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Commentary on Reed & Walton

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Commentary on: Chris Reed & Douglas Walton's "Argumentation Schemes in Argument-as-Process and Argument-as-Product"

I am on record as objecting to many of the claims made in recent years about the use of argument schemes (see Pinto 2001, chapters 10-12). At the same time, I have endorsed the idea that schemes and the critical questions associated with them are a valuable component of our critical practice (Pinto 2001, 124). As a result, I find myself particularly interested in the suggestions Reed and Walton (henceforth, R&W) make in this paper about the possible uses of argument schemes. They discuss the use of schemes in four areas:

(1) the reconstruction of arguments
(2) the determination of dialectical relevance
(3) the generation of arguments to defend commitments
(4) the generation of *responses* to arguments that have been offered in defense of commitments.

I'm skeptical about the claims that R&W appear to make about the use of schemes in areas (1) and (2), but I'm quite intrigued by their suggestions about the use schemes in areas (3) and (4).
In this response, I must limit myself to a few observations about two matters.

(a) First, I will indicate the reasons for my skepticism about the role claimed for schemes in argument reconstruction. I suspect the idea that schemes have a role to play in the determination of dialectical relevance rests on the idea that they have a role to play in argument reconstruction,[1] but I won't press that point here.
(b) Second, I will try to pin down what the role of schemes in generating responses to arguments might be.

What kind of role can schemes play in argument reconstruction?

In the early part of their paper, R&W try to illustrate the role they think schemes can play in argument reconstruction with the "Dr. Phil" example. In a context in which she is attempting to defend the proposition that tipping is a bad practice, Helen asserts that Dr. Phil says tipping lowers self-esteem. R&W offer a tolerably plausible reconstruction of an argument in which Helen's assertion might be used to support the proposition she is defending. In that reconstruction there are two unstated premisses and an unexpressed "intermediate" conclusion. R&W then ask,

But how do we know all this? How can we fill in the unstated premises and link them together with other premises and conclusions in a chain of argumentation that represents Helen's line of argument?

They claim that "one tool we need to use is the argument scheme." They're suggesting that unless we had argument schemes to draw on, we'd be unable to discover the "implicit" premisses of Helen's argument – or at the very least, that our job would be more difficult. But do we – or can we - draw on argument schemes to identify the implicit premises in this example. Is it really because we recognize that quoting Dr Phil is an instance of appeal to expert opinion that we realize Helen is assuming that Dr Phil is an expert in psychology ("a field that has knowledge of self-esteem"). To my mind, that appears to be exactly backwards. For how are we able to recognize Helen is using an appeal to expert opinion - as opposed, for example, to an "argument from position to know" or as opposed to an appeal to popular opinion? I submit that we can recognize this only because we've *already* concluded that Helen is assuming that the television entertainer who calls himself Dr. Phil is somebody who has expertise about self-esteem.

Well, perhaps we need a knowledge of argument schemes to realize that Helen wants to draw the intermediate conclusion that tipping lowers self-esteem. But why? Isn't it enough to know that arguers frequently quote others in order to draw on the content of what those others have said?

A similar point holds when it comes to recognizing that there's an argument from negative consequences at play here: we can view Helen as offering an argument from negative consequences only because we have some reason to think that Helen wants us to suppose that lowering self-esteem is a bad thing.

In short, in this example we're able to identify applicable schemes only because we've *already* identified implicit premises and an unstated intermediate conclusion. Application of the schemes seems to me to be a consequence, and not a cause, of reconstructing the argument in the way that R&W do. There is, one might say, a "chicken and egg" problem here. It's possible, of course, that other, more complicated examples might illustrate the point that R&W are trying to make. But in the absence of more compelling examples, the chicken and egg problem leaves me quite skeptical about the claim that schemes have a significant contribution to make in locating unexpressed premisses and intermediate conclusions.

However, I can see a somewhat different role that schemes *might* play in the process of reconstruction. To the extent that the process of reconstruction is guided by a principle of charity, any hypotheses about implicit premises must be filtered through an assessment of the strength of the arguments that result from adding those premises to the premises explicitly stated. The critical questions associated with schemes provide useful tools for assessing the *strength* of arguments instantiating those schemes. Accordingly, the critical questions associated with schemes might well have a role to play in the filtering process just alluded to.[2] But it remains to be seen just how this might work. And in particular, developing this point would require a more detailed account of the contribution that schemes can make to argument evaluation.[3]

What kind of role can schemes play in helping a respondent challenge the defense of a claim? R&W claim that

…the ways in which W might counter B's defense are then given (again, either partially or completely, depending on the game) by the specification of the critical questions associated with the given scheme (p. 6).

and they claim more generally that, when one analyses an argument that has been presented, the analysis is

akin to a dialogue between the analyst and the material. This process can avail itself of many of the same techniques as the original. So for example, the analyst can evaluate the strength of the argument by posing the critical questions. Are the presumptions met in this case? Is Dr. Phil an expert in the right domain (or, more specifically, is it reasonable to think that Bob and Helen thought that Dr. Phil is as expert in the right domain?), and so on.

In this paper, R&W are not explicit about the *role* that the critical questions associated with a scheme are to play in the *dialogue* they are imagining. I can see two possible accounts they might give of that role. I believe that one of those accounts is very promising, but that the other is a dead end.

Consider first what I consider a dead end. In a series of publications going back at least to 1996, Walton has been advancing a particular story about the role of argument schemes and critical questions in the context of dialogues:

The function of each argumentation scheme is to shift a weight of presumption from one side of a dialogue to the other. The opposing arguer in the dialogue can shift this weight of presumption back to the other side again by asking any of the appropriate critical questions matching that argument scheme. To once again get the presumption on his or her side, the original arguer (who used the argumentation scheme in the first place) must give a satisfactory answer to the critical question.[4]

In a recent joint paper, R&W seem to repeat that very idea.[5] But if we examine the critical questions Walton associates with various schemes, we will see that many of them are not questions it would be reasonable to expect a proponent to answer in the context of dialogue. Consider for example the critical questions that Walton has recently invoked for dealing with argument from consequences (Walton 2000, 138), a type of argument used to support the conclusion that a person *a* ought to try to bring about some state of affairs *B*.[6]

1. Are there alternative means of realizing A, other than by bringing about *B?*
2. Is *B* the most acceptable (the best) alternative way of bringing about A?
3. Is it possible for *a* to bring about *B*?
4. Does *a* have goals other than A, which have the potential to conflict with *a's* realizing A?
5. Are there negative side effects of *a's* bringing about *B* that ought to be considered.

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Consider the situation of a proponent who has offered such an argument, and is then requested to answer these questions. If the proponent gives an affirmative answer to questions 2, 4 or 5 he undermines the argument he has just offered. Can he reasonably be expected to impeach his own argument that way? Or is the proponent being required to demonstrate that there is no evidence that would undermine his argument? But wouldn't such a requirement defeat the very point of presumptive reasoning, in which we are entitled to a presumptive conclusion, as long as no undermining or overriding evidence is brought forward to impeach it? Surely if the respondent were to lob such questions at a proponent, it would be reasonable for the proponent to make the following standard reply: "I can't think of anything that would warrant an affirmative answer to your question; but if you know of some such thing, please call it to my attention?" Why wouldn't such a reply be "satisfactory answer" to a critical question? And if it is a satisfactory answer, then the respondent can't *really* shift the burden of proof back to the proponent by asking critical questions 2, 4 or 5 – since that burden can be lobbed right back with the standard reply. Moreover, I would be inclined to maintain that the similar considerations apply to questions 1 and 4 as well.[7]

But the reasons why Walton's usual account of the role of critical questions is a dead end points to another account which I think is both instructive and viable. On this other account, the function of the critical questions is to guide a critic or respondent who is looking for evidence or considerations that would cancel the force of the argument. The "burden" of finding overriding or undermining evidence does not lie with the proponent; it lies with the respondent. And the critical questions are signposts pointing the respondent in directions where such evidence might lie. But in that event, critical questions "drive a dialogue onwards"[8] only indirectly. The critical questions occur, not in the dialogue itself, but in the reasoning of a respondent who is searching for a way to counter an argument made by a proponent. In a computerized implementation of an evaluation dialogue, the critical questions would be encapsulated within the module, "object," or agent which generates respondent's replies – they would not occur in the dialogue itself. But perhaps this is what R&W had in mind all along.

Notes

[1] The passage which purports to illustrate how schemes are helpful in determining dialectical relevance is in that section entitled "Relevance Determination and Argument Chaining." In that section, they present an example to illustrate the use of schemes in the determination of relevance, but in the development of that example they don't mention schemes at all. They come closest to mentioning schemes when they say that the example examined can be contrasted with the earlier case "where Dr. Phil said that tipping lowers self-esteem" – a case in which schemes were allegedly instrumental in reconstructing the argument in an "enthymematic" text. That tempts me to think that the role being claimed for schemes in the determination of relevance presupposes the idea that they have a role to play in argument reconstruction.

[2] Perhaps this is what R&W have in mind when then say that, "schemes represent a mechanism for aiding the informal logic process of analysis and reconstruction, and, more broadly, of critical thinking in general. By identifying claims and trying to link them with schemes, the analyst is

guided towards critical questions by which to judge the strength of the claims, their relation, and the resulting argument."

[3] It will not do to say that the mere fact that an argument instantiates a scheme shows that it creates a presumption in favor of its conclusion, provided only that its premises are acceptable or are "supported by the weight of evidence." See my criticism of that contention in chapters 11 and 12 of Pinto 2001.

[4] Walton 1996, p. 46. See also p. 14 ("The argumentation schemes and the matching critical questions set out a profile of a dialogue – a question-reply sequence of exchanges – that defines what is correct or appropriate at any given point, in relation to the exchanges that surround it") and p. 15 ("For each argumentation scheme, there is a matching set of critical questions appropriate for that scheme. To ask an appropriate critical question in a dialogue shifts the burden of proof back onto the side of the proponent of the original argument to reply to this question successfully.").

[5] Early in Reed & Walton 2001 they say, "The two things together, the argumentation scheme and the matching critical questions, are used to evaluate a given argument in a particular case, in relation to a context of dialogue in which the argument occurred…. If all the premises are supported by some weight of evidence, then that weight of acceptability is shifted towards the conclusion, subject to rebuttal by the asking of appropriate critical questions." To be fair, the conclusion of that paper contains a list of issues that need to be resolved – and the first of those issues concerns what the role of the critical questions associated with the schemes actually is.

[6] Walton (2000, 138) offers these as the questions that can be applied to argument from negative consequences (one of the schemes identified in the Dr. Phil example) as well as to argument from positive consequences. To make them fit argument from negative consequences, *A* must be taken to refer escaping a negative consequence and *B* must be taken to be refraining from a particular action which has a negative consequence.

[7] Of course, among the critical questions Walton recognizes there are *some* which it would be reasonable to demand a proponent answer- e.g., a question about whether Dr. Phil really has expertise concerning the factors that affect self-esteem. See the distinction I make between critical questions associated with "type I criticism" and those associated with "type II criticism" (Pinto 2001, pp. 103-104).

[8] That phrase is used by R&W in their abstract for this paper.

References

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