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Commentary on Chris Reed and Doug Walton: “Argumentation Schemes in Dialogue”

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Argumentation Schemes in Dialogue” by Chris Reed and Douglas Walton is, as expected, a nice work on dialogue logic. The article extends the existing systems of dialogue logic and makes them suitable for analyzing and evaluating argumentation schemas of plausible reasoning. Even though much work in argumentation theory has recently been devoted to arguments that cannot be classified as either deductive or inductive, the existing systems of dialogue logic are still constrained by principles of deductive reasoning. The rules of inference that define acceptable reasoning in these dialogue models still presuppose only the rules of deductive logic.

According to Walton (1997), plausible reasoning cannot be reconstructed as either deductive or inductive reasoning, since the premises in plausible arguments are typically statements based on incomplete information; their reliability is thus always open to discussion. The conclusion does not necessarily (nor with certain probability) follow from the premises; but premises still provide good reasons for accepting the conclusion. As Reed and Walton describe it in “Argumentation Schemes in Dialogue”, when relying on plausible reasoning, we move “to a plausible hypothesis under conditions of uncertainty and lack of knowledge”.

The importance of Reed and Walton’s Argumentation Scheme Dialogue (ASD) is even greater when we realize that a large part of reasoning, not only in everyday conversation but also in many theoretical contexts of acquiring beliefs or knowledge, is actually grounded on plausible arguments.

Two items in Reed and Walton’s ASD encourage some critical reflection. The first one is about their meaning of a (temporarily) defeated argument. The other one is about the commitment rule (v) of ASD.

2. WHAT IS A DEFEATED ARGUMENT?

According to Reed and Walton, an argument is (temporarily) defeated as soon as the respondent asks one of the critical questions corresponding to the pertinent argumentation scheme. That is curious: asking a critical question does not provide enough information for evaluating an argument as temporarily *defeated*.

In trying to illuminate the meaning of a defeated argument, we follow Bowel and Kemp (2005, p. 229) and Krabbe (1999, p. 10) to clarify that an inductively or plausibly strong argument is defeated for a person at a given time when the person reasonably believes the premises, but still reasonably rejects the conclusion that otherwise follows from the premises, by means of additional information expressed through active criticism. The principles of active criticism as discussed in Krabbe (1999, p.10) correspond to what Reed and Walton call the “Pose C-exception move” in ASD. A (temporarily) defeated argument would therefore be either:

- (1) an argument for which the hearer has successfully formulated an active criticism, that is, posed an exception critical question of the corresponding scheme A (making thus a ‘Pose exception C’ dialogue move) and which is followed either by the speaker’s statement ‘not-C’ or ‘No commitment C’; or
- (2) an argument for which the hearer has posed an assumption critical question of the corresponding scheme A (making thus a dialogue move ‘Pose assumption C’) and which is followed either by the speaker’s statement ‘not-C’ or ‘No commitment C’.

Contrary to that, Reed and Walton suggest that an argument is temporarily defeated as soon as the hearer has asked one of the pertinent critical questions. It seems, however, that arguments which are under the analysis and evaluation process, in situations in which critical questions are still to be answered, would rather correspond to what we may call criticized arguments. (A better term would actually be ‘challenged arguments’, but it should probably be saved for dialogue moves based on what Reed and Walton in the Locution rules of ASD call *challenges*).

Reed and Walton claim themselves that the role of critical questions is to shift the burden of proof in a dialogue. Critical questions may therefore initiate the process of seeking information so as to be able to evaluate an argument, but do not in themselves provide enough information to evaluate the argument as temporarily defeated, as Reed and Walton would suggest. Assuming that would involve a risk of making an appeal to ignorance fallacy.

3. WHICH COMMITMENTS TO WITHDRAW WHEN REASONING PLAUSIBLY?

Commitment Rule (v) of ASD puts forward that “No commitment may be withdrawn by the hearer that is shown by the speaker to be an immediate consequence of statements that are previous commitments of the hearer”. This rule is taken from Walton’s CB deductive dialogue system (Walton, 1984:133-135). Nevertheless, if ASD should be suitable for plausible reasoning and the corresponding argumentation schemes, commitment rule (v) should be modified. It otherwise limits the advantages that commitment rule (iv) and the dialogue rule R4 are bringing into ASD and transforms ASD back into a model suitable only for deductive reasoning.

Commitment rule (v) as formulated in ASD implies two problematic assumptions, namely:

- (1) that the hearer and the speaker both have enough information for answering all the critical questions of the corresponding argumentative scheme; and

- (2) that the speaker and the hearer share the same set of commitments (commitment information); the speaker (therefore) knows all the hearer's commitments (and *vice versa*).

Do these assumptions really correspond to the ways in which a dialogue based on a plausible argumentation scheme works? Let us think about each of them.

Ad 1: Reed and Walton agree that argumentation schemas typically “represent defensible inferences of a kind that are useful heuristics for moving to a plausible hypothesis under conditions of uncertainty and lack of knowledge”. Let us consider the argumentation scheme for argument from expert opinion and the corresponding critical questions. The conditions of uncertainty apply to the incompleteness of information in each of the premises of the argumentation scheme. This makes the answers to some critical questions incomplete, if not impossible.

For instance, in many situations of everyday conversation we use arguments from expert opinion because we are not authorities in a given field. This implies that the speaker would seldom be able to answer the *Backup Evidence Question*, if asked, due to the lack of the expertise needed for knowing or/and analyzing the evidence that should support the expert's assertion. The same follows for the incompleteness of the information necessary to answer the *Consistency Question*.

One problem with ASD is that it does not specify the principles of evaluating arguments from expert opinion, in situations of incomplete information. What degree and kind of information would be sufficient for providing the speaker and/or hearer with a strong/weak argument from expert opinion? In other words, how many of the critical questions, and in which way, should be answered to obtain a strong/weak argument from expert opinion?

Another problem is that the answers to critical questions may provide the speaker and the hearer with conflicting information. Additionally, the aspects that the critical questions address are not equally important for evaluating the argument. Furthermore, the speaker and the hearer may have different preferences as concerns the importance of these aspects. For instance, the expert on whose opinion the argument relies may be a credible expert source, but personally unreliable. Or, the expert may satisfy all the conditions suggested by the critical questions, except that the expert's claim A is inconsistent with what the other experts assert. The ASD does not reflect on that (distinctive) feature of plausible reasoning and does not introduce any kind of logical procedure to guide evaluation of an argument from expert opinion in such situations.

Ad 2: The hearer and the speaker usually do not assume the same information when analyzing and evaluating an argument from expert opinion. It is quite possible that the hearer has more information relevant for the analysis and the evaluation of the argument, than the speaker (or the other way round). Moreover, the speaker (or the hearer, respectively) may not be aware of that. Thus the speaker and the hearer may start a dialogue with different sets of commitments and may be unaware of that.

This feature of plausible reasoning, together with the characteristics discussed above suggests that, at least in certain cases, it would be necessary to allow the hearer to withdraw the statements that are shown by the speaker to be immediate consequences of statements that are previous commitments of the hearer. Reed and Walton's commitment rule (v) needs a modification that would better suit these characteristics of plausible

reasoning. The proper use of the argumentation scheme assumed by rule R4 in combination with the ‘Pose C’ move assumed by rule R5 is otherwise impossible. The example considered in the following section shows the need of modifying ASD commitment rule (v), with regard to the principles of plausible reasoning discussed above.

4. AN EXAMPLE

Stefan (the speaker): It is not good to eat sugar!

Håkan (the hearer): Oh, You are in the mood of proclaiming today, aren’t you? Why is it not good?

Stefan: Because it has bad effects on body and produces a disturbing changes in mood that initiate a strong need for sugar consumption, which at the end produces a kind of sugar addiction. Arthur Basie concludes that in his article published recently in *Healthy Living*.

Håkan: Why do I have to believe that eating sugar is not good for me only because Arthur Basie says so?

Stefan: Do you remember the program for nutrition therapy against high blood pressure that started in 2000 at Göteborg Health Centre and had extremely effective results?

Håkan: Yes.

Stefan: Well, that program is based on Arthur Basie’s theory on nutrition, healthy living and immunology and all these positive results suggest that he is credible as an expert source.

Håkan: Oh, yes, Basie is without doubt credible as an expert source, not only due to the high blood pressure therapy program.

Stefan: And then, would you agree that nutrition, healthy living and immunology are relevant for having some clue about the consequences of eating sugar?

Håkan: What a Socratic dialogue! Yes, I agree.

Stefan: And Arthur Basie is really reliable as a person, isn’t he? Moreover, he rappsorts in his new book about many other research programs that came to the same conclusions.

Håkan: Yes, I know that. I have myself read through a number of other research rappsorts on the subject. Indeed, they all suggest the same as it concerns sugar eating. We should definitely avoid it as much as possible.

Stefan: But then, why do you still eat all these chocolate cakes with ice cream several times a week if you agree that we should avoid eating sugar? We have just realized that the statement against sugar eating is a kind of your commitment, right? Moreover, we have seen that this commitment is an immediate consequence of statements that are your previous commitments! Therefore, according to Reed and Walton, you may not withdraw the commitment that we should avoid eating sugar as much as possible, except you do not withdraw some of the previous commitments that have the new commitment as the immediate consequence.

Håkan: Who are Reed and Walton now?

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Stefan: They are experts in dialogue logic and they have, in their Argumentation Scheme Dialogue, suggested a commitment rule which corresponds to what I have just explained to you.

Håkan: I am not interested in jumping into analyzing a new argument from expert opinion at the moment. Look, I may keep all the previous commitments from which my claim that we should not eat sugar is the immediate consequence, and still withdraw the claim from the set of my commitments and thus continue to eat all these chocolate cakes.

Stefan: That is inadmissible! Do you have any logical explanation for doing so?

Håkan: Yes, I do. Have you read about the new research on consequences of sugar eating by Lester Davis?

Stefan: No, I actually do not know anything about it.

Håkan: Well it is in accordance with the results of Arthur Basie's research and the similar results of all the other experts, but it suggests something more that makes me ready to withdraw the commitment that we should not eat sugar. Lester Davis' results suggest namely that sugar stimulates intellectual work. And intellectual activities have extremely good consequences for human body and health. According to that aspect of health, we should eat sugar. Since enjoying intellectual work is more important to me than worrying about the disturbing changes in mood and the slight addicted behavior that sugar eating may produce, I am going to continue eating my chocolate cakes - and with ice cream.

Stefan: Oh, I see. Indeed, it seems logical that you may withdraw the commitment that we should not eat sugar, even if it has been shown to be an immediate consequence of your previous commitments.

[link to paper](#)

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