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Commentary on Vorobej

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Commentary on: M. Vorobej's "Thick Cogency"

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      According to Mark Vorobej, an argument is cogent for a person **just** in case it is an argument that *ought to* persuade that person of its conclusion (cp., p.2-3), that is, one in which it *is rational* for that person to believe the argument's conclusion "on the basis of the evidence cited within the argument's premises" (p.2). According to Mark, it will be rational for you to believe the conclusion of an argument on the basis of the evidence cited in its premises just in case: (T) it is rational for you to believe the premises, (R) it is rational for you to believe that the premises provide *some* evidence for the conclusion, (G) it is rational for you to believe that they provide *conclusive* evidence for the conclusion, that is, enough evidence to make it rational for you to believe the conclusion, and (C) each proper subset of the argument's premises provides less evidential support for its conclusion than the whole set itself.

      Some things to note are that this account of cogency relativizes it to subjects. It may be rational for you, but not for me, to believe that the premises of some argument are true, and that they offer some, or even conclusive, evidence for its conclusion Second, an argument can be cogent even if its premises are false (as Mark points out, p.3), since we can rationally believe false statements, and cogent even if the premises do not *in fact* provide conclusive, or even any, evidence for the argument's conclusion. It is one thing for them to provide such evidence and another thing for it to be *rational for you to believe* they do.

      Well, then, can either of the following two arguments be cogent for some people?

(I)

    1. Rivers run.
    2. What runs has feet.
    3. Therefore, rivers have feet
    [Example taken from Larry Powers.]

(II)

    1. What you know must be true.
    2. No statement about the external world must be true.
    3. Therefore, no one ever knows anything about the external world.

      Take the average college student who has never taken a course in logic or critical thinking. I do not think it is rational for such a student to think that the premises in (I) support the conclusion, that is, provide evidence for it, even if he or she cannot say what is wrong the argument. Hence, according to Mark's account, (I) is not a cogent argument for the average college student who has not taken a course in logic or critical thinking, even though it is rational for him or her to believe the premises.

      However, suppose there are some students enrolled in a critical thinking class and their

philosophy professor tells them that the premises do support the conclusion. The GTAs tell the same story, and when they go to the Chair of the Department he also says that the premises support the conclusion. (The situation is similar to the one that existed at the end of the 19th Century when some philosophers thought, and taught, that what we call The Gambler's Fallacy was no fallacy.) I'd say that now the students are justified in believing, and so are rational in believing, that the premises do support the conclusion, on the basis of testimony they are justified in believing is trustworthy. So according to Mark's account, in this situation the argument is cogent for these students (since, in addition, it is compact and rational for them to believe the premises of the argument), but I'd say it is not cogent for them. It is not a good argument and not one that should persuade these students of its conclusion.

Without bringing testimony into the picture, I think it is rational for the average college student who has not been misled by his teachers to believe that the conclusion in (II) does follow from the premises, that is, rational to think that they provide some, and even conclusive, evidence for the conclusion, even though they do not. I also think it is rational for them to accept the premises. The argument is compact in that no unnecessary premises are included. Hence, according to Mark's account, argument (II) *is* cogent for our students.

But there is something wrong with argument (JI). In particular, it commits a scope fallacy that trades on the two possible readings of premise I, namely, (a) necessarily, if someone knows something, then that thing is true and (b) if someone knows something, then, necessarily, that thing is true. (b) is needed for a valid argument, but it is not rational for the students to believe it. It is rational for them to believe (a), but (a) cannot be used with (b) to construct a valid argument. So I'd say that (II) is not a *good* argument, because the premises do not *in fact* support the conclusion. Because a cogent argument must be a good argument, (II) is also not a cogent argument, contrary to what Mark's criteria imply. I believe that Mark must add (RS), the condition of real support that says that in a cogent argument the premises must really support the conclusion, for his conditions to be sufficient for cogency. That is what is wrong with both (I) and (II) even though it can be rational for people to believe that the premises do support the respective conclusions.

Even if Mark added a "real support" requirement, are his conditions necessary? Most problematic is his fourth condition of compactness, which requires that a cogent argument not contain superfluous premises, that is, ones that do not provide additional evidence for the conclusion. As an example of a non-compact argument Mark gives the following:

1. There are giraffes in the zoo.
2. There are gazelles in the zoo.
3. Therefore, there are mammals in the zoo (p.6).

This argument is *not* compact because premise 1 by itself, and premise 2 by itself both support the conclusion as much as they do when combined. As Mark says, this argument contains "superfluous evidence" (p. 6).

Note that the following argument *is* compact:

1*.   Jones said there are giraffes in the zoo.
2*.   Smith said there are gazelles in the zoo.
3*.   Therefore, there are mammals in the zoo.

In this case, even if both the first and the second premise give conclusive evidence for the conclusion, together they provide *more* testimonial evidence than either does separately. Since neither is superfluous, the argument is compact.

The question is whether superfluous evidence necessarily makes an argument bad and so not cogent. Suppose there are two conditions, (a) and (h) that by themselves entail some conclusion, (c). However, suppose someone does not realize this and thinks that (c) is entailed only when (a) and (b) are conjoined. For instance, suppose someone believes, and it is rational for him to believe, that for a plane figure to be a circle it must both be: (a) a set of points equidistant from a given point and (b) an enclosed curved figure whose rate of curvature is the same at every point. He then concludes that figure F is a circle because it satisfies conditions (a) and (b). His argument is not compact because either (a) or (b) alone entails that F is a circle. Still, this seems to be a cogent argument given that the person does not realize that either premise alone entails the conclusion and his failure to realize this is not a failure of rationality.

Finally, I do not believe that an analysis of cogency requires reference to what Mark calls relevancy, which is the requirement that it be rational for the arguer to believe that the premises provide *some* evidence for the conclusion. As Mark says, the requirement that a cogent argument be grounded implies that it must also be relevant. Is relevance together with (T) and perhaps (RS) sufficient for an argument to be cogent? No, for even if it is rational to believe the premises of an argument, rational to believe they provide *some* support for the conclusion, and in fact they do, the argument need not be cogent, for it need not be the case that the person *ought to be* persuaded of the conclusion. Perhaps the evidence that the premises provide is too weak to make it rational to believe the conclusion. So (G), which requires that the person have reason to believe that the premises provide *conclusive* evidence for the conclusion, is a necessary condition of cogency.

I propose that an argument is cogent for S if and only if (T), (C), and (RS) = the premises really do support the conclusion. Contra Mark, I do not believe that relevancy need be mentioned, nor that (C) is necessary for a cogent argument. Further, I believe that (RS) must be added as a necessary condition of cogency