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Commentary on Assimakis Tseronis: “Evaluating Qualified Standpoints”

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Although I am not a member of the pragma-dialectics school, I shall attempt to summarize and evaluate this paper about the role of epistemic qualifiers in the conclusions of arguments, and in particular the nature of qualified standpoints and their bearing on derailing the application of burden of proof considerations. I realize that, being an outsider, I might well have the summary and evaluation all wrong, and hope that Assimakis Tseronis will clarify any misunderstandings.

VOCABULARY

First I shall present my interpretations of some of Tseronis’ key terms, but do not have a hypothesis about what he means by “distancing”, “derail”, and “semantic potential”, words that appear toward the end of his paper.

Standpoint. Apparently a standpoint is the protagonist’s conclusion, point of view, or thesis. Whether a qualifier is part of the standpoint is a question I shall consider presently.

Reconstruct. As I understand it, a key task for an argument analyst, as envisioned by Tseronis and I believe the whole school, in examining a dialogue is to “reconstruct a standpoint”. It is not clear to me why the process is called “reconstruction” rather than ‘identification’ – or, where an inference is needed to specify the standpoint, ‘construction’. For the argument I shall soon present (“GA”), which is on the handout, the language I would use to perform the task is “identify the conclusion, “The tree will probably produce grapefruit fairly soon.””

Tests. It appears that the analyst also “tests” the statements in the dialogue for their relevance in resolving the dispute, relevance I take to be determined by the actual or likely causal role of the statement in resolving the dispute. In this sense of “tests”, a statement passes the test if it helps resolve a dispute. If it does not help, it fails the test. Since I am accustomed to think of testing statements as checking them for their likely correctness, rather than their causal powers, I found myself occasionally confused.

Here is a passage in which it seems clear that Tseronis’s view of the testing of a statement depends on resolution of a dispute, and does not involve the evidence for or against the correctness of the statement:

The tenability of a standpoint is considered tested when the two parties agree at the end of the discussion that the doubt or the standpoint should be retracted. (p. 4)

Qualified Standpoints. Tseronis is interested in qualified standpoints, that is, standpoints qualified by adverbials, and focuses on the epistemic adverbials, ‘certainly’, ‘clearly’, ‘obviously’, ‘perhaps’, and ‘probably’. As I understand it, for Tseronis the standpoint does not include the adverbial, although it is qualified by it. So, in the following argument (GA), which I offered to my friend, the standpoint would be “The tree will produce grapefruit fairly soon” rather than “The tree will probably produce grapefruit fairly soon.”

GA: Since this tree has flourished in the past year, and has developed from the insertion two years ago of a bud from the base of a leaf of a productive mature grapefruit tree into a root stock seedling, the tree will probably produce grapefruit fairly soon.

I find this exclusion of “probably” from the standpoint odd, at least because if someone reports what I concluded, or what is my point of view, or what is my thesis, the report should be, “The tree will *probably* produce grapefruit fairly soon”, rather than the qualificationless “The tree will produce grapefruit fairly soon.” If the latter were the report of my thesis, conclusion, or point of view, I would justifiably feel misrepresented by the omission of the word ‘probably’.

COMMITMENT TO A STANDPOINT

Tseronis challenges as “insufficient...an account of [the] effect [of qualifying adverbials] in terms of lowering the protagonist’s commitments, an account that he attributes to Hyland (1998), and possibly also to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004). In this rejected account, the word “probably” in GA’s concluding sentence would show that my commitment to “The tree will produce grapefruit fairly soon” is less than complete endorsement.

In his *The Uses of Argument*, Stephen Toulmin offered such an account: “When I say ‘S is probably P’, I commit myself guardedly, tentatively or with reservations to the view that S is P, and (likewise guardedly) lend my authority to that view” (1964, p. 53). In my “‘Probably’” (2006), I defended a delimited version of Toulmin’s account.

Instead, Tseronis holds that the protagonist is fully committed to what Tseronis calls the standpoint, which, you will remember, contains no qualifiers, even if it is qualified by an epistemic adverbial, such as ‘probably’. So Tseronis implies that I am fully committed to the core statement without the word probably in it (“The tree will produce grapefruit fairly soon”), even though I have explicitly said, “The tree will *probably* produce grapefruit fairly soon.” Clearly my commitment is revised by Tseronis’ interpretations.

THE ROLE OF EPISTEMIC ADVERBIALS

The role of the epistemic adverbial, according to Tseronis, is to “acknowledge” (p. 5) whether there is common ground that is already established.

Strong Adverbials. According to Tseronis, if it is a strong adverbial, such as ‘clearly’ the speaker is indicating to the antagonist that there is common ground, already established, on the basis of which the content and justificatory potential of the arguments

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adduced can be accepted. This claim by Tseronis would be shown false, if I had used the word ‘clearly’ instead of “probably” in offering an argument similar to GA (call it “CGA”) to my friend, who knows very little about citrus trees, if at the time I had sufficiently more justification to say “clearly” than at the time I offered GA. I would not have been indicating that my friend agreed with the premises and their justificatory potential (He did not know enough to agree or disagree), although I agreed with them. I still might justifiably have concluded, “Clearly the tree will produce grapefruit fairly soon.”

Weak Adverbials. Tseronis said, “By using the weak epistemic adverbials, such as ‘probably’, ‘perhaps’, ‘possibly’, ‘presumably’, ‘arguably’, the protagonist indicates to the antagonist that there may be no common ground that is already agreed upon by the two of them, on the basis of which the content and the potential of the of the arguments adduced could be accepted.” (p. 5). But the implication of a possible implied disagreement in premises or justificatory potential is alternatively explainable as a conversational implicature of the giving of an argument. We generally do not offer arguments to someone if we believe that person to agree totally with our premises and their justificatory potential. That would be a waste of time. Tseronis offers no evidence to rule out this alternative explanation, nor any other evidence to support his claim. He just asserts it.

MANAGEMENT OF BURDEN OF PROOF

I am less sure about this next section, but I suspect that Tseronis feels that the use of these epistemic adverbials somehow evades or exploits the burden of proof obligations, as follows: If the adverbial is a strong one like ‘clearly’, then the protagonist is indicating to the antagonist that both agree on the premises and their strong justificatory import, which would not be the case if the antagonist does not agree, and is thus tricking the antagonist almost by intimidation into accepting the argument and the standpoint.

If the adverbial is a weaker one, like ‘perhaps’, the protagonist, according to Tseronis, is indicating that there may be no common ground, or no agreement on the justificatory potential of a common ground. So, for some cause which is not clear to me, the antagonist will not be as demanding and will accept the standpoint, even though it is a very strong statement, such as, “The tree will produce grapefruit very soon.” I hope that Tseronis will clarify how the antagonists are supposed to be misled when the adverbial is weak. Is it that the antagonist will accept what I have identified as the conclusion (with its adverbial included), and somehow then be tricked into accepting the proposition with the adverbial removed?

CONCLUSION AND COMMENT: A SIMPLER EXPLANATION

A simpler explanation of what is going on is the one Tseronis rejects (though he gives no counter evidence): that the adverb indicates the strength of the protagonist’s commitment to the core of the conclusion (the core being the conclusion without the qualifier, for example, “The tree will produce grapefruit very soon”). If then a protagonist utters a weak adverbial, but thinks that the case for the standpoint is really strong, then the protagonist is relieved of some of the burden of proof, so might be judged to have made

and successfully defended the qualified conclusion (e.g., “*Perhaps* the tree will produce grapefruit very soon”) with the caution that any scholar should have. Then the naïve antagonist might forget the scholarly qualification and think that the unqualified core of the conclusion has been adequately defended.

If the protagonist uses the strong adverbial, then the protagonist has made a strong statement, but, by saying “clearly”, sometimes intimidates the antagonist into accepting the premises and accepting their having strong justificatory power, which together require accepting the core of the conclusion (without the adverbial).

The possible explanations that I suggest are not very different from those I attributed to Tseronis, but they are not burdened by the counter-intuitive claims that

- a) a protagonist is fully committed to the core of a qualified standpoint, which is, according to Tseronis, the actual standpoint;
- b) strong qualifiers indicate that the parties are agreed on the premises and their justificatory value; and
- c) a weak qualifier indicates possible lack of agreement on the premises and their justificatory value.

I look forward to Tseronis’ clarification of these matters. If his claims and interpretations are different from the ones I have suggested, it would help me for him to take the grapefruit argument (GA) and show how he would apply his various claims and interpretations to it, and if there is time, to two other versions of GA, each of these versions employing one of these two different epistemic adverbials, ‘clearly’ and ‘perhaps’, inserted in the place where ‘probably’ now appears.

I thank Assimakis Tseronis for presenting these topics and introducing possible alternative ways of viewing things.

[link to response](#)

[link to paper](#)

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