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Commentary on Blair

James B. Freeman

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Author: James Freeman

In Response To: J. Anthony Blair's *A normative theory of argument schemes*

The theory of normative reasoning schemes which J. Anthony Blair discusses in his paper is a very promising field for informal logic and argumentation theory. It is a commonplace that for an argument to be good from the logical point of view, the premises must be acceptable, if not true, and they must be properly connected to the conclusion. However, a general account of premise acceptability and connection adequacy await development. The theory of normative reasoning schemes could mark a major advance in a general understanding of when premises are properly connected to conclusions. To maximize such an advance, however, I believe those developing the reasoning schemes project need to consider certain questions, which I would like to put forward. Since in my own work I have been concentrating on the issue of premise acceptability rather than connection adequacy, some of these questions may already have been addressed in the literature. If so, I can only apologize for restating what you already know. But reading Blair's account has raised these questions for me and I believe they are important for developing the theory of reasoning schemes properly.

1. *If one reasoning scheme can be seen as a special case of another, what is the rationale for distinguishing this particular case?*

Consider the very first example of a reasoning scheme that Blair entertains, the Appeal to a Source:

S says that P.

Normally, when S says that P, P.

So probably P.

Is this not a statistical syllogism? Can we not straightforwardly cast it in the form

Z% of F's are G's.

a is F.

So probably a is G ?

Normally cases of S's saying that P are cases of P's being true.

This is a case of S's saying that P.

So probably this is a case of P's being true.

Have we misrepresented the reasoning by seeing it as instantiating this form? How? What more could the analysis of this argument as an "Appeal to a Source" reasoning scheme add to the preceding analysis? One answer seems straightforward. Appeal to a Source arguments *are* statistical syllogisms as a matter of form, but characterizing them as a particular case of statistical syllogism, we can readily call up a list of critical questions which will enable us to determine *in these cases* whether the *ceteris paribus* qualification has been defeated. If so, we would have a significant rationale for distinguishing this class of arguments. But this leads to a subsidiary question. *Are we marking a formal difference here, or an evaluative or dialectical difference?* Talk of argumentation schemata suggests talking about forms of arguments. How do different sets of critical questions mark different forms? I believe that those involved in the reasoning schemes project need to answer this question. If our goal in developing a system of argumentation schemes is to assist persons in acquiring truth and avoiding error through attending to arguments, we must avoid unnecessarily multiplying argumentation schemes. That would make the whole system unworkable. If many of the argumentation schemes in a given system are special cases of the statistical syllogism, why not simply replace all of these schemata with that for the statistical syllogism? Lists of critical questions would then be determined by subject matter and not be determinants of form.

2. *Should the theory of reasoning schemes make contact with the theory of presumption?*

I believe it should. As Blair points out, the prototype argumentation scheme is Toulmin's basic model
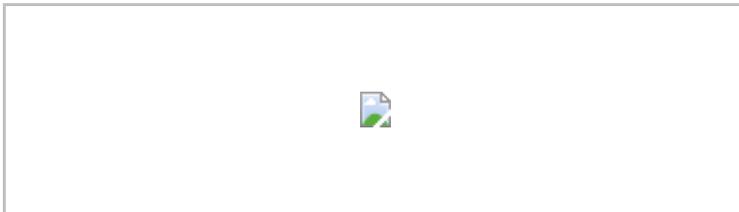
The connection with the Toulmin model goes even deeper. We may ask why the warrant has authority. In many cases, especially in the reasoning whose analysis and evaluation has prompted our turning to argumentation schemes, the warrant expresses a presumption. Blair alludes to this in discussing why at least in certain circumstances, it is reasonable to accept a proposition P on the basis of someone's sayso. At least in some circumstances, there exists a practice of truthfulness. But then in those circumstances, there would be a presumption of trust. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call this to our attention when they refer to "the presumption of natural trustfulness by which our first reaction is to accept what someone tells us as being true, which is accepted as long and insofar as we have no cause for distrust." (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 70-71) To be justified in accepting P on someone's sayso, we also need a presumption of reliability. There must be a presumption that the person can speak reliably about the issue of P. Is P a matter of

personal testimony? Personal testimony is based on perception and memory for which, as Rescher points out, there is a presumption. (See Rescher 1977: 37) But to ask why a warrant has authority is to ask for its backing——another element in Toulmin's model. The theory of presumption, then, can make a contribution to understanding why warrants——at least in certain areas——are suitably backed. (See Toulmin 1958: 103-104) (I believe it is better to talk of backing here rather than entailment, as Blair does. He says that in some sense of entailment, "the practice of truthfulness entails P for R in C when S tells R that P in C." But is it best to use a word frequently reserved for a deductive relation to describe *this* relation? Furthermore, as Toulmin points out, how various warrants are backed is field dependent. How one establishes the authority of a warrant varies from field to field. Hence, there would be no unitary sense of entailment here to characterize the relation. But what backings have in common is to establish why reasoning according to a particular warrant is legitimate, why the warrant has "authority" or "currency." (See Toulmin 1958: 103.) The practice of truth-telling or the presumption of truthfulness work in the same way.)

There is an even stronger reason for making contact with the theory of presumption. As Blair points out, the reasoning we are analysing and evaluating through argumentation schemes is defeasible. Our premises justify accepting a conclusion, all things being equal. But all things need not be equal. Our warrants have excepting conditions——Toulmin's rebuttals. (This is a well recognized epistemic category. Some epistemologists point out that arguments have defeaters. In the default situation, the argument is cogent, but a defeater may undercut the cogency of the argument.) It is here, I believe, that the theory of reasoning or argumentation schemes has the potential to be a major contribution to the practice of analysing and evaluating arguments. As Blair points out, it is possible to outline in a general way for any scheme the principal classes of exceptions, and so to provide useful guidance for the employment of that scheme. And that is the role of the so-called "critical questions" associated with each reasoning scheme....The critical questions function as a check-list to help determine whether any of the standard types of excepting conditions that should cancel the default [are] present in the given case.

The critical questions then let us identify what rebuttals could operate with a given type of argument. In approaching argument evaluation, then, instead of asking the general question of whether any rebuttals are operating here, or whether there are any rebuttals which the proponent of the argument should have countered, we have a list of critical questions to identify rebuttals.

I believe that these lists of critical questions are connected with the issue of presumption in a way that has significant implications for the theory of argumentation. Whose responsibility is it to ask these critical questions? One obvious answer is that it is the responsibility of the challenger or critical evaluator of the argument. This is well and good. But suppose the challenger asks these questions and finds that the proponent has not answered some of

these questions in the course of the argument. Perhaps he has addressed none. Does that means the argument is flawed, defeated? Was it the proponent's responsibility to consider each question on this list and to counter through argumentation in each case the rebuttal or defeater these questions raise? Suppose there is a presumption——at least in the circumstances where the argument is put forward and received——that the excepting, rebutting, defeating conditions identified by the critical questions do not hold. Then why should the proponent of the argument have the responsibility to point this out? If the presumption is that the rebutting conditions do not hold, then the burden of proof is not on the proponent to show that they do not hold and his not addressing them constitutes no fault in his argument. On the other hand, if there is not a presumption that some of these conditions identified by the critical questions do not hold, the proponent's not countering them does constitute a fault.

This highlights the importance of the theory of presumption for argument evaluation. Just when is there a presumption that a rebutting condition does not hold? Answering that question obviously depends on identifying the rebutting condition——the theory of normative reasoning schemes——and having a suitably developed theory of presumption. The two need to work together for a proper approach to argument evaluation.

The issue of the relation between the theory of reasoning schemes and the theory of presumption is important also for the issue of when beliefs are justified. Suppose a challenger comes to believe P because it is the conclusion of an argument which has been presented to her. Is that belief justified, is the challenger not rational in accepting this belief without reviewing the critical questions posed by the argumentation scheme which that argument instantiated? Must the challenger convince herself, or at least consciously note to herself, that no rebutting condition defeats the argument before she is justified in accepting its conclusion? I believe this would put too heavy a burden on the challenger. If there is a presumption that defeating conditions do not hold and the challenger is aware of no evidence to defeat that presumption, why then is she not justified in accepting the conclusion of the argument on the basis of the premises? The conclusion follows, all things being equal, and the challenger is aware of no evidence that all things are not equal. Obviously, whether or not one judges that the challenger's accepting or believing the conclusion is justified depends on one's account of epistemic justification. What these last considerations illustrate is that the issues or reasoning or argumentation schemes, presumption, and justification are all interrelated.

This leads me to a further question for the normative reasoning schemes project.

3. *How may we distinguish a piece of evidence's being a reason for C and someone X's reasoning to C from a proposition P asserting that evidence?*

I am bothered by Blair's Appeal to a Source reasoning schema, because it

suggests to me an overly illative picture of our belief-generating mechanisms. If someone tells me that it is nine o'clock and I come to believe that it is nine o'clock on the person's sayso, does it follow that I have *inferred* that it is nine o'clock from the fact that the persons has said it is nine o'clock? Do I invariably come to hold my belief that it is nine o'clock through reasoning? It seems to me that in most cases, forming a belief that P on the basis of someone's saying that P is a case of forming a basic belief. We may draw an analogy with perception. I am appeared to in a certain way. I form a belief about the external world. Does this mean that I have inferred, reasoned to that belief from the proposition that I have been appeared to in a certain way? If I am aware of no such argument, reasoning, or inference then, without a good case that I have nonetheless engaged in such reasoning, to describe my belief-generating mechanism as involving inference would misdescribe it. This does not mean that I came to hold my belief about the external world without evidence. My experience, how I was appeared to, is the evidence. Similarly, my hearing you tell me that it is nine o'clock constitutes evidence that it is, and I may come to believe that it is nine o'clock on the basis of that evidence. But it does not follow that I have inferred that it is nine o'clock from the proposition that you have told me it is nine o'clock. My belief is basic, not inferred.

This explains why I am bothered when Blair says "Your reasoning, `It is probably around nine o'clock because my partner tells me it is around nine o'clock (and there is no reason to doubt him)' is excellent reasoning," or when he speaks of "`P is true because S says so'" reasoning." Is this how we reason? On the basis of someone's sayso or testimony, are not the beliefs we form ordinarily basic beliefs? I think it is important that any theory of reasoning be informed by an account of how we come to formulate our beliefs and which ones involve mechanisms generating basic beliefs and which ones involve inference. Without this, we risk artificiality in our account of reasoning schemes. We might put forward reasoning schemes which do not, at least in many cases, reflect how we come to hold certain beliefs. Even if we do, on occasion, reason according to one of these artificial schemes in forming a belief on the basis of a certain kind of evidence, that we standardly form beliefs based on this evidence in a basic way could lead us to give undue prominence to this argumentation scheme and thus distort our classification of argumentation schemes.

There is one further question I would like to pose to the project of normative reasoning schemes and in some ways it may be the most important. It is related to the first.

4. *How many basic or primitive reasoning schemes are there? Once these basic schemes are identified, can one develop a comprehensive method for evaluating most, if not all, arguments we meet with in everyday life by means of these basic schemes and their associated critical questions?*

As Blair described it, Walton has identified twenty-five argumentation schemes. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst have identified three basic

schemes. This situation is far from satisfactory. Blair points out that "Walton's list of 25 turned out to contain a quite small number of subsets, each of which could be distinguished by being a variation of a single general warranting principle." How many of these subsets were identified? Were there more than three? What is the relation between these subsets and van Eemeren and Grootendorst's three basic schemata? If these questions have not been answered already, I hope they will be given a high priority by those engaged in developing an account of normative reasoning schemata.

These then are four questions for those engaged in the normative reasoning schemes project. I believe this project is extremely important for the overall developing of informal logic and argumentation theory. It promises to give a comprehensive account of connection adequacy for most arguments in everyday contexts, the arguments of the *polis*, the central focus of informal logic. We offer these questions then in the hope that they will aid in developing a theoretically adequate account of normative reasoning schemes.

References

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