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Commentary on: Steven Patterson’s “Are arguments abstract objects”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In “Are arguments abstract objects”, Steven Patterson first motivates the issue of the nature of arguments with some comments on my “Is argument subject to the product/process ambiguity?” He then turns to presenting and criticizing Simard-Smith and Moldovan’s account of arguments found in their “Arguments as abstract objects”. In the last section he explores an analogy between works of music and arguments that motivates him to propose treating ‘argument’ as an open concept. In what follows I will very briefly address some minor issues with his criticisms, but then focus most of my attention on his analogy and his resulting proposal.

2. MINOR COMMENTS

Concerning my survey of the possibilities for arguments, Patterson writes: “Note, however, that the fundamental thing all three conceptions share... is the notion that arguments are sets of somethings.”(p. 3) Not so—I do not restrict my discussion to sets of somethings. For example, I do not merely consider the possibility that an argument is a set of sentence tokens, but also the possibility that it *is* the particular sentence tokens (or *is* the very speech acts or...). Sets are abstract objects and so assuming that the advocates of act-based or sentence-based theories of arguments really meant sets of such acts or sentences would be uncharitable.

Concerning my take on act-based accounts of arguments, he writes: “thinking of argument as the product of a process or act has the advantage of solving this problem rather handily—all and only those groupings that come into being as the result of an act of arguing could count as arguments. ... So it’s not as if process or act-based conceptions of argument have nothing going for them, as Goddu seems at times to suggest.”(p. 4) Firstly, it would only solve the problem if it were the case that arguments are the product of the process of arguing. But we have good reasons to think that is not the case. Secondly, we need to be clear about what an act-based theory of argument is. We could mean one that literally takes arguments to be in the ontological category of acts. But such theories cannot solve the classification problem—the problem of identifying the features that make something an argument—by appeal to the product/process distinction since the arguments are not produced by the acts of arguing, they literally *are* the acts of arguing. Note also

that the classification problem just re-emerges in a different form—once we have established that arguments are acts, we need to know what features an act has to have in order to be an argument.

Alternatively, we could mean that a theory is act-based if it appeals to acts to solve the classification problem. For example, one could hold that arguments are groups of propositions. Which groups of propositions are the arguments—the ones that come into existence in virtue of acts of arguing. These sorts of ‘act-based’ theories I do object to—for the simple reason that whatever ontological category arguments are in, they are not the products of an act of arguing. Note also that I do not eschew the potential benefit of appealing to some sort of activity to delineate arguments—I just deny that if we delineate arguments via appeal to some activity, the activity will be that of arguing. But if ‘argument creating’ were a particular kind of identifiable practice, then we could identify arguments as the products of that process (and nothing in my paper is directed against that possibility.) Note also, to carry Patterson’s analogy with music and art further, that some people do hold that what makes something a work of art is that it is produced by the right kind of creative process. (BBC) Nothing I have said rules out a similar sort of appeal in the case of arguments.

Finally, I have already had my crack at Simard-Smith and Moldovan’s paper (Goddu, 2012) and have never been a fan of appeal to ‘intentions’ in the definition of ‘argument’, (though a full scale argument against such definitions is a project for the future) so I will pass over Patterson’s arguments against their definition of argument. Instead I shall focus on Patterson’s more positive suggestions.

3. ANALOGY AND OPEN CONCEPT

Suppose we want to know what an argument is. One strategy would be to assume that arguments are in a single ontological category, determine that category, and then within that category distinguish the arguments from the non-arguments. For example, if we were to determine that arguments are sets of propositions, we would then need to distinguish those sets that were arguments from those that were not. Call this the Ontology First Strategy. Another strategy would be to try to determine necessary and sufficient conditions for something being an argument. In some cases the ontology of arguments would explicitly drop out. For example, x is an argument iff x is a set of propositions with properties A, B, C. But in other cases the ontology might not line up so neatly with the Ontology First Strategy. For example, x is an argument iff x is a reason/claim complex does not specify the ontological category of arguments. It could turn out that complexes of reasons and claims would be in a single ontological category, but it could also turn out that such complexes could have instances in different ontological categories. Either way, the ontology of arguments would be a consequence of the ontology of reasons, claims, and complexes of the two. Call this strategy the Necessary/Sufficient Conditions Strategy.

Another strategy, the one Patterson adopts in his paper, would be to argue that arguments are analogous to some other sort of entity, say, works of music, and appeal to the nature and properties of these analogous entities to reveal the nature

and properties of arguments. Call this the Analogy Strategy. Based on the analogy and the claim that treating ‘musical work’ as an open concept is more fruitful, Patterson recommends treating ‘argument’ as an open concept, roughly a concept that does not have necessary and sufficient conditions of application. One of the benefits of treating ‘argument’ as an open concept is, according to Patterson, that it avoids the classification problem. Roughly, treating ‘argument’ as an open concept involves identifying a sufficient number of paradigm cases and some proper similarity relations we can use to adjudicate new candidates. The new candidates that are properly similar to, i.e., continuous with, the paradigm cases are also arguments. But now further cases can be compared against the new larger group of arguments and it can turn out additional candidates will be properly similar to the new larger group even though they might have failed to be properly similar to the original group of paradigms. In such a fashion the group of things that fall under the concept of ‘argument’ can accrete new members in a way that seems to defy the production of necessary and sufficient conditions for being an argument. As Patterson puts it, the open concept approach avoids the classification problem “because the boundaries of an open concept are not fixed by firm criteria that need to be satisfied in advance.”(pp. 16-17).

Assume the analogy with musical works holds and assume that a consequence is that ‘argument’ is more fruitfully treated as an open concept rather than a closed concept. Does treating ‘argument’ as an open concept avoid the classification problem? Not really. At best it merely redefines what counts as successfully solving the problem. If you think there are necessary and sufficient conditions for something being an argument, then successfully solving the classification problem will involve giving those conditions. If on the other hand you think there are no such conditions, solving the problem may involve providing the paradigmatic cases, identifying the properties that make them paradigmatic, identifying the similarity relations that non-paradigmatic cases should have to count as arguments, etc. Both sides are trying to identify arguments and distinguish arguments from non-arguments—they just disagree about how crisply this can be done (and perhaps whether, in principle, the identifying the relevant criteria work can ever be finished). But either way they are still trying to distinguish arguments from non-arguments and give criteria by which this distinguishing can be done.

In fact a Necessary/Sufficient Conditions strategist might pretend ‘argument’ is an open concept as a stepping stone to discovering the necessary and sufficient conditions for being an argument. For example, a Necessary/Sufficient Conditions strategist can start by collecting a paradigmatic group of arguments, determine the properties shared by all the members of the paradigm, and then provide transitive similarity relations for judging new cases. Alternatively, the strategist can accept that the similarity relations are not transitive, but just grant that the resulting necessary and sufficient conditions will most likely be quite complicated and ultimately disjunctive in form. But either way, the Necessary/Sufficient Conditions strategist can explore the nature of arguments in a way consistent with those who believe that ‘argument’ is an open concept.

Assume the analogy with musical works holds. Is it a consequence that ‘argument’ is more fruitfully treated as an open concept? Not necessarily. As

Patterson points out, the open concept approach is contentious even within the field of music ontology, so it is far from clear that a successful analogy will support treating 'argument' as an open concept.

Does the analogy with musical works hold? While I certainly find the analogy suggestive and have myself pondered whether arguments can be fruitfully compared to plays or poems ontologically, I finish with some challenges to certain aspects of Patterson's proposed analogy.

Patterson writes: "It would be strange to think that in one context an object is a work of art, while in another context it fails to be so." (p. 14) But consider, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. If it is art, then we must be committed to porcelain urinals everywhere being art or if not, we must deny the experts who say that *Fountain* is one of the most influential works of art in the 20th century. (BBC) Similarly, in certain contexts four minutes, thirty-three seconds of silence is just that, but in others it is a performance of John Cage's *4'33"*. But if being a work of music or art is contextually dependent, while being an argument is not, then we should be wary of what sorts of ontological conclusions we can draw about arguments on the basis of works of music.

Patterson also claims that "both musical works and arguments are human creations." (p. 10) This may be true. My denial of arguments being the product of the act of arguing does not mean they are not the products of some human activity. But I have also left it open that arguments are not created, but rather discovered. Some think that logic proofs and math proofs are a type of argument, and it is fairly common to talk in terms of discovering proofs for certain claims rather than creating them. More generally, if arguments are 'reasons for a given claim', then it is perfectly reasonable to think of arguments as discovered rather than created. Since the claims are given, we do not create them. It is also perfectly reasonable to talk of discovering reasons for those claims rather than creating reasons for those claims. Once we have discovered what we take to be adequate reasons for a given claim, and have adequately expressed those reasons in support of the claim, we might create the awareness or knowledge of an argument that we were not aware of before, but it does not automatically follow that we created the argument. Even more generally, given that Patterson grants that arguments are at least partially abstract (p. 10), I wonder how one goes about creating an abstract object. But if arguments are discovered rather than created, while works of music are created, then once again there is a significant disanalogy that threatens the drawing of any ontological conclusions about arguments on the basis of works of music.

4. CONCLUSION

Are arguments relevantly analogous to works of music? Is 'argument' an open concept? I do not know, but these questions are certainly worth exploring. Even my doubts about the analogy are suggestive rather than conclusive. At the same time, as far as I can see, exploring these questions is perfectly consistent with continuing to carefully seek necessary and sufficient conditions for being an argument.

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