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Commentary on “The Use of Arguments a Fortiori in Decision making”

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1. Introduction

In this paper, Sandra Clemencia Valencia Martínez reviews classical and contemporary work on a fortiori arguments, or arguments based on ‘more or less,’ examining the conception, uses and how to evaluate a fortiori arguments. If you have heard of a short song, “Everything you can do I can do better, everything you can do I can do too,” the lyrics captures key elements of a fortiori argument. In the argument, two cases A and B are compared, A has attribute x, so B should/must have the same attribute x. How much light has she shed on this argument is the main focus of this commentary. In this commentary, I will briefly summarize Martínez’ paper, draw our attention to the strengths and then room for improvement.

2. Summary of the paper

In section 2 of her paper, Martínez draws on Rieke, Sillars and Peterson’s Argumentation and Critical Decision Making and emphasizes the use of a fortiori argument in two phases of decision-making process. It clarifies contexts in which a fortiori argument is used. In her understanding, decision-making or deliberation seems to be an important situation in which people use this argument type.

The third section of the paper draws on contemporary work by Marrud and Wiseman, and defines this argument type as a “comparative” argument, and lays out its structure. In Martínez’ words, it can be put in the MP-mp-conclusion structure as follows:

Major Premise (the comparative one): A is more/less than B, A has property x, (which include or exclude) B.
minor premise: A is / has property x
conclusion: a fortiori (with more reason) B is / has property (or not) x (Martínez, p. 5)

From a pragmatic view, different uses of this argument type are for (1) determining the degree of possession of a predicate by contrasting two or more subjects/things/events, (2) strengthening a position, (3) examining the plausibility of award of a characteristic or property, (4) ranking the best examples of a class or category, and (5) helping to resolve dispute between two values or alternatives.

The fourth section of this paper turns our attention to the work of Aristotle and examines the issue of predication, linking it with Aristotle’s categories of accident, property, genre and definition. Also, Martínez informs us of three different ways of presenting comparative
superiority of two options: addition, extension, and subtraction. Based on these two sections, the fifth section introduces five cases of *a fortiori* arguments:

- **Case 1:** whether John should give a diamond or a gold necklace as a present from to Mary
- **Case 2:** whether a company renews its machinery for improvement of production
- **Case 3:** whether a company reduces its employees to reduce the risk of bankruptcy
- **Case 4:** from which bank a person should get mortgage
- **Case 5:** what would constitute quality of a good husband

The final section six of the paper uses the same examples and tackles the issue of evaluation of these examples. With five sections, Martínez offers conception, different uses, classical roots, examples, analysis and evaluative framework of *a fortiori* argument type.

### 3. Strengths and room for improvement

One general strength of Martínez’ paper is its broad-ranging coverage of *a fortiori* argument type. Not only does it offer a conception and different uses of this argument type based on contemporary and classical literature, but covers other issues such as analysis and evaluation. With this paper she has started a good research program on this specific argument type.

Another strength of Martínez’ paper lies in sections three and four and, where Martínez offers a conception and different uses of a fortiori argument type based on contemporary literature and historicize it with classical literature of Aristotle’s *Topica* and *On Rhetoric*. Going back to the classical literature and ‘re-‘discovering the key elements of the argument type can sometimes lead to better understanding of the research topic. In her paper, she links the topic with Aristotle’s categories of accident, property, genre and definition, as well as three ways of showing superiority between two competing propositions/positions: addition, extension and subtraction. While there could be more ways of showing comparative superiority or inferiority, offering these three based on Aristotle’s work helps us see clear ways for comparison. Another strength is example *a fortiori* argument for analysis and evaluation. These examples collectively link historical and contemporary theoretical accounts of *a fortiori* arguments and actual practices of the argument-making.

Two general suggestions that I make for improving Martínez’ paper are substance and form of the paper. As regards the substance, two comments center on conception and classification of, as well as synthesis of different approaches to this argument type.

First, as I have sensed in my first exposure to the paper, and as it became clear during the discussion of this paper at the conference, Martínez must offer a clear map surrounding this argument type, with reference to *a priori* analogy argument and causal argument. As she presents in section two of the paper, a typical example includes some comparison between two cases, like the one between animals and humans in discussing respectful and considerate treatment of both. If rights of humans precede those of animal and if A (animals) have property x (right to respectful and considerate treatment), then it follows *a fortiori* that B (humans) (ought to) have the same property. Comparing two similar cases and drawing a conclusion are key features of *a priori* analogy, as several works by Trudy Govier have shown. In addition, case 4 of this paper suggests that a person should get a mortgage from a bank with lower interest rate. This example
seems to suggest a causal argument that compares relative consequential benefit because of different interest rates. I do not mean that these two examples undermine what she advances. However, the onus is on the author of the paper to make clear distinctions among these similar argument types because different argument type may well require different analytical and evaluative frameworks.

Another room for improvement in the substance of this paper lies in the synthesis of different approaches to this argument type. In short, I would like her to weave different literature/schools of thought together. If I make a list of people she draws on: Rieke and Sillars from speech communication and debate tradition, Marraud, Wiseman, and Macagno & Walton from contemporary argumentation studies, Aristotle or Quintilian from classical Greek and Latin traditions, Eemeren from Pragma-Dialectical school of argumentation. The broad-ranging literature she cites individually and collectively shows us the significance of the research topic. However, if Martínez treats one school of thought in one section of paper and moves on to another school in another section without clearly relating them together, the readers may be left to question how and in what respect these different ideas are weaved to make a whole story about a fortiori argument type. Rieke and Sillars, and Eemeren are key figures for showing a use of this argument type in deliberation and decision-making in section two of the paper. Eemeren is also important in evaluating biased and unbiased uses of this argument type with a theoretical construct of strategic maneuvering in section six of this paper. Using Pragma-Dialectical theory of argumentation for evaluation seems to imply that the author is committed to evaluate this argument type as a violation of their procedural rules or rhetorical contextual factors such as language or audience. However, turning our eyes to section three and four, she draws on Marraud, Wiseman, Macagno and Walton, and Aristotle in analyzing a fortiori argument as product. These two approaches toward evaluation are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but she could have constituted a better whole by synthesizing these different approaches.

Given Martínez’ educational affiliation with logic and philosophy of science, my suggestion to evaluation is to bring the logical tradition to the fore and to talk more about a fortiori argument type as a product of argument, and use Pragma-Dialectical theory as a heuristic tool to call our attention to certain contextual elements in actual cases. This may not satisfy Pragma Dialecticians, but what is more important to her project is to provide a better account of a fortiori argument types in terms of conception, analysis, different uses in different contexts, and biased and unbiased ways of using this argument type.

The final suggestion for improving this paper concerns the form of presenting Martínez’ ideas. Every time she presents five cases in section five of this paper, she uses a table to show relative merits of two or three competing options. For example, when she presents case 1, in which John decides which jewels he gives to Mary—a diamond or a gold necklace, she lists a table showing two options (a diamond and a gold necklace), and accompanying number with which she intends to show relative merits. However, I am left to wonder what these numbers are. What do they represent? How has the author come up with these numbers? If these numbers are ‘objective’ and ‘unbiased,’ what roles does evaluation of argumentation have? Providing more detailed explanation about these points will easily answer my questions, but the onus is on the author of the paper to develop her points much more in detail.

While I am a bit confused about some ways that Sandra Clemencia Valencia Martínez presents her ideas, she has done a really nice job to call this community’s attention to a fortiori argument type, paving a way to bridge logical, communicative, and dialectical approach to arguments. I would like her to pursue this route and fully develop her ideas, so that we can better
understand conception, analysis, evaluation, and different uses of this argument type.