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Commentary on Hoppmann

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Commentary on Michael Hoppmann's "The Rule of Similarity as Intercultural Basis of Defeasible Argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hoppmann wants to address two questions in argumentation theory: whence do arguments derive their normative force?, and how can we systematize the critical questions we ought to address to arguments? I am particularly interested here in his first question, but first I begin with some comments on his attempt at the second question, that is, his proposal for organizing the evaluation of arguments.

2. THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT EVALUATION

Hoppmann takes a monistic approach to non-demonstrative arguments. That is to say, he proceeds on the working hypothesis that one can reduce all defeasible arguments to a single set of simple elements organized around a "rule of similarity," which I'll call RS for short:

> (RS) Similar propositions must be ascribed to entities in the same essential category.

Such a rule readily lends itself to an analogical approach to argumentation. Thus Hoppmann considers analogies the archetype of argument schemes, and their basic elements constitute the core of his analysis. That analysis involves the idea that an object "possesses a proposition." At first blush, his term "proposition" seems equivalent to a property or perhaps an act of predication. Perhaps we might put it this way: one asserts some proposition with respect to some object X, where 'X' marks a substitutable grammatical role in the proposition—i.e., X is the subject of some assertion, or perhaps the direct object, etc., such that one can substitute different objects in the X-position. I thus take Hoppmann's "object" as a very wide category, which can include entities, classes of entities, properties, etc.; the X-position ranges accordingly across different grammatical alternatives (subject, direct object, modifiers, etc). The "proposition" that the object possesses is simply the complete sentence in which the object occurs.

With apologies to formal logicians, we might use 'p(X)' as a shorthand for this idea. Recalling Hoppmann's point that arguments involve an audience's rational transfer of assent or belief, we can formulate his analogical scheme as follows:

(1) We believe that p(A).
(2) Objects A and B are essentially similar.
(3) Therefore, by (RS) we ought to believe that p(B).

This scheme allows us to develop a set of core critical questions simply by questioning the claims in (1) and (2), and the grammatical identity of p(X) across the two substitutions. To analyze other types of argument, one simply expands the analogical scheme in the appropriate ways, to take account of further elements specific to the type of argument. For example, the analysis of arguments from authority must adduce further premises that reflect the basis of the authority's credibility, i.e., whether one assents to that authority directly or indirectly.

Hoppmann's project is ambitious, and should it succeed, it would yield a (nearly) systematic method of generating critical questions. If I understand his project, it aims to uncover something like a *core argument scheme*, in the sense of an organized set of internal propositional relationships that form the inner core around which all arguments are built.[1] I say his method is "nearly" systematic, however, because as Hoppmann himself admits, his analysis "does not guarantee a fully systematic result" (9). In fact, his is not the first attempt to reduce non-demonstrative arguments to a single analogical structure. John Burbidge (1990) has attempted something similar, but he admits that some arguments do not fit. Whether Hoppmann can do better than Burbidge remains to be seen. However, a significant worry stands in the way: has Hoppmann mistaken a necessary condition of reasoning in general for a core scheme of argument? Hoppmann is no doubt right to think that transitions based on similarity relations constitute a necessary element of defeasible arguments. Hence it should not be hard to find similarity assumptions in many arguments. But I have some doubts that one can turn that necessary condition into a core scheme from which one can build up more complex arguments. Three considerations motivate my doubt.

First, Hoppmann's analysis of arguments from authority requires a significant amount of reconstructive work, based on a particular interpretation of the initial argument. I suspect that many argument forms will demand considerable interpretation and reformulation before they fit a scheme that centers on RS. If this surmise bears out, then one must ask whether Hoppmann's scheme has not in fact distorted the original argument form for the sake of a uniform method, and thereby misunderstood the original form. If arguments are to function in everyday contexts, must not those who employ them be able to rely on surface relationships as indicative of cogent transitions from accepted premises to new conclusions? And must not critical questions respond to such surface features?

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[1] Here I follow van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Snoeck Henkemans, et al. (1996, 18-19), who distinguish argumentation structures from argumentation schemes: whereas structures have to do with the "external organization" of a set of arguments in support of a conclusion, schemes have to do with "internal organization," i.e., "the principles on which these [individual single] arguments rely in defending the standpoint at issue by means of the premises."

The second consideration has to do with the way Hoppmann's scheme specifies the topic of every argument. His scheme implies that in every argument, the core mode of reasoning holds some "proposition" constant across a transition from one object A to another object B. This transition is warranted by an essential identity claim along with RS. Thus every argument, we might say, is about an extension of some proposition across distinct objects. In his example of analogy, the argument extends the proposition 'it is good for country __ to enter the EU' across the objects Slovenia and Croatia.

Many arguments, however, are about a single object and its properties. Consider Toulmin's simple example (1958, 111): Peterson is a Swede, so Peterson is almost certainly non-Catholic. Intuitively, the argument makes a transition from one fact about Peterson to a further probable fact about him. The constant here is not a proposition or predication, but Peterson. To fit this argument into Hoppmann's scheme, it seems we must invert this apparent surface structure. That is, we must regard the proposition as 'Peterson is a ___,' the initial object as 'Swede,' and the target object as 'non-Catholic.' Thus the essential similarity claim is: 'Swedes and non-Catholics are essentially similar.' This analysis strikes me as changing the intuitive topic of the argument—what we can surmise about Peterson's personal characteristics—to a claim about the association of nationality and religion in the case of Peterson. This shift involves a subtle change in focus. If we take Hoppmann's analysis of analogy as a template, then it would have us think of Toulmin's example like this: "Swedish nationality is a property of Peterson, so non-Catholicity is almost certainly a property of Peterson."

To be sure, arguments rely heavily on assumptions about similarity across transitions. This brings me to the third consideration: as a necessary condition of natural argumentation, similarity relationships naturally turn up in argument transitions, possibly at more than one point. Thus Toulmin's well-known scheme involves a number of similarity assumptions, but they are not quite the sort that Hoppmann employs. Recall that Toulmin analyzes the Peterson argument as follows: 'Peterson is a Swede' functions as initial data, from which one concludes that Peterson is almost certainly non-Catholic, based on the general warrant that 'a Swede may be taken to be almost certainly non-Catholic.' The warrant rests in turn on empirical backing, in this case on statistics correlating nationality and religion. The warrant in effect *names* a similarity relation emergent in the backing: Swedes are similar in their religion. The warrant does not say that Swedes and non-Catholics are essentially similar, as RS seems to require, but that *Swedes are similar* in a *particular respect*, namely with respect to not being Catholics. Toulmin's model also assumes a second similarity relationship, namely that *Peterson is similar to other Swedes*. This assumption is given official recognition by the qualifier that Toulmin attaches to the conclusion. That qualifier—in this case, 'almost certainly'—in effect says that "the conclusion follows, provided the similarity between Peterson and other Swedes is not defeated by a dissimilarity."

The difference between Hoppmann's analysis and Toulmin's, then, is this: whereas Hoppmann's scheme centers the argument around an essential similarity claim and RS, Toulmin's scheme builds similarity assumptions into key elements of the model: into the warrant, which makes the relevant similarity explicit, and the qualifier, which acknowledges that the assumption of similarity between data and warrant is defeasible. If similarity assumptions constitute a necessary condition of cogent reasoning in general, then it comes as no surprise to find that similarity appears at key transitional points in

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Toulmin's model. But that does not mean we can reduce all argument forms to a rule of similarity that functions as the universal warrant. Although Toulmin's warrant names a core similarity, that warrant functions not as a single rule that holds for all arguments à la RS, but as an empirical induction that depends on context. If a rule like RS is to function not only as a necessary condition but also as sufficient for capturing warranted "transfers of assent" (as Hoppmann puts it), then it should allow us to track natural argument forms without the deep reconstructive work that Hoppmann's analyses require.

2. THE NORMATIVE FORCE OF ARGUMENTS

I turn now to Hoppmann's first question, which concerns the grounds of the normative force of arguments. Because Hoppmann holds that the rule of similarity (RS) states the core warrant for all rational transfers of assent in an argument, he approaches the question of normative force as a matter of justifying RS. He proposes that RS is justified insofar as arguers want to be treated as persons whose acts display the stability required for argumentation (8). The justification might be spelled out as follows:

> (1) One can participate as an equal partner in argumentative practices only if interlocutors can treat one as a person.
> (2) Interlocutors can treat one as a person only if one acts in a stable and consistent manner.
> (3) One acts in a stable and consistent manner only if one follows RS.
> (4) Therefore, one can participate as an equal partner in argumentative practices only if one follows RS.

According to the above justification, anyone who wants to participate as an equal partner in argumentation must follow RS. Conversely, failure to follow RS can result in loss of face and even expulsion from the community of arguers.

However, linking this justification with the concept of a person, and in particular with the desire to maintain standing (or face) in the community, casts the analysis at a very high level of generality. As a result, step (3) in the justification involves an overly strong claim about the kind of consistency necessary for the display of personal stability. One might soften the claim by tailoring it for argumentation: (3') the level of personal consistency necessary for participation in argumentative practices is achieved only by following RS. But (3') begs the question, simply asserting what the justification set out to demonstrate.

I therefore suggest an alternative approach to the normative force of arguments. This approach is implicit in Hoppmann's allusions to participation in the "argumentative community" (8). To participate in the argumentative community, I take it, is to do something together with others, to engage in collective action. But as various social philosophers have argued, when a number of individuals intend to act together as a group, they incur obligations to one another. To take Margaret Gilbert's straightforward example, if you and I agree to take a walk together, then we commit ourselves to a joint action that puts us under a mutual obligation: neither of us may unilaterally break off the walk prematurely without explanation or excuse. If one of us does simply split off, say after only five minutes, then the other is likely to express pained surprise,

disappointment, or indignation. The obligation here follows from the joint acceptance of, and each party's commitment to, the collective action (Gilbert 1989). This collective action contrasts with a situation in which we simply find ourselves walking in the same direction, one or both of us remarks on this fact, and we fall in to walking together. In this case, either party remains free to split off without excuse or pardon.

According to Raimo Tuomela (2007), collective action presupposes a "group ethos," which at the very least is simply the collectively accepted goal (e.g., taking a walk together). More broadly, the group ethos is "the set of *constitutive* goals, values, beliefs, standards, norms, practices, and/or traditions that give the group motivating reasons for action" (ibid., p. 16). The group ethos, that is, provides reasons that guide the members' choices and actions in situations in which membership is relevant. In our simple example, the goal of taking a walk together provides a reason for each person to stick with it. For communities of discourse that involve more elaborate collective practices, such as those we find in academia, the group ethos includes a range of goals, values, standards of expression, exemplary texts, and norms of proper argumentation. Members must master the group ethos in order to gain entry into its argumentative practices. And by mastering the ethos and identifying themselves as (new) members of the group, they in effect signal their acceptance of the ethos as a source of authoritative reasons that bind them precisely as group members. In training to become a chemist, for example, one must master the ways in which chemists gather evidence and then deploy that evidence to support convincing conclusions. To violate the standards of good chemical arguments incurs corrections from other members. To ignore correction incurs more severe sanctions, and in the end leads to marginalization or even expulsion from the group. Standards of inquiry and argument in chemistry are group reasons that members have collectively accepted, and that therefore *obligate* members to proceed in some ways and not others, upon pain of sanction.

The analysis of collective action, I propose, provides a more promising avenue for understanding the normative force of argument. Rather than grounding normative force in personal stability in general, the analysis of collective action focuses more precisely on the implications of acting together with others on the basis of a collective acceptance of, and commitment to, the group ethos and its obligatory reasons. In a nutshell, the analysis focuses on the conditions of *stable collective action* rather than stable personality.

The analysis of collective action also opens up interesting lines of further research. One of these studies the mix of individualistic and holistic attitudes in groups. Here Tuomela makes a fruitful distinction between two fundamental orientations in collective action: I-mode and we-mode. In I-mode groups, each individual joins with the others for his or her own private reasons. In such groups, each individual retains authority over the conditions of his or her participation. Thus the stability of the group ethos, and the collective action guided by that ethos, depends on the mere coincidence of private reasons. In we-mode groups, individuals act together precisely as group members who identify with the group. They thus regulate their choices in the relevant situations according to authoritative group reasons, and not merely for individual or private reasons that are likely to vary from member to member. Once one has committed oneself to the group ethos in a we-mode, its reasons provide categorical grounds for acting in some ways and not in others, in the relevant situations.

If argumentative warrants are to have normative force for arguers, then they have to function as group reasons, and arguers must form a we-mode group, at least at some level, committed to an ethos that includes such warrants. This is not to deny that individuals *also* pursue argumentation for their own personal reasons. The stability of argumentative practices, however, depends on a normative framework of discourse that supplies group reasons for arguers, reasons that obligate participants precisely because they have collectively committed themselves to the cooperative group goal of argumentation. But it should not surprise us to find that the mix of personal and group reasons can vary according to argumentative practice—along with the kind of warrants and level of normative force those warrants command. If Tuomela is right, then the stability of argumentation should also vary accordingly. Indeed, the more stable practices of argumentation are the more heavily regulated ones, such as those in the natural sciences. Everyday argumentation, by contrast, tends to disintegrate much more easily, particularly when participants do not belong to some community whose members are committed to staying together (e.g., a family). Insofar as the everyday practice of argumentation rests on a group ethos that can supply we-mode group reasons, that ethos lies in the normative force of coherent language use in general. But that basis apparently does not take us very far, apart from some further group context that holds us together in a common project.

Link to paper

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