either deductively valid or invalid, a possibility entailed by the invitation to evaluate such arguments according to standards of deductive validity, as a criterion that only some but not all deductive arguments will satisfy. Perhaps Erik and I are not so far apart on this issue, but I want to emphasize the difficulty of characterizing the category of deductive arguments as a separate kind of argument form without taking the argument author's intentions into consideration, and in particular by making reference only to what I would say is a rather vague concept of an argument (all by itself?) *inviting* evaluation by deductive criteria.

Suppose, then, that we can lay our hands on a definite subset of all arguments that are either properly deductive or appropriate for evaluation by deductive criteria. What should be the interaction between deductive and pragmatic standards in the critical analysis of such arguments? I am uncomfortable with the idea of *stratifying* deductive and pragmatic criteria in the way that Erik reminds us Robert Ennis proposes. The idea of checking for deductive validity and soundness first and accepting the argument if it passes these tests without further ado seems wrong to me for several reasons that go beyond what Erik mentions.

There are in the first place other deductive criteria beyond validity and soundness, such as deductive relevance and deductive noncircularity, that an argument must satisfy before we can pronounce the argument satisfactory. For yet another more important reason, I would say, in harmony with Erik's reference to pragma-dialectical standards for evaluating arguments, that the pragmatics of argument analysis *pervade* the study of arguments, from the standpoint of determining an author's intentions, placing it in context, interpreting its exact meaning or content, as well as the identification in many if not most instances of appropriate suppressed premises, in keeping not only with the principle of charity but of other sometimes conflicting considerations as well, notably including contextual accuracy.

I think that an argument author's intentions need to be taken very seriously into account even if they are not always paramount in our interpretations of what an argument says or tries to say or what kind of argument it is meant to be, before deciding whether or not the argument succeeds. It is always possible for an author deliberately to put forward an argument that cannot be plausibly charitably interpreted, but, as we must sometimes say, is an irredeemably out and out bad argument. But since pragmatics are deeply involved at every stage of argument analysis, I am reluctant to consider pragmatic and deductive criteria as constituting distinct levels of argument analysis, as though we could prioritize these in a definitive way by which we can check them off *seriatim* as we evaluate an argument's strengths and weaknesses. I think that as we evaluate an argument's deductive potential we are dealing with pragmatic factors through and through at every stage and in a dialectical fashion that sends us back and forth from questions of validity to questions of interpretation, meaning and intent, and back to validity, again and again. The process involves a kind of upward spiral of refinement as we bring an argument under analysis into sharper focus, and our understanding of its exact content into what John Rawls in another context refers to as reflective equilibrium, until we finally stand ready to pronounce it satisfactory or unsatisfactory on the basis of deductive or other criteria.

Thus, I am somewhat at odds with Erik when he argues: 'Consequently, there is nothing wrong with Ennis' proposal to *start* evaluation at the logical level, that is to say by a set of *deductive* criteria. If that leads to a positive result, the opponent should give up criticism directed at the cogency of the argument' [my emphases]. I have several difficulties with this: (1) As I

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have indicated, I do not accept a clean division between deductive or logical and pragmatic considerations in the evaluation of an argument, and I think that the process of argument evaluation as a result is structurally much more complex. (2) I do not have a clear sense of what Erik means by an argument's 'cogency,' a term he uses in several places but without attempt at definition or explanation. Erik remarks that it involves an argument's inferential 'force,' but this term itself in this context requires further clarification. Finally, but perhaps more revealingly, (3) I think that whether or not an opponent of an argument should 'give up criticism' directed at an argument's cogency depends very much on what we find it in our interests to *do* with an argument. By this I mean to emphasize again the extent to which I regard pragmatic considerations as indispensable to the analysis of argumentation and deeply integrated into its methods of evaluation. If our only purpose in evaluating an argument is to decide whether or not to add its conclusion to our beliefs, then perhaps it is enough as Ennis says to judge whether or not the argument is sound. But if, for example, we need or want to apply or build something on the argument's conclusions, then we may need to further criticize its significance, including not only its circularity or noncircularity, as already mentioned, but also its relevance, rhetorical effect, persuasiveness, and many other things besides, all of which are unmistakably matters of pragmatic evaluation. It may not always be enough to bring the critical analysis of an argument to a halt when it has passed the tests of logic in its deductive validity and soundness.

As a final illustration of these themes concerning the complex interrelation between deductive and pragmatic considerations in the interpretation and evaluation of arguments, permit me to consider in more detail a reconstruction of the philosophical reasoning Erik discusses from Plato's dialogue the *Protagoras*. Erik symbolizes the underlying deductive structure of Socrates' inference in the following way, demonstrating his commitment to pragma-dialectical methods in the interpolation of suppressed assumptions in what appears to be an informally composed enthymeme. Erik offers us this symbolization:

1. $f = cw$ [the factor that causes cowardice makes one a coward]
2. $f = e$ [error is the factor makes one a coward (causes one to fear)]
_____
3. $cw = e$ (1-2 Leibniz's Law; transitivity of identity) [cowardice is error]
4. Opposite(cr,cw)   [courage and cowardice are opposites]
5. Opposite(w,e)   [wisdom and error are opposites]
6. [No object has more than one opposite]   [suppressed premise]
_____
7. $w = cr$ (3-6) [courage is wisdom]

I think that Erik's partial formalization is insightful, but I want to take issue with several of its main features. For example, I do not understand the justification for using *identity* in assumptions (1) and (2) as a way of symbolizing the relation of which Plato speaks.

Socrates refers to the factor (f) that *makes* someone a coward (cw); he does not say that to be a coward or cowardly is *identical* with that factor. If we argue on Erik's behalf that the property of cowardice or of being cowardly is identical with the factor that makes someone a coward, as a way of upholding assumption (1), we cannot as easily do the same with respect to assumption (2). For whereas it might be true as Socrates maintains that error *makes* or *causes* one to possess the factor that makes one a coward, it does not at all seem true to say that error is identical with or the same thing as fear.

What are such factors? They are presumably something either mental or extramental. If

they are extramental, then they cannot easily be identified with cowardice or being a coward, as assumption (1) in Erik's symbolization requires, since being a coward seems to be something at least partly psychological. If the cowardice-inducing factors are mental, on the other hand, then they cannot easily be identified with error, as assumption (2) requires, if, as seems correct, error involves a *belief* that does not positively correspond with conditions in the world as they actually obtain, and hence with something at least partly psychological. Moreover, there are plenty of instances of error about what is to be feared or not to be feared that are by no means instances of fear, and for that matter that do not even appear to cause or bring about a state of fear; such as falsely believing that prime numbers are to be feared. There are also innumerable actual things to fear, genuine reasons to be cowardly, that do not seem to involve any sort of cognitive error.

Nor is the use of identity innocuous here where perhaps some kind of causal predication is required instead, since if we pragmatically interpret Socrates' assertion differently than Erik we no longer have any deductively sound basis for inferring proposition (3) from (1) and (2), by Leibniz's Law, as Erik claims, or by any other validity-preserving principle, such as transitivity of identity, since in that case we will not be dealing throughout with strict identities. The discrepancy should cause us to rethink whether or not the conclusion in (3) is rightly expressed as an identity, especially in light of the fact that the same kinds of counterexamples undermine the proposition that cowardice is simply identical with error about what is or is not to be feared.

I think, as a result, that Erik is correct to identify pragmatically at least one of Socrates' suppressed assumptions, but that this is not enough to sustain his inference as deductively valid. Whether or not there exists a plausible symbolization by which Socrates' argument in the *Protagoras* turns out to be deductively correct is very much a pragmatic matter of interpreting context, content, and intent, without which we cannot even get started in the analysis of argumentation, and to which we must return again and again in evaluating an argument's merits and defects. How, in this interesting case to which Erik calls our attention, are we to decide whether Socrates presents Protagoras with a valid deduction to prove that courage is identical with wisdom, or an outrageous fallacy by which he browbeats his interlocutor with a subtle but ultimately defective reasoning of the sort he is often accused of perpetrating? How are we to determine whether Socrates' offers a deductively valid specimen of reasoning in the dialogue, or an argument that with equal justice we might criticize as embodying the following evidently fallacious form: Being American (a citizen of the United States of America) *makes someone* North American; being Canadian (a citizen of Canada) *makes someone* North American; therefore, being American *makes someone* Canadian. The pragmatics of interpretation as a propaedeutic to the proper evaluation even of what may appear obviously to be an argument's real deductive structure, are pervasive, inescapable and always disputable in ongoing argumentation and dialectical exchange. This requirement in turn discredits the judging of an argument's deductive validity as a first 'level' of analysis prior to raising pragmatic considerations.

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