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Defeasibility from the perspective of informal logic

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ABSTRACT: The notions of defeasibility and defeasible reasoning have generated a great deal of interest in various research communities. Here I want to focus on their use in logic and argumentation studies. I will approach these topics from the perspective of an informal logician who finds himself struggling with some issues that surround the idea of and the deployment of the concept of defeasibility. My intention is to make those struggles as clear as I can.

KEYWORDS: deductive, defeasible, defeasibility, Pollock, undercutting defeater, rebutting defeater, Informal Logic Initiative

1. INTRODUCTION

The notions of defeasibility and defeasible reasoning have generated a great deal of interest in various research communities. Here I want to focus on their use in logic and argumentation studies. I will approach these topics from the perspective of an informal logician who finds himself struggling with some issues surrounding the idea of, and the deployment of, the concept of defeasibility. My intention is to make those struggles as clear as I can.

I begin with a very brief history of the notion of defeasibility. Then I consider the expositions by Pollock in (2008) and, to a lesser degree (1995). Then I identify what I take, from the perspective of Informal Logic, to be the some of the issues that emerge from those considerations.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF “DEFEASIBILITY”

Let’s distinguish between the idea of defeasibility, which many trace back to Aristotle, and the term itself. According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, the term was introduced to philosophers by H.L.A. Hart in a paper “The Ascription of Rights and Responsibilities”¹ where he makes the point that “legal concepts do not describe actions but ascribe responsibility or liability, ascription defeasible in proof of exceptions. Legal philosophers debate law’s defeasible (presumptive, prima facie) moral obligatoriness” (p. 181). Two important features emerge here. First, that “defeasibility” applies to *claims* that can be cancelled or nullified in face of proven

¹ In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1949), pp. 171-94.

exceptions. Second, the association of “defeasible” with terms like “presumptive” and “*prima facie*.” To claim that P is defeasible (a la Hart) is to hold that there is a presumption in favour of P, or that the basis for P is *prima facie*.

A second prominent setting is epistemology. Both Pollock and Chisholm use the concept to discuss problems of perception.² Pollock’s use of the term *Cognitive Carpentry* (1995) and *Defeasible Reasoning* (2008) finds him engaged in an epistemologico-philosophical project that has connections to and ramifications for informal logic and argumentation studies.

A third setting in which the term appears is in Computer Studies’ approaches to argumentation. History tells us that the term worked its way into the lexicon of argumentation theorists in the 1980s when those involved in Computer Studies (an offshoot of AI) began to take in hand the task of modelling common sense reasoning. Here is how Prakken (1980) explained it in what has come to be known as the *Dagstuhl Manifesto*:

Modeling commonsense reasoning in AI is a difficult task given that it almost always occurs in the face of incomplete and potentially inconsistent information. Argumentation formalisms are defeasible reasoning systems which work by considering the reasons that lead to a given conclusion (or claim) through a piece of reasoning (the supporting argument) and the potential challenges (or counter-arguments) for accepting that conclusion. In this manner, the mechanisms proposed model reasoning as a *dialectical process*, i.e., the exchange of *arguments and counter-arguments respectively* advocating and challenging the claim of the initial argument. This process offers a remarkable tolerance to the problems introduced by the potential inconsistency and/or incompleteness of the knowledge source.

In explications of “defeasibility” in this setting, the distinction between monotonic and nonmonotonic logic/reasoning is often mentioned. This distinction is not easily explained. The term “monotonic” applies to a mathematical function that varies in such a way that it either never decreases or never increases. “A logic is monotonic if the conclusions that follow from a set of premises also follow from all Supersets of Premises. This means that a derivable conclusion cannot become underivable as a result of the addition of one or more premises” [Law and Defeasibility, Wikipedia, Japp Huge, retrieved December 2012]. The insight that many arrived at was that monotonic systems of logic could not be applicable to a great many real world situations; so began the interest in what are called nonmonotonic logics. This is another setting in which the notion of defeasibility emerged.

Thus we have seen that there are three quite different settings in which the term “defeasible” emerged.

The model proposed above of reasoning and argument, as a dialectical process of the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments respectively (and we

² Pollock writes: “Chisholm (1957) was the first epistemologist to use the term, taking it from Hart. He was followed by Toulmin (1958), Chisholm (1966), Pollock (1967, 1970, 1971, 1974), Rescher (1977), and then a number of authors.” (2008, p. 452)

might add objections, criticisms, and rebuttals etc.), advocating and challenging the claim of the initial argument, is in line with what many informal logicians and other argumentation theorists have advocated. I believe that approach allows us to make all the criticisms that need to be made, and is, in some ways, better than the approach that Pollock adduces.

3. POLLOCK ON DEFEASIBILITY

There is little doubt that Pollock's discussion of defeasibility and defeaters is part of the reason for its popularity. In this section, I shall focus my discussion on the accounts given by Pollock in *Defeasible Reasoning* (2008).³

Here is how he presents the idea in (2008):

In deductive reasoning, the reason schemes employed are deductive inference rules. What distinguishes deductive reasoning from reasoning more generally is that the reasoning is not defeasible. More precisely, given a deductive argument for a conclusion, you cannot rationally deny the conclusion without denying one or more of the premises. (p. 3)

Comment: Pollock's account is off here. He means to refer to valid deductive arguments, not deductive arguments as such. In a deductively valid argument, you cannot rationally deny the conclusion without denying one or more of the premises. Thus a deductively valid argument is not defeasible; a defeasible argument must be one that is not deductively valid; Pollock does not spell that point out here but it is, I believe, implicit in his treatment.

In contrast, consider an inductive argument. Suppose we observe a number of swans and they are all white. This gives us a reason for thinking that all swans are white. If we subsequently journey to Australia and observe a black swan, we must retract that conclusion. But notice that this does not give us a reason for retracting any of the premises. It is still reasonable to believe that each of the initially observed swans is white. (p. 4)

Comment: Crucial to how Pollock presents defeasible reasoning is that new information can force the retraction or revision of the conclusion. That is, someone puts forth reasoning and then is confronted by information that forces a retraction of the conclusion. So Pollock attributes the property of defeasibility to complex rational objects—inferences and arguments, not to individual claims.

What distinguishes defeasible arguments from deductive arguments is that *the addition* of information can mandate the retraction of the conclusion of a defeasible argument without mandating the retraction of any of the earlier conclusions from which the retracted conclusion was inferred. (p. 4)

³ The two expositions by Pollock that I am most familiar with, (1997) and (2008), are far from identical. I find both puzzling, but the 2008 presentation seems clearer, which is why I have chosen it over the account in *Cognitive Carpentry* (1997).

Comment: It seems to me that being defeasible is a very different kind of property than being deductive. “Deductive” refers to a structural property that inheres in the argument; defeasibility is different kind of property; or, in the formal mode “defeasibility” denotes a different type of property than does “deductive”. It is what I have referred to as a dialectical property (2010); that is, it emerges in the way that others respond to that argument.

Pollock treats the premises of arguments as information. This move shows the influence of the AI/CS approach in its assumption that the premises of arguments are, or consist of, information, a view that I will examine later. In other traditions, premises are thought of as claims, assertions, propositions, beliefs; and are often themselves controversial so that much of the subsequent discussion will focus on the premises as to their truth (or warrantability or, plausibility -- the issue of premise adequacy). I will be revisiting this point later.

By contrast, you cannot retract the conclusion of a deductive argument without also retracting some of the premises from which it was inferred. (p. 4)

Comment: Again note that Pollock here means “deductively valid argument”.

Information that can mandate the retraction of the conclusion of a defeasible argument constitutes a *defeater* for the argument. (p. 4)

Comment: In at least one important sense, information is, by definition, true (like knowledge).⁴ But we also have the notion of “false information”. However, false information cannot serve as the content of a defeater. So the concept of information that Pollock uses needs further attention. In characterizing the content of the defeater, Pollock also uses “new information” and “consideration.”

Summary: We can summarize Pollock’s (2008) position on defeasibility as follows. Defeasibility is presented as a property of *arguments*.⁵ A defeasible argument is one that is it is not deductively valid. This first condition leads to the second condition: that information can mandate the retraction of the conclusion. Each of these conditions, I will argue, is problematic. Pollock goes on now to discuss two types of defeater: the rebutting defeater and the undercutting defeater. A

⁴ Dictionary.com defines “information” as “Knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact, or circumstance; news.”

⁵ By extension, then, to reasoning and inference. This important point is not always underscored. I quote here with permission an excerpt from a recent exchange between myself and Pinto:

Johnson: If I am reading Ch. 3 correctly, defeaters for an argument A are other arguments that either undercut or rebut argument A.

Pinto: This, it seems to me, is a significant requirement that does not get picked up in subsequent literature about Pollock. This requirement would significantly affect what is required for a defeater. The one who wants to rebut or undercut has to mount an argument; not just make an assertion. It seems to me that this view is (a) spot on; and (b) a much stronger position than that attributed to Pollock and much stronger than that taken in standard expositions. But I could be wrong because I am not that well grounded in that literature. [Used with permission.]

rebutting defeater shows the conclusion of the argument to be false. An *undercutting defeater* is one that attacks the inferential connection by showing that the premises can be true and the conclusion false.

Pollock claims that “rebutting defeaters and undercutting defeaters are the only kinds of defeaters necessary for describing the full logical complexity of defeasible reasoning” (1995, p. 41). [Later in the book, Pollock seems to modify this claim-- allowing for another kind of defeater (p. 105)⁶ and introducing the notion of “a defeater of a defeater” (p. 110)].

The use of this framework helps clarify why Pollock does not include a type of defeater for the premises of an argument, though attempting to defeat [or, I would prefer to say, criticize] an argument by challenging one of its premises is certainly one of the most common ways of attacking an argument. I return to this matter later.

Pollock’s position is an extremely important one; it has been influential and widely adopted. Pollock’s account focuses on defeasibility as it is applied to arguments [reasoning]. There are two related conditions for an argument’s being defeasible: the first is the condition of not-being-deductively valid. I call this the “NDV” condition. This condition creates the possibility that the premises can be true and the conclusion false. The second condition is the specification of a reason (in the form of information) that is consistent with the premises but shows the conclusion to be false; hence forces the retraction of the conclusion. The defeater actualizes the possibility created by this condition. Implicit in this second condition is that the articulation of the defeater takes the form of an argument.⁷

There are several problems with Pollock’s account.

First, there is the slight sloppiness in his presentation using “deductive” vs. “deductively valid” but that is not a serious problem.

Second, there is some ambiguity in his specification of the defeasing material. He typically refers to “information” but also to beliefs and justified beliefs. [In (1995) he uses “new information” (p. 40) and “consideration” (p. 40).] What is clear is that the defeater has propositional content (is true/false); moreover, because it defeats a proposition, the proposition is true. I return to this matter later.

Third, the NDV condition creates a problem in the following way. To defeat an argument

$$A \langle P1.P2.P3 \rightarrow C \rangle$$

one must produce not just an argument, but a good argument $\langle B \rangle$ that shows that $\langle A \rangle$ is not a good argument. I think Pollock would agree with this, though neither here, nor in the text of *Cognitive Carpentry* (1997) could I find this point made in just those terms. But Pollock’s treatment of defeasibility, in effect, supplies us with a template for specifying the defeater: i.e., constructing the counterargument. One locates and cites a reason, R, that is compatible with the premises of A and which

⁶ But Pinto (2011, pp. 108-100) questions this claim.

⁷ This second condition gets associated in the literature with a wide variety of properties: the conclusion of a defeasible argument has been said (not by Pollock but in the literature) to be corrigible, falsifiable, revisable.

shows that the conclusion of A is false. Hence whatever else we may say about the premise of this defeater, it is put forward as true.

Now I think we should make explicit what I take to be implicit here: that R is not just a reason, but a good reason. Pollock must be thinking that in order for the critic to be justified in holding R to be true, the critic has to have good reasons for R: D1, D2, etc. The *complete counterargument* (defeater) of A would look, then, like this:

$$D1 \& D2 \rightarrow R; \rightarrow -C.$$

Thus in Pollock's approach, both the material defeated and the defeater are *arguments*. I regard this as an important clarification of what has been implicit in Pollock's position.

To support my claim that the NDV clause creates a problem, let's apply it to the famous Tweety example.⁸ Someone, A, is supposed to have reasoned as follows:

<Tweety is a bird; birds fly; therefore Tweety flies>.

B responds with an undercutting defeater (which is in effect a counter-argument):

<Tweety is a penguin; penguins cannot fly [No penguin can fly]; therefore 'Tweety flies' is false>.

The new information contradicts the conclusion and forces the proponent to withdraw it.

Does the defeater satisfy the NDV condition? Is it the case that the argument is not deductively valid? It is not at all clear that it is. A's reasoning, one might argue, is *ambiguous* because of the second premise. It could be that A means "all birds fly," in which case the argument would be deductively valid; hence it *would not* be an example of defeasible reasoning. Or, it could mean "most/some birds fly" in which case it would be not-deductively-valid; hence defeasible. [See Pollock, p. 42].

Suppose A insisted that he meant the former. Then, as we saw, his argument would be deductively valid; hence not defeasible. I now want to adopt the apparatus of informal logic and say that that interpretation will make no difference to our final evaluation, because we will now use exactly the same counterexample to make the point that even though the argument is valid (hence not defeasible), it is still a bad argument, *because the second premise is false*: "all birds fly" is false. We will argue that penguins are birds and penguins don't fly; therefore Tweety does not fly. In other words, we can use the exact same reasoning here as we did in the prior interpretation; the difference being that we need to have available the sort of defeater that Pollock does not have: we allow for the argument to be rejected on the ground that the premise is false, which we offered a reason for.

⁸ I have issues concerning the plausibility of this example but set them aside for now.

It seems then to make no difference to the final judgement whether we interpret the argument as a defeasible argument that is subject to a defeater, or, as a bad argument because it has a false premise. In either case, the argument is to be rejected and for the same reason (though framed in different terms).⁹

However, from my perspective as an informal logician, Pollock's inventory of defeaters has a glaring gap that has just become evident. There is a defeater for the reason that falsifies the conclusion: a rebutting defeater; a defeater that falsifies the inferential connection—an undercutting defeater; but no category for a defeater that falsifies a premise! How to explain this gap that I call *premise blindness*? The only answer I can think of is that traditionally those who taught formal deductive logic used the soundness doctrine as their frame for evaluating and criticizing arguments. There were two criteria: the premises must be true; the argument must be deductively valid. The business of logic was the determination of deductive validity. The issue of determining the truth of the premises was held to be a substantive issue, extra-logical in character. I believe that premise blindness could be an inheritance from the deductivist proclivities of formal logic.¹⁰

Here is where what I have referred to as the Informal Logic Initiative came into play. It rejected the ideal of soundness, criticizing it on two fronts. First, it rejected the deductivist view that validity was a necessary condition for a good argument. The Informal Logic Initiative opposes deductivism.¹¹ Second, the Informal Logic Initiative raised the issue of premise adequacy: what are the proper requirements for the premises of a good argument? Informal logicians have had an ongoing debate about whether truth was an appropriate criterion to demand. Many have argued for acceptability.¹² But that matter is not at issue here. I am trying to explain how Pollock could omit the challenges to the truth of the premises. One answer I have suggested is that it is an inheritance of the tradition of logic dominated by formal logicians and deductivism.

An approach to argument evaluation and criticism advocated by some informal logicians understands arguments as having a more complex structure: as having an illative core (in which the arguer gives the reasons that support the conclusion) and a dialectical tier in which the arguer deals with objections, criticism, and counterarguments. Criticism of the illative core takes place in terms of the criteria of relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability.¹³ (I would add truth; see Johnson, 2000, pp. 337-340 for my arguments). In the dialectical tier, the arguer has to deal satisfactorily with counterarguments, objections and criticisms (Johnson, 2006).

⁹ William James is supposed to have said something like: "A difference that makes no difference is no difference."

¹⁰ If I am right, it illustrates the deep difficulty of parting company with deductivism. For a more detailed treatment of this matter, see my (2010).

¹¹ See my (2006).

¹² Informal logicians, however, have made important inroads into what is called the issue of premise-adequacy: Hamblin (1970), Govier (1987, 1999), Freeman (2005), Johnson (2006), Blair (2012).

¹³ But see Blair (2012), for his second thoughts.

The position I would want to develop (but can only indicate here) is that because of the problems with the deployment of the defeasibility frame, those who wish to study argument/argumentation will be better off to approach such matters using the traditional conceptual apparatus of logical criticism [argument, counterargument, criticism, objection, rebuttal] supplemented by developments from Informal Logic and Argumentation Studies.

I have discussed the history of the idea and also important settings in which it developed and found that there are issues surrounding these expositions of “defeasibility” in respect of what it means and what it is applied to. (I have also noted but not developed its relation to cognate notions like “prima facie” and “presumptive.”)

The notion of defeasibility has come to designate a kind of looseness in reasoning that stems from the inferential connection’s being not airtight (deductively valid). The cash value seems to be that the reasoning in question can be invalidated/undermined/annulled by new information (while leaving the original premises intact.) It is this property of defeasibility that in the literature comes to be associated with a wide variety of properties such as: annulled, cancelled, revisable, corrigible, falsifiable, criticisable – a matter I take up below.

4. SOME ISSUES SURROUNDING THE NOTION OF DEFEASIBILITY

In this section I look at some issues regarding what I call the “defeasibility frame” from the perspective of informal logic. Here I have focussed on Pollock but these same issues will apply to many other treatments.

A: The notion of information may be more problematic than realized.

What is meant by information? The term is never really explained by Pollock in (1997) or (2008). Consider this text:

Suppose Simon, whom I regard as very reliable, tells me, “Don’t believe Herbert. He is incompetent.” That Herbert told me that not all swans are white gives me a reason for believing that not all swans are white, but Simon’s remarks about Herbert give me a reason for withdrawing my belief, and they do so without either (1) making me doubt that Herbert said what I took him to say or (2) giving me a reason for thinking it false that not all swans are white. Even if Herbert is incompetent, he might have accidentally gotten it right that not all swans are white. Thus Simon’s remarks constitute a defeater, but not a rebutting defeater. This is an example of an *undercutting defeater*. (2008, p. 5)

It seems clear that by the nature of his account, “Herbert is incompetent” is treated here as a defeater, a reason that undercuts the conclusion. It is a claim made by Simon. It is put forward as true. But can it be categorized as “information”? It is certainly a claim, likely one that Herbert (and others) would contest. And it is

certainly a more robust concept of information than one would find in certain quarters, e.g., in the mathematical theory of communication.¹⁴

In the Informal Logic Initiative, premises are thought of as claims, assertions, proposition, beliefs. They are often themselves controversial, so that much subsequent discussion will focus on the premises as to their truth, or warrantability or, plausibility. This is the issue of premise-adequacy. What are the proper requirements for the premises of a good argument? Informal logicians have had an ongoing debate about whether truth was an appropriate criterion to demand. Many have argued for acceptability.¹⁵ But that matter is not at issue here. I am trying to explain how Pollock could omit the challenges to the truth of the premises. The answer I have suggested is that it is an inheritance of the tradition of logic dominated by formal logicians and deductivism. This is the more remarkable when we recall Pollock's explicit statement that it "is logically impossible to reason successfully about the world using only deductive reasoning" (1995, p. 41). For an explanation of how possible see my (2010).

B. The Defeasibility Frame has seen the development of a kind of looseness that surrounds what I call the uptake category.

Pollock himself is clear and consistent on this point: the information requires that the conclusion be retracted. However, in the literature that has developed around the idea of defeasibility, a variety of terms have been used to refer to this property. Here is the *Wikipedia entry*¹⁶:

Defeasible reasoning is a particular kind of non-demonstrative reasoning, where the reasoning does not produce a full, complete, or final demonstration of a claim, i.e., where fallibility and corrigibility of a conclusion are acknowledged. [Retrieved: 14 March, 2013]

Comment: First, this account implies that fallibility and corrigibility cannot occur in deductive reasoning, which is false. In 1993 Andrew Wiles put forward what he (and others) thought was a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. Subsequent work by Katz showed that the proof was flawed. Second, this account connects defeasibility with the fallibility or corrigibility of the conclusion. This seems doubly wrong;

¹⁴ In an exchange I had with Steve Patterson, he wrote: "The question of what it means for premises to be information is an interesting one. I would wager that Pollock... is almost certainly using a conception of information that goes back at least to Claude Shannon's 1948 paper "A Mathematical Theory of Communication". ...There is also a nice overview of Shannon's work at this page at NYU: <https://www.nyu.edu/pages/linguistics/courses/v610003/shan.html>. Their summary: On Shannon's view, and the view of information theory more generally, information is the property a communication (e.g. string of code, etc.) has when it decreases uncertainty (i.e. randomness or noise)." [Used with permission.]

¹⁵ Informal logicians, however, have made important inroads into what is called the issue of premise-adequacy. Hamblin [1970], Govier [1987, 1999], Freeman [2005], Johnson [2006] Blair [2012].

¹⁶ I cite this entry from *Wikipedia* not because I regard it as reliable, far from it; but because it is a ready to hand reference that some may get their notion of defeasibility from.

defeasibility a la Pollock attaches to the argument or inference, not to components (premises or conclusion); and the conclusion to be drawn from the countermanding information is not that the conclusion is fallible, but that it is false.

Other accounts unpack “defeasibility” using other terms, such as “revisable” and “criticisable.” These are not at all the same thing as the retracting of the conclusion that is the earmark of defeasibility. Blair (2012) has recently made the case that “revisability” is not the same as “defeasibility”:

Are “defeasible” and “revisable” synonyms in this context? Could we equally use either term? No, for an argument that is defeasible might not be revisable. It might be not only defeasible, but in fact defeated devastatingly, and as a result be unsalvageable. So defeasibility does not imply revisability. And does an argument need to be revised only if in its original form it has been defeated: does revisability imply defeasibility? No again, for an argument can require and permit revision because one of its premises has been shown to need repair and repair is possible, but not because (or not only because) its conclusion has been upset. So revisability does not imply defeasibility. The two concepts are independent.

Likewise I think it can be argued that “defeasible” is not synonymous with “falsifiable.” The latter term has generally been associated with scientific theories, as a property proposed originally by Popper to demarcate between genuine and bogus scientific theory. But we do not generally think of arguments as being falsifiable.

If we are going to persist, we must keep the term “defeasibility” from being used equivocally—in a sense not compatible with the meaning assigned to it by Pollock.

C. The Defeasibility Frame as presented here invokes a victory-defeat model.

To develop this point, let me ask this question: What is gained by applying the metaphor (framework) of defeat to argumentation? This language applies most clearly to competitive settings where there is some mechanism or process for determining who wins and who loses, victory and defeat. To cite a clear case; the team that wins four games of the World Series in baseball is the winner. Thus, there are no debates about who won the World Series in 2012 when San Francisco swept the Detroit Tigers in four straight (though there are lots of debates about who should have won). Similarly, in chess, there is a clear-cut process for determining who wins the game.

There are no comparable mechanisms in the realm of argumentation. A puts forth an argument and B responds by lodging an objection which he claims is a defeater: does B therefore win? Not unless A concedes.

It seems to me unfortunate to adopt a model that construes argumentation in terms of victory and defeat. I would propose instead a co-operative model (such as was implicit in my treatment of a theory of criticism in my 2000, pp. 217-248; see also Patterson, 2011). In this approach, the purpose of argumentation would be to arrive at the best outcome; and we agree that the way to achieve this is through the giving and processing and criticizing and evaluation of reasons. There is room for opposition here: for lodging objections and criticisms; and for them to be responded to. The traditional conceptual

apparatus of logic (objection and reply, rebuttal, counterargument, suitably developed) can help us accomplish all that we want to accomplish when it comes to criticism of argumentation.

5. CONCLUSION

I began my paper by looking at Pollock's account and suggesting that there were some loose ends that needed to be tightened and proposed amendments. I then argued that there were problems with the "NDV" clause; and the second condition, which originally was limited to the retraction of the conclusion. I then entered some reservations about the approach to argument criticism via The Defeasibility Frame arguing, first, that the notion of information needs to be clarified; second, that it had witnessed an unhealthy broadening in the secondary literature to include such notions as "revisability," which, I argued, are different from the idea of defeasibility; and, third, that The Defeasibility Frame promotes adversariality.

To conclude, I want to suggest that if one is concerned with the critical evaluation of argument, one can get by without the idea of defeasibility.¹⁷ The traditional language of argument criticism [objection, criticism, rebuttal, etc.], when suitably developed and enhanced along the lines suggested by informal logic, can meet our needs in terms of analyzing and evaluating everyday argumentation, without the problems that, I have tried to point out in this paper, attend the concept of defeasibility.

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