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Commentary on: J. Anthony Blair's "Are conductive arguments really not possible?"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently the topic of *conductive argument* has attracted more and more attention from argumentation scholars. Based on a careful reading, and some critical development, of Carl Wellman's ideas of "conduction" and "conductive", many scholars are apt to take conductive argument as a new and important type of argument. The best example, also the representative pattern, of Conductive Argument is an argument whose conclusion is drawn non-conclusively from both positive and negative considerations. This is a distinctive type of argument, according to many of its advocates, because there is no other type of argument which explicitly takes into account the negative considerations, and thereby indicates that the conclusion is reached in a way of weighing and balancing.

However, this promising view of conductive argument has been challenged by Jonathan Adler, in his last paper on the journal of *Argumentation*. From an epistemological point of view, Adler seriously doubts that we could really have the conductive argument understood in the above way. His arguments in that paper are now critically examined by J. Anthony Blair, who tries to reveal that Adler's criticism is based on some misunderstanding of conductive argument.

2. ARGUING ABOUT CONDUCTIVE ARGUMENT

Adler agrees that many of our public issues are indeed controversial, or unsettled at the present time, so they have "the evident pro-con nature" (Alder, 2013, p.4), that is, when we think about them, and when we try to argue for some view on these issues, we do need to consider both reasons *for* and reasons *against* our claim. Therefore, "Conductive Arguments are not new; what is new is their recognition, their critical

examination, and the discussions of explicit roles they are called to play” (ibid.). However, he disagrees with most of advocates of conductive argument, on their ways of defining this type of argument. Because he believes that they have wrongly characterized conductive argument with two incompatible properties:

(1) the argument itself is *inconclusive*, since the counter-considerations are regarded as being able to continue to diminish the support for the conclusion;

and

(2) the conclusion of the argument is supposed to be *accepted* as true or acceptable without qualification, thus it could issue in *belief*.

Adler contends that these two characterizations are indeed conflicting, since if the conclusion is to be accepted as true or acceptable, then the undermining reasons must not remain viable.

From an epistemological point of view, Adler argues that only *conclusive* arguments whose premises provide *sufficient* support can render their conclusions acceptable without qualification, and then yield our belief in conclusion in such a way that we could “separate the accepted conclusion from the premises that settled its truth”. (Alder, 2013, p.5) He terms this phenomenon *detachment*, or *entitlement to detach*, which “reflects that inquiry on the matter is ended - all relevant considerations are weighed in”. (ibid.) Detachment, according to Adler, is not possible for all the *inconclusive* arguments, whose conclusions have to be reached with qualification, for there still remain relevant evidences to be accommodated.

As a result, conductive argument cannot have both of the above properties: if it is *inconclusive*, it must have its conclusion qualified; or, if it renders conclusion acceptable and issues belief, it has to be conclusive, by *nullifying* all the counter-considerations. Characterizing conductive argument with those two properties at the same time would just make the understanding of conductive argument paradoxical, and its existence impossible.

Blair assessed Adler’s analysis and he disagrees. As his first criticism, Blair points out that Adler has misunderstood the views of (most of) the proponents of conductive arguments, especially, their ways of unpacking the meaning of *inconclusive*. According to Blair, Alder has wrongly taken it to mean that conductive arguments “are non-conclusive in the sense that their conclusions are not detached from their premises, but always remain qualified by the acknowledged counter-considerations”. (Blair, 2013, p.6) While, unfortunately, a careful reading of the works of Wellman, Govier, and other proponents of conductive argument will just prove this surmise to be simply false. As Blair has shown,

for Wellman, conductive reasoning and arguments are inconclusive in the sense that they are not subject to deductive closure (Blair, 2013, p. 5)

for Govier, the premises of conductive arguments do not supply conclusive support for their conclusions in the sense that those premises do not entail those conclusions. (ibid.)

and

conductive arguments are non-conclusive, for Pinto, just in the respect that they are defeasible and in that respect they are unlike deductively valid arguments. (Blair, 2013, p. 6)

Therefore, Blair contends, “Adler simply mistakes what those theorists mean by ‘non-conclusive.’ There seems, on close examination, to be no incompatibility between Adler’s position and that of the proponents of conductive arguments.” (ibid.)

For his second criticism, Blair carefully examines many other views of the authors of chapters in *Conductive Argument*, the book Adler cited in writing his paper. His finding is that almost no one has held the view that the conclusion of conductive argument is non-detachable (James Freeman, arguably, might be the only exception). So they are “not committed, by virtue of Adler’s argument, to the view that conductive arguments are not possible” (Blair, 2013, p. 9). It appears as though Adler himself is committing a *straw man* fallacy, refuting a seemingly inconsistent view that no one really has. As his final verdict, Blair concludes,

[Adler’s] objection to the possibility of conclusion-detached conductive arguments when these are defined as, among other things, non-conclusive, is based on a misunderstanding of the way ‘non-conclusive’ is used by many, if not most, of the proponents of conductive reasoning and argument. So conductive arguments are, after all, possible - at least if Adler has identified the only reason for thinking that they are not. (Blair, 2013, p. 9)

3. ADLER’S OBJECTION AGAIN

Does Blair make a good case *against* Adler’s objections on conductive argument? We believe he does. Adler detects two incompatible properties (i.e. being inconclusive and establishing the truth/acceptance of conclusion) which are supposed to be characteristic of conductive argument. But, as Blair has pointed out in such a clear way with solid evidence, since no one really understands one of them (inconclusive) in the way Adler has in mind, the incompatibility turns out to be illusive.

However, is Adler’s critique then to be completely dismissed? Is there really nothing incompatible in current understanding of conductive argument that would turn the impossibility of its existence? We think the answer remains to be vague.

Adler could have formulated his arguments in a better way, to avoid the using of and the interpreting of the term *inconclusive*, which result his being guilty of misunderstanding. He is attracted by the frequent uses of “inconclusive” by others. And he hastily assumes it to be “a term for expressing the conviction that in Conductive Arguments there are un-eliminated or unreduced, even if outweighed, counter-considerations” (Alder, 2013, p.7), while unluckily all the others in fact take it to mean “non-deductive” or “defeasible”.

Regardless of the fact that Adler does misunderstand the others’ uses and meanings of *inconclusive*, let’s try to think the issue in another way around: whether

the others have indeed attributed conductive arguments with a characterization that Alder has referred to by his wrong use of the term *inconclusive*? We believe they have, since for almost all of them, counter-considerations, though outweighed, are still seen to be remaining viable, and are treated as premises providing reasons relevant to the strength of argument. It is nearly the same as the property that Adler has attributed to conductive arguments with “inconclusive”. It, as Blair himself has identified, consists in “their counter-considerations continuing to carry force and to weaken the argument even after the conclusion has been drawn”. (Blair, 2013, p.2) Consequently, the incompatibility that Adler has detected might still be there in their ways of characterizing conductive argument.

As Adler has clarified, “the claim that I dispute is that once the conclusion is drawn, the counter-considerations continue to diminish its support” (Adler, 2013, p. 4), and his “main and final conclusion” is “that counter-considerations must be nullified if there is to be acceptance of the conclusion.” (ibid. p. 7) To argue for these claims, he explains at length the mechanism of *detachment*, and he strives to defend that if the conclusion of conductive argument could be rendered acceptable or accepted to be true (i.e. detachable), the counter-considerations must have already been nullified. As Blair’s survey of views in *Conductive Argument* has confirmed to us, nearly everyone has held the view that the conclusion of conductive argument is detachable while none of the outweighed counter-considerations needs to be nullified. So here comes the incompatibility that Adler really has in mind, which has nothing to do with the different meaning and uses of the term *inconclusive*.

Accordingly, another version of Adler’s argument *against* conductive argument, in our reading, runs as follows:

1. When our argument is cogent, meeting whatever conditions are necessary for a successful argument, the claim in conclusion can be reasonably accepted, and then yield belief in the claim legitimately.
2. Within a cogent argument, we can separate the accepted conclusion from the premises that settled its truth, which represents an end of inquiry (till now) into whether the claim in conclusion holds or not.
3. An inquiry on some matter could be ended only when all relevant considerations (available at the present time) have been weighed in.
4. When all the relevant considerations have been weighed in, a *definite* view could be reached and asserted, which means, and requires, that the reasons in favour of it have been considered to be sufficiently strong to outweigh the reasons against it, otherwise the inquiry on the matter remains to be open and no definite view can be asserted *without qualification*.
5. When reasons against a claim are outweighed, their function and role in the inquiry of the claim are then nullified; as a result, they are no longer of (negative) consequence, and become irrelevant, in the establishment of that claim. Why? Because

when one belief is settled favourable by the evidence, the disfavoured belief evaporates, since it has been determined to be false....the favouring of one belief over a conflicting one can only occur if the counter-considerations, the reasons in favour of the conflicting beliefs, are nullified. Previously conflicting reasons must lose force. (Adler, 2013, p.10)

6. It is incompatible, in our inquiry, to reach or assert a definite claim without qualification, while at the same time to retain the force and relevance of reasons which have already been outweighed.

7. A conductive argument, as characterized by many of its proponents, just embodies this incompatibility: the conclusion is supposed to be established (as acceptable) without qualification, while the outweighed counter-considerations are still regarded to be retaining their force and relevance in establishing the conclusion.

This argument could still be challenged, especially for some of its premises which simply involve controversies in the field of epistemology. But that is not our concern here, though we would like to see how the proponents of conductive argument would respond.

4. WHY ARGUE CONDUCTIVELY?

There are some more points in Adler's objections which we find very interesting, and would like to expand a little.

Conductive argument (of its third pattern) is regarded as a distinctive type, because there is no other type of argument which explicitly collects both affirmative and negative reasons bearing on the conclusion into a single structure, and thereby indicates that the conclusion is reached in a way of *weighing* and *balancing*. It seems to be very common in our argumentative practices, for in many occasions and on many issues, together with providing reasons supporting our conclusion, we do explicitly mention or acknowledge those reasons *against* it. It is particularly indicated by linguistic clues such as "although," "even though," "notwithstanding," and "nevertheless".

However, Adler's objections are addressed to this distinctiveness of conductive argument: *weighing and balancing*. Can we argue for a *definite* or *certain* conclusion, while at the same time are still *inquiring* on whether it is definite or certain, i.e. are still in the process of *weighing and balancing* reasons for and against it? It appears as though there is some sort of incompatibility within conductive argument. The conclusions of an argument are always definite and certain, at least in the arguer's mind before he/she starts to construct his/her argument, otherwise it is not arguing, for there is nothing to be argued. Maybe in that case we are only *thinking about* or *reflecting on* the matter, hence conductive arguments are not arguments at all.

If conductive argument cannot be characterized as representing a process of *weighing and balancing*, it could be characterized as representing the *product* of

weighing and balancing. That is, the conclusion argued in conductive argument *is* a definite or certain one, and characteristically, it is a *weighed and balanced* conclusion. The conclusion is the result of an ended inquiry on the matter, and the argument is a retrospective reconstruction of the finished process of *weighing and balancing*. But, Adler wants to inform us, the ending of a process of *weighing and balancing* not only terminates inquiry and reaches a certain view, it also settles the support for the view in a fixed maximal amount, and nullifies the force and relevance of all the counter-considerations on altering the amount of support. Therefore, again there seems to be some sort of incompatibility within conductive argument. The outweighed counter-considerations can no longer be used as *reasons* against the conclusion, if the conclusion has already been a *weighed and balanced* conclusion, because their force and relevance have already been counted in and overridden *before* the argument is made.

It is a matter of fact that outweighed counter-considerations are frequently used in argumentative practices, especially in the alleged conductive argument (of its third pattern). What is their role and function? Adler clearly denies that they are used as reasons against the conclusion, and he further backed his view by contending that their uses are indeed for *rhetorical* concerns, indicating or manifesting that “the arguer is not subject to familiar biases like one-sidedness” (Adler, 2013, p.3). However, proponents of conductive arguments insist that their uses are for *logical* concerns; they function as negative reasons, premises, qualification.....and the analysis and evaluation of the strength of conductive argument have to take them into consideration. How can we decide who is right about this? We think the judgment can only be made after a careful examination of the pragmatics of linguistic expressions like “although...”, “even though...”, “notwithstanding...”, and “nevertheless...”, revealing the real communicative intentions of our uses of these terms.

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