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Title: Alfred Sidgwick's 'rogative' approach to argumentation

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1. Alfred Sidgwick and Informal Logic.

Many workers in the field of argumentation have, at one time or another, come upon Alfred Sidgwick's name. Judging from the relevant literature, however, very few researchers seem to be aware of the variety and depth of his contributions to the field which he called 'Logic' or 'the application of logic,' and which is referred to nowadays as 'informal logic,' 'the theory of argumentation,' or simply 'argumentation.' Fortunately, this state of affairs seems to be changing, as can be seen from the manner in which Sidgwick is treated in some recent work in the field. Thus, while Sidgwick's *Fallacies* (Sidgwick 1883) - a book of almost 400 pages with a subject index which ought to make any informal logician's mouth water - was touched upon very briefly and somewhat condescendingly in C.L.Hamblin's *Fallacies* from 1970 (Hamblin 1970: 10, 172-173, 175-176), Douglas Walton's books about the traditional fallacies clearly take Sidgwick's work seriously and leave their readers with the impression that here may well be many ores of precious metal left to be mined.(E.g. (Walton 1991: 22-25, 260, 302-303, 311; (Walton 1996: 41-42, 141-142).

It so happens that I have been studying Alfred Sidgwick's writings for quite some time, partly because of my interest in argumentation and my conviction that among modern writers Sidgwick qualifies as the closest relative of contemporary informal logic, partly because I view his philosophy as an instance of an exceedingly rare phenomenon: a radical nonjustificational theory of knowledge.((Popper 1960); (Albert 1968); (Bartley 1962)). One result of my studies is a book, currently only published in Danish, the title of which translates well into *Alfred Sidgwick's Theory of Argumentation* (Nielsen 1997). As far as I have been able to ascertain, this book is the first monograph on this acute and original amateur philosopher. It represents an attempt to reconstruct Sidgwick's ideas in the form of a coherent theory of argumentation - without at the same time undertaking the further tasks of pointing out the many important similarities to recent work in the field, or defending Sidgwick's views as if they were in every respect identical with my own, or criticizing them from the innumerable logical or epistemological points of view which might be considered relevant. In this paper I have chosen, rather than putting forward an excessively abstract outline of Sidgwick's theory of argumentation as a whole, to concentrate on what might be called his 'rogative' theory about the application of the distinctions, schemata, and principles of formal logic to natural language discussions. Even so, I am afraid that this short exposition will have to leave many quite natural questions of interpretation unanswered.

2. Alfred Sidgwick - the man and his works.

Not to be confused with his cousin, the well-known moral philosopher *Henry Sidgwick* (1838-1900), *Alfred Sidgwick* was born in 1850 in Skipton, Yorkshire, as son of a cotton-manufacturer. He was educated at Rugby and Lincoln College, Oxford, graduating in jurisprudence in 1873. After leaving University he developed an interest in logic and philosophy, and in 1881 he was Bishop Berkeley Fellow at Owen's College, Manchester. He apparently never practiced law, and it seems that considerable private means made it possible for him to concentrate on his work in logic and philosophy. With his wife, a quite successful novelist, he settled near Penzance in Cornwall and lived there until his death in 1943.

Over a period of more than sixty years Sidgwick regularly produced books and articles about logic as applied to natural language arguments and discussions. Only the first of his books, *Fallacies: A View of Logic From the Practical Side* (1883), was a success, being published in several editions and often referred to in logical bibliographies. His other books are *Distinction and the Criticism of Beliefs* (1892), *The Process of Argument* (1893), *The Use of Words in Reasoning* (1901), *The Application of Logic* (1910) and *Elementary Logic* (1914). None of these were used for university teaching in his life-time. (Sturt 1944). With a single exception his articles were published in *Mind*. Perhaps the reason why his many articles (e.g. (Sidgwick 1892b); (1905); (1916); (1921); (1928); (1936); (1941)) have not attracted the attention they deserve is that they often presuppose some acquaintance with his views as put forward more intelligibly in his books. Apart from frequent participation in discussions in *Mind* his most permanent contact with the academic world seems to have been through his friendship with the quite well-known Oxford philosopher *Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller* (1864-1937) whose highly polemical critique of formal logic was inspired to a great extent by Sidgwick's ideas. ((Schiller 1912); (Radcliff 1966))

3. The 'negative' view of logic.

The declared purpose of Sidgwick's endeavours is to investigate natural language argumentation with a view to constructing *a practical logic*, - a kind of 'applicable' theory about how to conduct real life discussions concerning complex, substantial, and controversial subjects in a rational and effective manner. Explicitly rejecting all speculations about the 'essential nature' or the 'proper province' of logic, he sets about this task guided by the working hypothesis that the doctrines of logic can achieve this kind of applicability only if they are reinterpreted as an organon of *criticism*. This is Sidgwick's idea of the 'negative character of logic.' (Sidgwick 1878)

The actual work which any one who tries to apply Logic, whether in everyday life or in science, will find himself chiefly engaged upon, is that of continually refusing to accept rash assertions rather than admitting safe ones; guarding and waiting rather than striking and discovering. Logic is, from the nature of the surroundings, essentially negative in its most practical application; and the positive method of studying it, even if the special dangers be avoided, is

wasteful of time in translation for daily use. To discover fallacies, to reject false arguments, to eliminate definite errors from infinite possibilities of error, is the essence of the application of Logic. Discretion is our motto rather than valour. (Sidgwick 1878: 334)

If we study the typical traditional textbook of logic from this angle, he points out, it is not primarily in its chapters about the exact rules of valid inference and their formal systematization that we find inspiration, but rather in the chapters (if at all included) about the traditional fallacies. Not least because of the more complex and less exact nature of the examples traditionally used, the treatment of the fallacies generally seems more 'realistic' and 'useful' than other parts of logic. Also, the somewhat controversial character of the subject itself may create doubts in the student's mind concerning the very idea of 'nailing a fallacy' - in Sidgwick's opinion not at all the worst thing that could happen.

4. Formalization as interpretation.

As Sidgwick reads the standard formal logic textbooks of his time - William Stanley Jevons' much used *Studies in Deductive Logic* (Jevons 1880) is his particular scapegoat - these are naively 'formalistic' in the sense that they tend to convey the impression that the logical validity or invalidity of natural language arguments can be conclusively established by a virtually unproblematic *formalization* of argument formulations into logical formulae followed by a direct comparison of these with the abstract schemata of valid inference. With the help of especially simple and clear examples - as often as not constructed for the particular purpose - we are taught first to recognize various kinds of *terms*, next to identify the logical form of *sentences* and, finally, to identify the true logical form of arguments of the nonenthymemic variety.

But certainly things are not as simple as all that, Sidgwick points out. Take the so-called *terms*. Is the term "Don Juan" a general or a singular term? A singular term, of course! Well, how about the *proposition* "What a Don Juan young Petersen is!" (Sidgwick 1892a: 168-173)? And how to decide or establish, from a list of isolated sentence examples, the 'logical form' of each sentence, *i.e.* exactly what *kind of proposition* it is? Word by word translation of the grammatical form of the sentence into its 'true logical form' is, of course, beset with all sorts of doubt and difficulty. To mention just two, it is well known that there are many ways of using 'some,' 'all,' 'is,' or 'if, then' as well as other so-called 'logical constants' in natural languages. Also, it is quite rare to meet complete arguments outside the hot-house climate of the standard textbook. Most real argument formulations are enthymemes, and will have to be 'completed', or 'fully rationalised' (Sidgwick 1984: 111) before they can be criticized in a fair manner.

Unworried by such considerations, the traditional textbook tends to give its student the impression that he (or *she*, of course) is being taught exact techniques for *establishing* the logical validity or invalidity of actual, individual arguments; *i.e.* the collection of valid schemata of formal logic is viewed as a

complex *criterion* of validity. *Negative logic*, however, must stress exactly the difficulties of such a view and the dangers they involve:

Partly through the labours of Aristotle and the Schoolmen, partly with the aid of more recent grammar, we are in the possession of a fair amount of knowledge of the sentence-forms that meaning commonly takes. It is doubtless true, for instance, that when we say: 'All S are P,' we commonly mean to express the 'universal' affirmative meaning; these common forms were not invented by philosophers for amusement, but to a great extent arise from the general consent of practical men who desire to find the best means of expressing their thoughts. All this may be admitted to the fullest extent,- in fact, every writer knows that he must on the whole obey grammar and custom if he wishes his readers to understand him - and yet the opposite side of the truth should also not be forgotten.

For, no grammar - no reflexions on custom - can adequately represent so complex and shifting a set of phenomena as those of the expressions of meanings. We may do full justice to 'general consent' and yet admit that language-forms are largely an accident of time and place, not to speak of those finer differences that depend upon the varying mental constitution of different people, or upon the degree of assertiveness with which the assertion happens to be made. The failure of 'Logic' to cope with such facts as these - facts not exceptional or unimportant, but of immense and practical weight in dealing with any assertion or argument - is so notorious that now-a-days to appeal to Logic in support of any opinion is almost enough to spoil our chance of persuading common-sense to accept it. "I will not admit that the whole is greater than the part, unless you tell me how you are going to use the admission." It is not, in the end, the words that make the meaning, but the uses to which we put them.(Sidgwick 1892b: 148-149)

How, then, do we handle the difficulties of formalization due to the enormous complexity, variability, and 'irregularity' of natural language? The very least we can do, Sidgwick suggests, is to take quite seriously the fact that a word's logical function will to some extent depend upon the context (*i.e.* the sentence in which it is used), and that the sentence's form and force will be dependent upon, among other things, the context of the argument of which it is a part. So if the process of formalization does not take *context* into consideration there is a risk of misinterpreting the argument and accordingly a serious danger of ascribing to the assertor premisses or conclusions which he never intended to assert and defend, and thereby of unfairly ruling his argument invalid.

This advice accords very well with the way we actually analyse argument formulations as a preliminary to judging its validity. What we certainly do not do is starting by identifying the 'logical character' of the words used, progressing to noticing the order of the constants and variables so as to establish what kinds of 'propositions' the sentences really are, ending up with a formalization of the complete argument. Rather, we tackle the job in a more 'holistic' way, for instance asking ourselves questions like "What might the proponent's thesis

be here?", "I wonder whether he intends a simple argument in *Barbara?*", "if so, what further premisses would have to be presupposed?"

But Sidgwick finds it necessary to go even further in his attempt to dissociate himself from traditional, 'formalist' ways of thinking about logic and argumentation. He has to question even a corner-stone of logic: the idea of a sharp distinction between logical form and content. Not that he is a 'radical informalist' in the sense of thinking that applied logic can manage perfectly well without that distinction. On the contrary, he is perfectly well aware of the importance of the difference between the objection that a conclusion does not follow from a certain set of premisses, and the objection that a certain statement is factually false. What he does deny is that in real criticism of arguments the logical form (and, consequently, the logical validity) of a string of sentences can be identified solely through 'syntactical' analysis. His point is that in order for an opponent to guess what kind of assertions (universal, existential, singular, negative, or whatever) the proposed premisses or conclusions are intended to assert, he will have to possess some knowledge of *the subject-matter and the problems argued about* - and, not least, certain hypotheses about what views the proponent holds about them:

... when people speak of the validity of a piece of reasoning being determined solely by its form, they are either not speaking carefully or else are overlooking the fact that, in order to get assertions expressed in (what the formal logician calls) logical form, it is often necessary first to consider the meaning, - to consider what is the matter asserted. Since, therefore, in these cases the form is determined by our view of the matter, the supposed escape from material considerations is to that extent illusory. (Sidgwick 1901: 10-11)

In view of these facts about form, context and meaning in relation to the critical investigation of arguments it would be less misleading if, instead of 'formalization,' we were to use 'interpretation' - with all those associations to something complex, difficult, empathic, tentative, and fallible that this term usually arouses in our minds. In judging the validity of an argument, then, we must take into account what might fittingly be called the assertor's 'actually intended meaning' if we want our logical criticism to be *relevant*, i.e. if we want it to be directed against actually asserted theses and arguments and not against others which are *not* asserted in the given situation. In fact, the 'dangers' that he warns against in *Fallacies* (e.g. Sidgwick 1983: 252, 286) are not, as one might think, the various faults and traps which we may encounter in arguments, and which a nice textbook of fallacies might teach us to beware of and perhaps even to combat in our own reasoning. They are primarily *dangers of unfair interpretation and criticism*; for instance the danger of incorrectly and unfairly ascribing to a proponent an invalid or easily criticizable argument which *could* be read into a clumsy, incomplete, or 'literally' illogical formulation of his. (Sidgwick 1883: 182-83)

5. The necessity of a dialogical approach.

Thus Sidgwick is soon led beyond the idea of a 'negative logic,' at least in the sense in which it is conceived as constituting a *criterion* of invalidity. For even a person who masters the relevant natural language as well as the distinctions and rules of formal logic, and who conscientiously takes notice of the context and takes into account what the assertor's views of the character of the subject-matter discussed might be, will never be able to *establish authoritatively* which argument the assertor has attempted to convey by his formulation. Any accusation that a definite fallacy has been committed must be considered as fallible 'guesswork,' *i.e.* possibly a result of misinterpretation. (Sidgwick 1883: 176ff) But this means, of course, that the proponent's own explicit clarifications and corrections are essential:

The grammatical form of the proposition, though often useful as a hint towards the meaning in this respect, is at best an uncertain guide; nor can even the whole context be taken as in every case complete evidence of the real intention. ... When the intention is doubtful, there is nothing to fall back upon except an express declaration by the speaker as to the sense in which the proposition is put forward. (Sidgwick 188: 65)

Accordingly, the question of what particular type of argument is actually put forward by an assertor, can find an adequate answer only if we bring into play the proposals and corrections, the assertions, objections and counter-objections, the attempts at obtaining increased precision by 'cross-examination' *etc.*, which take place *inside* the particular discussion in question. Also, for an objection to be *relevant* it must be directed against the assertor's 'actually intended meaning,' *i.e.* against his actually asserted theses and arguments, not against other theses and arguments which he has no intention of defending in the particular discussion. Thus, like others in more recent times, Sidgwick takes leave of the view of logical interpretation-*cum*-criticism as a one-person job and the logician as a judge of formal validity, and arrives at a *dialogical* theory of argumentation. (E.g. Hamblin 1970)

But isn't it somewhat risky to introduce so flimsy an expression as 'the actually intended assertion' into this context? And is it at all necessary? Wouldn't it be preferable to stick to traditional logic's familiar concept of *propositions*? In order to indicate Sidgwick's reply to these questions I will have to give a few hints about his critique of propositions, and to touch briefly upon one of his most fundamental assumptions - an assumption that I shall refer to as *the principle of access*. According to this principle we have no other way of gaining access to, and no other way of giving expression to, 'the intended meaning' except through the given natural language formulations, *i.e.* sentences (or 'statements,' as Sidgwick sometimes calls them). When, for instance, we are asked to clarify what we meant to assert in a particular sentence, we must of course do this in the shape of further *sentences*:

Take any case where we recognise that a meaning expressed in words is not quite what the words strictly ought, or strictly profess, to mean - for instance a statement evidently too general, presumably not insisted upon to the full in our

cooler moments; like the Psalmist's hasty assertion that all men are liars. We may soften it down as much as we please, but nevertheless the amended meaning itself can take no other form than that of a sentence. By stating the 'real meaning' of a sentence in other words we only raise up the same difficulty in another shape. However often the process is repeated we cannot escape the need of expressing the assertion in some sentence or other. (Sidgwick 1901: 18)

It must be emphasized here that the principle of access does not exclude the possibility that the assertor himself has only a vague idea of what he 'intended to assert.' On the contrary, according to Sidgwick's results concerning 'vagueness' or 'indefiniteness,' which I have described briefly elsewhere (Nielsen 1987), in an important respect, this is always the case. No wonder, then, that Sidgwick does not feel any need to interpolate between sentence and assertion something like traditional logic's perfectly clear, objective or interpersonal *proposition*, which each party to a discussion can inspect for himself so that absolute precision and univocality of communication can be guaranteed. For instance, he simply does not accept the idea that a spectator of sufficient logical expertise from a position outside a particular discussion authoritatively and once for all can *establish* that one of its concrete, individual arguments is a fallacy!

It is not difficult to see how the confusion between assertion and sentence arises. The *ideal* proposition is an assertion, but the *actual* proposition is always a sentence, just as the ideal nobleman is noble, while the actual nobleman is a titled man. In the case of assertion and sentence, however, there is more excuse for the failure to distinguish, since we cannot conceive what any assertion is or means except by putting it into a sentence. And though a sentence without a meaning may easily be invented, this is practically never done. Sentences, as we meet with them, are used for the purpose of conveying meanings, however imperfectly they may succeed in doing so. Hence, as long as we distinguish kinds of assertion, and ask what actual assertions belong to each kind, we very naturally bring forward not assertions but sentences to illustrate our distinctions. Thus we give the *sentence* 'All men are mortal,' as an instance of the universal affirmative *assertion*, and by calling both the example and that which it exemplifies a *proposition* we hide from ourselves whatever risk there may be in the above proceeding. (Sidgwick 1892b: 148)

We see that even in connection with so elementary a process as that of identifying the logical form or assertive force of a statement brought forward by an opponent, we have no other means at our disposal than that of putting questions to him until we are satisfied that we know what he asserts - at least until new doubts should occur to us.

6. The 'rogative' approach to the application of logic.

Sidgwick's acute sense of the *problems of application* leads him in no way to

advocate the total neglect of formal logic's distinctions between kinds of assertions, its schemata of valid inference, or its fundamental 'Laws of Thought.' Though the abstract formulae commonly used for the purposes of interpretation and criticism in authentic discussions are comparatively few and rather simple, they are indispensable, he insists. (Sidgwick 1883: 239-244) All we need to do is to apply them in what we might dub a 'rogative' manner (*rogo*, befragen, fragen, beantragen, zur Wahl vorschlagen, ersuchen, bitten ... (Merguet 1894: 428)), rather than in what might fittingly be called a 'criterialist' way. It would not be misleading, I believe, to characterize the larger part of Sidgwick's work as a series of attempts to follow the idea of the *rogative* application of logic wherever it might lead him,- the outcome consisting in an abundance of somewhat unorthodox but often strangely convincing pieces of advice and methodological suggestions.

The rogative approach can be sketched as follows: We seek to clarify theses through *questioning*; we *ask* our opponent to choose among several interpretations of his own formulations; we *recommend* a certain use of an expression as less liable to misunderstanding than certain others, but we do not insist upon it as 'essentially correct;' we *suggest* the preliminary acceptance of certain statements 'for the sake argument;' we *object to* law-statements (rather than definitely 'refuting' them) by suggesting seemingly relevant counter-examples, at the same time taking quite seriously the possibility that there may be relevant ways of 'explaining them away;' we put pressure on the opponent by placing him in uncomfortable *dilemmas*, but are willing to listen to his explanations and clarifications; and last, but not least: we assert theses or put forward arguments in an undogmatic way by *challenging* any opponent to tell us in concrete detail exactly what makes it false or invalid. Within the rogative approach the distinctions, schemata, and principles of formal logic play an essential part as *regulating* the discussion, without at any stage being used for establishing the 'correctness' of interpretations not to say the absolute invalidity of arguments.

In *Fallacies*, for example, Sidgwick interprets the classical theory of the syllogism and the traditional doctrine of fallacies in the light of this very approach. He shows how a number of the most frequently applied syllogistic *modi* might advantageously be viewed as schemata for the tentative *interpretation* of strings of sentences viewed as arguments (including of course *completions* of enthymemes), or as schemata indicating the relevant forms of *objections* rather than as criteria to be used for authoritatively judging the logical validity of argument formulations. Furthermore, he interprets the traditional doctrine of fallacies, not as a set of criteria of invalidity, but as a series of suggestions on how to make fair and realistic conjectures about what considerations might have led our opponent to put forward arguments which we find confused and *prima facie* fallacious. To this is added much good advice concerning how to avoid *unjustly* accusing arguments of fallaciousness. Even a criticism based upon a *reductio ad absurdum*, according to Sidgwick, ought not to be regarded as a definitive 'refutation.'

The method of reducing to absurdity should, then, be considered rather as a method of putting *questions* than of making a direct assertion that an absurdity is necessarily implied. We can never really get so far behind the scenes of another person's mind as to attain complete security in guessing what the exact Principle relied upon has been. We can only say that the Principle which *appears to us* to be implied by the express statement is so and so, and that we presume he hardly intends, in fact, to rely on any such plain absurdity. He must either narrow it for our benefit, or be content to leave us unconvinced: we certainly cannot accept the argument as it stands. ... We do not catch the assertor in a trap: we merely show him that he has placed himself in a dilemma: and we then request him, for our enlightenment, to choose whichever alternative he himself prefers.(Sidgwick 1883: 203)

In general, though many concepts, distinctions, and doctrines of traditional logic must be considered as more or less beyond salvation (Sidgwick 1914 *passim*) most of them can be made to make good sense if 'turned around' and viewed 'negatively' in Sidgwick's sense of the word. As such they can be of excellent help in structuring our interpretations, our modes of questioning, our tentative objections, our constructive attempts to place the assertor in dilemmas *etc.* - though always subject to the condition that it is the assertor and the assertor alone who has the final say in what he 'actually meant to assert.'

7. Concluding Remarks

The object of these pages has been to convey, quite briefly of course, a rough first impression of Alfred Sidgwick's criticism of certain aspects of formal logic, his *negative* 'methodological twist,' his principle of access, and his rogative approach to the application of deductive logic. I suppose one might say that the majority of Sidgwick's works are applications of these ideas and principles to a large variety of subjects of interest to many students of argumentation. To mention just a few, his greatest contribution is undoubtedly his investigations into a cluster of problems around ambiguity, vagueness, precision, distinction, and definition.(Nielsen 1987). He also has interesting things to say about the burden of proof (Sidgwick 1883: 148ff); *petitio principii* (e.g. 1883: 180; 1901: 132; 1910: 205-206); the distinction analytic/synthetic (e.g. Sidgwick 1892b: 153ff; 1901: 36-37; 1905 *passim*); various types of vacillation and immunisation (e.g. Sidgwick 1921; 1928); verifiability and meaning (e.g. 1936); and the scope and limitations of the traditional 'Laws of Thought.'(E.g. Sidgwick 1905; 1921; 1926; 1928). Anybody interested in such phenomena would, I trust, derive some satisfaction and inspiration from having a closer look at the books and articles of Alfred Sidgwick.

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