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James B. Freeman

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Author: James B. Freeman
Commentary on: G.C. Goddu's "The Context of an Argument"

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G.C. Goddu announces that the primary purpose of his paper is to begin to explore whether a general theory of argument context is possible. He begins by defining 'argument' as "a set of statements, one of which is designated the conclusion." This is very close to a standard textbook understanding of argument as product. (One wonders how Goddu regards arguments with divergent or serial structure where there is more than one conclusion. Are such structures compounds of arguments, but not themselves arguments?) Goddu next presents a constraint or necessary condition for any argument context:

For a given argument, the context of the argument is those facts relevant to the determination of (i) the identity of the argument and (ii) the goodness or non-goodness of the argument.

Determining argument identity may involve both disambiguating an argument text and supplying unexpressed premises. That argument context may have a bearing on these issues seems completely plausible. For Goddu, argument goodness involves two questions:

Are the premises adequate?

Do the premises sufficiently support the conclusion?

He quite rightly points out that whether the context will have a bearing on premise adequacy depends on one's understanding of premise adequacy itself. If known truth or acceptability is one's criterion, context will have a bearing, but not if the criterion is for example necessary truth.

Although Goddu explicitly indicates that this is not the only understanding of argument goodness, he focuses on argument cogency defined this way:

A argument is *cogent* in a context T iff the premises are true and the premises sufficiently support the conclusion in T.

He holds that truth is not context dependent. Surely this is correct on a correspondence theory. Once one determines what statement is expressed by a given sentence, whether or not it is true depends on the way the world is. This does not vary from context to context.

For Goddu, for the premises of an argument to sufficiently support the conclusion, their actual support of the conclusion must be "at least as great as the required support." He regards both actual and required support as context dependent. This again is completely plausible. How strongly premises support a conclusion can vary widely given background knowledge, part of the context of the argument. The strength of support required involves pragmatic considerations of the cost of accepting the conclusion, again something that can vary from context to context.

For Goddu, then, a theory of argument context must capture sufficient facts so that one can determine what argument or arguments are being expressed by a given source and whether the premises sufficiently support the conclusion. "Any general theory of context that fails to

capture sufficient facts for answering these questions is an inadequate theory." Goddu then examines four theories of argument context. He finds the first, which he initially characterizes as "fairly intuitively plausible," seriously wanting:

The context of an argument is just the particular situation in which the argument is made. I question why this answer should even be regarded as intuitively plausible. I find "the particular situation" vague. It seems to include the physical setting in which a source expresses an argument and the persons in that setting. But, as Goddu points out, much of this would be irrelevant to determining what argument a source is expressing and whether the premises sufficiently support the conclusion. To answer those questions, it would seem that facts about the linguistic dispositions, overall background beliefs, and the desires and purposes of those who were witnesses to the propounding of a given argument would be relevant.

In this connection, Goddu's question of how a particular situation is to be delimited or individuated raises in my mind the issue of whether one should think of being in a context as a binary relation between an argument and a yet to be determined thing, or rather a ternary relation between an argument, a person or the set of dispositions and beliefs constituting a person's perspective, and this yet to be determined thing. Goddu asks, "What if I say something today that clarifies exactly what one of my arguments is....Ten years from now is my comment...part of the situation in which my argument is made?" Clearly, this would seem to depend on whether the comment was available ten years from now. If it were available to some persons and not others, would not those persons be in different situations or contexts?

These considerations suggest what Goddu recognizes in turning to the second candidate—that context specifically involves the beliefs of the arguer and audience:

The context of an argument is some subset of the arguer's and audience's beliefs/assumptions.

After pointing out that the most permissive version of this candidate would take the subset to be simply the union of all the beliefs and assumptions of the arguer and audience, Goddu argues that this set does not satisfy the constraint and no proper subset will either. "It is possible for both the audience and arguer to be mistaken about what argument is expressed by a given source" and "It is also possible for the arguer and audience to be mistaken about the facts relevant to both the actual strength by which the premise supports the conclusion and the required strength."

To illustrate the first point, Goddu cites the possibility that both arguer and audience could be mistaken about the meaning of some expression occurring in the source. This fact is interesting, but I question whether it establishes Goddu's point. It allows that it is possible that neither the arguer nor the audience properly understand the argument as expressed by some source, typically a text. But Goddu has also said that the source can express a plurality of arguments. Now presumably the arguer has understood the source, the argument text he has uttered, as expressing a particular argument. Presumably the arguer understands what he meant to say, even if this involves some deviant or non-standard meaning of an expression he has used in saying it. Unless a member of the audience is at a loss to comprehend what the arguer has uttered, she will have some non-standard understanding of this expression also, whether or not it is the same understanding as that of the arguer. But certainly the arguer's beliefs or assumptions about what this expression means are material to identifying the argument he is expressing and these are included in *his* set of beliefs and assumptions. If anyone wanted to identify the argument being put forward, he would need to be aware of these beliefs or assumptions. That the

source could express some other argument when this expression is given a standard reading does not show that it cannot express the argument the proponent understanding himself to be putting forward. The facts about the standard meaning are not necessary or relevant to determining the identity of the proponent's argument.

To illustrate the possibility that persons may be mistaken about facts relevant to assessing the actual or required strength of an argument, Goddu asks us to consider a group of scientists aware of a body of evidence which confirms that hypothesis to a certain degree. Unknown to them, other scientists have framed a rival hypothesis which the evidence confirms to an even higher degree. As Goddu sees it, these facts are relevant to the cogency of the argument for the hypothesis but are included in the set of beliefs and assumptions neither of the scientists who have put forward the argument for the hypothesis nor of those who have received it.

Appraising Goddu's point here goes to the heart of what we understand by argument evaluation and indeed perhaps of the whole practice of argumentation. Are arguments to be evaluated absolutely, as Goddu's mooted the possibility of a better supported unknown rival hypothesis suggests, or are arguments——some arguments at least——to be evaluated against or relative to a certain contextual background? One's answer may ultimately depend on one's understanding of argumentation. Consider Ralph Johnson's characterization:

A pragmatic approach to argument begins by asking: "What purpose(s) does argument serve?...The answer is: Many, no doubt. But preeminent among them is the function of persuading someone (I call this person the Other) of the truth of something (I shall call this the Thesis) by reasoning, by producing a set of reasons whose function is to lead that person rationally to accept the claim in question (Johnson 2000, 149).

By presenting their confirming evidence to other scientists, have these scientists presented their colleagues with reasons which should rightfully lead them rationally to accept their hypothesis? (By accepting the hypothesis, we do not mean that their colleagues will become unalterably or irreversibly committed to it. Rather they are granting a provisional acceptance, subject to withdrawal in the light of a proper counterargument.) The answer depends, in part, on whether the colleagues who received their argument have an epistemic duty to be aware of the better confirmed rival hypothesis. But surely, if the independent researchers had not published their results and there were no personal connections between the two groups, how could they be expected to be aware that this rival hypothesis and its better confirmation constituted an objection to the hypothesis whose defense they have just received? Assuming that they were aware of no other objections, why would not the evidence the advocates of the hypothesis have presented lead their colleagues rationally to accept it, given the colleagues' epistemic situation? Should they later learn of the rival hypothesis and its better confirmation, they would *ceteris paribus* be rationally compelled to withdraw their acceptance. But then their context would have changed. The argument which was good in the previous context is no longer good in the new context. Hence, I fail to see that the absence of information about the rival hypothesis from the union of the beliefs and assumptions of the scientists defending the hypothesis and their colleagues shows that there is no proper subset of these beliefs and assumptions which may serve as a context for evaluating their argument with respect to that context.

It may be that Goddu would grant some points I have just made, in light of his parenthetical remark that "we often resort to...facts [about the arguer's and audiences's beliefs and assumptions] in determining argument identity and certain evaluative properties such as

convincingness" (italics added). Goddu might reply that argument convincingness and argument goodness are two different concepts, which someone like Johnson, taking a pragmatic approach, has confused. Goddu may take that approach, but then it is open to the pragmatist to reply that Goddu's characterization of the constraint on argument contexts is wrong and inappropriate. It is not the facts relevant to determining the goodness or non-goodness of the argument which constitutes in part its context, but the facts pertaining to its convincingness or non-convincingness for each audience, given the particular commitments of that audience at a particular time.

Goddu constructs his third candidate by building on certain pragmatic suggestions of Charles Blatz. For Blatz, critical thinking takes place in a community of discussion and such a community is constituted by a "set of shared purposes, aims, or uses of reasons' and...[a] `shared set of basic assumptions and procedures of reason'" (Blatz 1989, 109, quoted by Goddu). Given this understanding of how communities are defined or identified, Goddu proposes:

The context of an argument is the set of facts that identify and specify the community of discussion in which the argument is made.

He effectively shows that given his constraint, this proposal has serious shortcomings. Just when does a set of aims and norms constitute a community? If the requirement is very minimal, defining the context in terms of these norms may leave out means necessary for evaluating particular arguments. Furthermore, any facts pertaining to evaluation of arguments seeking to adjudicate disputes across communities or arguments not pertaining to the field of some community of discussion would also be left out.

Goddu's final proposal, developing suggestions of Terence Parsons, claims

The context of an argument, at least the part concerning argument evaluation, is a set of background assumptions and rules of inference.

As he points out, like the third proposal, this is too underdetermined. Whose assumptions are to constitute the context? Goddu feels that Parsons would say the arguer. By contrast, I would argue that if one were to go this route, one should take the audience's assumptions or the assumptions of each member of the audience considered as a critical challenger. To take the evaluative stance is to take the stance of someone who receives an argument. Whether reference is properly to arguer or audience, one could still ask what if the assumptions were mistaken. Given Goddu's constraint, could they be part of the material constituting the context of an argument? Could an illegitimate inference rule, one which is deductively invalid or one—to use Toulmin's terminology—which is an unwarranted warrant, a warrant not properly backed or even able to be properly backed, be a context constituting factor? It could be if the constraint were framed in terms of rational convincingness, a subjective goodness, rather than the objective goodness which Goddu is using. From the latter perspective, these considerations reinforce Goddu's arguments that this fourth view is significantly deficient.

Why should a mistaken inference rule or background assumption be a context constituting factor? The answer is straightforward, if one accepts something like Ralph Johnson's conception of argument. To convince rationally, one must not only present cogent reasons to support some claim, but must answer objections to the claim and the reasons given for it, including objections to the illative moves from those reasons to the claim, at least those

objections of a particular prominence, salience, or force. As Johnson puts it,

If the arguer wishes to persuade Others rationally, the arguer is obligated to take account of these objections and opposing points of view. To ignore them, not to mention them, or to suppress them—these could hardly be considered the moves of someone engaged in the process of rational persuasion (Johnson 2000, 160).

Now it is quite possible that some objections could be based on mistaken background assumptions or improper inference rules. If so, the arguer's strategy in reply might seem straightforward—simply rebut these mistaken assumptions. Still the arguer has an obligation to make this reply occasioned by these mistaken factors. If the absence of these mistaken assumptions means the absence of these objections, the arguer would not have this obligation to meet them in their absence. But in such a situation, the arguer would be presenting the core of his argument in a different context.

This brings me to what I regard as the most serious problem in Goddu's paper. Aside from the briefest of references, he does not consider the work which Johnson and also Douglas Walton have presented in numerous publications over the last fifteen years developing the concept of argument context.¹ Like Johnson, Walton understands argument to involve a pragmatic dimension—one must understand the purposes for which arguments are given. For Walton this involves identifying the context of dialogue in which the argument was generated. Walton has presented a whole theory of types of dialogue and the implications of this theory for evaluating arguments. In view of the centrality of this work and these authors, Goddu owes us a reply to this body of material and an indication of how it does, or why it does not, have a bearing on his project. Certainly, he needs to discuss this work as giving an explication of the notion of argument context and, if he sees it as not advancing our understanding, he needs to indicate how it is deficient.

This brings me to my final point. Should the constraint on our understanding of an argument context be framed in terms of goodness or rational convincingness? Given the pragmatic nature of the concept of context as developed by Johnson and Walton, and the fact that the constraint as Goddu has presented it can be explicated purely semantically, as I believe his development suggests, is the constraint appropriate for the notion of context? I believe that the burden of proof is on Goddu to show that it is. This might be the next step in *his* further work on argument contexts.

Note

¹ Johnson has developed his views in particular in (1992) pp. 55-56, (1996) pp. 103-14 and 264-66, and (2000) pp. 164-75. For Walton, see (1989) pp. 1-11, (1992) pp. 81-121, and 1998.

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