The Context of an Argument

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Informal logicians appeal to ‘the context’ in a plethora of ways. (One might even hold that it is the appeal to context that, at least partly, distinguishes informal logic from its strictly symbolic cousin.) Consider some examples: According to Johnson and Blair (1994, 15), “Informal logic requires the assumption that there are contexts in which it is possible to discriminate between strong and weak arguments, that people can be wrongly persuaded by bad arguments” and can mistakenly fail to acknowledge the force of good arguments. Douglas Walton (1985, 271) writes, “In many contexts of argument, there may be nothing impermissible (fallacious, vicious) per se about an argument that goes in a circle.” According to Don Levi, (1995, 67) the failure of the enthymeme approach to arguments is “a failure on the part of logicians to appreciate the importance of the rhetorical context of an argument.” Dale Jacquette (1992, 377) maintains that the analysis of contradiction “requires the concept of what I shall call univocal argument contexts.” Concerning relevance, Christopher Tindale (1994, 76) writes, “In the argumentative context that interests us, we require that one proposition is relevant to another if it strengthens or weakens that other proposition.” Further examples abound.

Despite the ubiquitous appeal to context, explication of what argument contexts are is, in most cases, either non-existent, minimal, or uninformative. Why so little explication? I can think of at least three possible answers.

(i) What argument contexts are is just patently obvious.
(ii) Explicating argument contexts is a messy and difficult task (and often tangential to the author’s primary purpose).
(iii) Little of general import can be said about argument contexts.

Whatever argument contexts are, they are far from obvious. Admittedly, I suspect we all have a rough intuitive notion of what the context of an argument might be. But I further suspect that we do not all share the same notion of argument context. Jacquette (1992, 378), for example, understands ‘context’ as ‘the concept of the problem being addressed’; others probably intend something like ‘the local situation in which the argument is made’; others ‘the background assumptions of the arguer and audience.’ In addition, even if we did share a rough notion, without further explication, it remains unclear whether, or to what degree, the notion can play the many theoretical roles that informal logicians demand of it.

Explicating contexts will be a messy and difficult task, but this alone is not reason to shirk one’s theoretical responsibilities, especially if the appeal to context plays a significant role in one’s argument or theory. I, for example, have committed myself theoretically to the notion of context even more explicitly than those I quoted above, for ‘context’ is part of my definition of sufficient support, viz.
The premises *sufficiently support* the conclusion in a context, T, iff the strength by which the premises support the conclusion in T is at least as great as the strength required in T.2

Whereas in some cases appeal to context may be tangential to the author’s particular project, I certainly have an obligation to explicate what exactly argument contexts are, since sufficient support is a fundamental part of my theory of argument evaluation.

Finally, whether much can be said in general about contexts is an interesting, significant, and *open* question. I am optimistic about articulating a general theory of argument contexts, but also recognize the distinct possibility that contexts vary so widely from argument to argument that a general theory may not be possible. At least beginning the exploration into the possibility of a general theory of argument contexts is the prime purpose of this paper.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall, firstly, articulate and discuss a constraint on any adequate theory of argument contexts and, secondly, present and evaluate four possible general articulations of what argument contexts are, viz. (i) the particular situation in which the argument is made, (ii) some subset of the beliefs/assumptions of the arguer and the audience, (iii) the contexts of critical thinking as articulated by Charles Blatz and (iv) the settings of arguments as articulated by Terence Parsons. I shall argue that each of the four general articulations are either problematically incomplete or fail to satisfy the constraint. Hence, more work is required to produce an adequate general theory of argument contexts.

I

So what is the context of an argument? For the purposes of answering the question I define ‘argument’ as follows:

An *argument* is a set of statements, one of which is designated the conclusion.

In addition, to simplify further, I shall assume that all the statements in the set other than the conclusion are premises, though given my definition they need not be. The definition and the assumption result in a standard minimalist account of argument--arguments are sets of statements comprised of premises and a conclusion. If it turns out that arguments include features over and above this minimal core, then the context of an argument might be something over and above what I explore here. Regardless, if the premise/conclusion set is the minimal core of any argument, then the context of the minimal core will be part of the context of any more richly structured argument. Hence, exploring the contexts of premise/conclusion sets will be worthwhile even if you think arguments are something more than just premise/conclusion sets.

So arguments are sets of statements, one of which is the conclusion, but what are the contexts of such things? Let me begin by articulating what I take as a minimal constraint on contexts. Assuming you suspect there is at least one argument lurking in this paper, you may have two fundamental questions-- “what exactly is his argument?” and “is it any good?” You may have even more questions, but I take it that these two questions are in some sense basic or fundamental to the analysis of any piece of argumentation. As such, these two primary questions can be used to form the basis of the following constraint on argument contexts:

The Constraint: *For a given argument, the context of the argument is those facts relevant to the determination of (i) the identity of the argument and (ii) the goodness or non-goodness of the argument.*
Before turning to more specific attempts to articulate and explicate the notion of argument context, I shall spell out The Constraint in more detail.

The first part of The Constraint requires capturing those facts relevant to the identity of the argument, i.e. those facts relevant to determining what exactly the premise/conclusion set in question is. Arguments, as I understand them, are expressed by a variety of sources. Most straightforwardly we have written or spoken texts that express arguments. I have no objection to saying that pictures, musical pieces, or even sculptures might express arguments. At the same time, given my definition, pictures or musical pieces or sculptures will not themselves be arguments. In addition, while many texts that express arguments are themselves arguments, plenty are not, for any text with an implied conclusion is not itself an argument. For example, consider the following paragraph from Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*:

S1 Surely whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses. However, I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once. (Descartes 1993, 14)

Given Descartes' already stated goal of casting all his former opinions into doubt by attacking the principles upon which those opinions are founded, the following argument, A, can be extracted from the text:

A. (1) The senses are sometimes deceptive.
(2) We should not place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once.
(3) We should not place our complete trust in the senses.
(4) Whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses.
(5) All I had admitted until now as most true should not be completely trusted.

While versions of (1), (2), and (4) are in Descartes' text, (3) and (5), both of which are conclusions, are not, and so strictly speaking Descartes' passage is not itself an argument, though it, in this case expresses two arguments.

Different sources can express the same argument. For example,

S2: All Athenians are mortal, so Socrates is mortal and S3: Socrates is Athenian, so Socrates is mortal,
can both reasonably be taken to express the same argument, viz.

B. (1) All Athenians are mortal.
(2) Socrates is Athenian.
(3) Socrates is mortal.

This example also shows that a single source can, and often does, express more than one argument. Since arguments are just sets of sentences, one of which is designated the conclusion, S2 expresses not only argument B but also the following argument:
C. (1) All Athenians are mortal.
   (2) Socrates is mortal.

Similarly, S3, in addition to argument B, also expresses:

D. (1) Socrates is Athenian.
    (2) Socrates is mortal.

More generally any source that has an explicitly designated conclusion, but leaves at least one premise implicit, will express at least two arguments. In this case, one of the arguments expressed will be a subset of the other argument expressed.

A single source can also express two arguments where neither is a subset of the other. For example, consider the following source:

S4: That movie was a bomb, so we shouldn’t show it again.

S4 expresses quite different arguments in England versus the United States, since in England calling a movie a bomb is to say is was very good, whereas in the United States saying something was bomb is to say it was awful. Similarly,

S5: There are too many cars on the road in this city, so drivers need incentives to utilize mass transit,

expresses a different argument in London, which has recently implemented the equivalent of an eight dollar toll for driving into the city, versus, say, Wichita, Kansas. More generally any source with expressions with multiple meanings or with explicit or implicit indexical elements is capable of expressing more than one argument where neither argument is a subset of the other.

Context then influences what argument is expressed by a given source. The first part of The Constraint, i.e. those facts relevant to argument identity, is those facts relevant to determining what argument is expressed by a given source. As the above examples show, some of those facts will be facts relevant to interpreting what is explicit in the source, for example, facts about language and language use. In addition, some of those facts will be facts relevant to generating material that is part of the argument expressed, but not explicit in the source. There may be other sorts of facts relevant to determining what argument is expressed by a given source, but I shall continue to focus on these two types--call them *explicit interpretation* facts and *implicit addition* facts.

Clearly, extensive work has already been done on these sorts of facts under the guise of discussions of interpreting explicitly given sources and discussions of enthymemes. Hence, a detailed discussion of explicit interpretation and implicit addition facts would need to take account of these discussions and so is beyond the scope of this paper. I shall, however, end my discussion of the first part of The Constraint with a few additional, and I hope suggestive, comments.

Firstly, as already pointed out, a given source might express more than one argument. Hence, while explicit interpretation facts and implicit addition facts may be relevant to the generation of these several arguments, these facts alone may not be sufficient to indicate which one or ones of the several arguments are the most significant or important or the one intended by
the arguer. Hence, facts that at least eliminate some candidates may also be relevant to determining the identity of a given argument. At the same time, I am inclined to downplay the significance of such facts on the following grounds. If a source does indeed express multiple arguments, even if it is clear which one the author intends, it may still be the case that one of the other arguments is in fact better for achieving the author’s ends. In other words, once we have the set of possible candidate arguments we can evaluate them all and decide which one or ones are best and whether these best ones are good enough.

Secondly, I suspect that implicit addition facts, at least with regards to implicit premises, are less significant than explicit interpretation facts. I suspect this because I suspect that a particular hypothesis concerning the relation between the strength of the premise/conclusion link and context is true. Let S be the source, C the context, and A and A’ be arguments expressed by S in C. Further let A’, but not A, have at least one premise that has no correlate in S. In addition, let A be a subset of A’. Put another way, A is the argument S explicitly expresses, whereas A’ is A with at least one additional premise. Here then is my hypothesis—the support the premises of A give to its conclusion in C will not differ from the support that the premises of A’ give to its conclusion in C. My primary reason for holding the hypothesis is that either C already contains the extra premises in A’ or C is the grounds for the extra premises in A’. Either way, I suspect that any extra support the additional premises in A’ might seem to provide will already be accounted for, if we take the ‘in C’ seriously. In fact, the ‘in C’ is important to the hypothesis, for without it the hypothesis is clearly false.

If the hypothesis is true, then the difference between A and A’ becomes much less significant. (In fact, if the hypothesis is true, then adding extra premises is more likely to make things worse, rather than better, since each additional premise is another potential wedge for an objector—see also Hitchcock, 1998.) Regardless, the project of assessing the viability of my hypothesis is a project for another day. I turn now to a brief discussion of the second part of The Constraint—viz. those facts relevant to determining the goodness and non-goodness of the argument.

Typically, especially if you define arguments as I have, there are at least two questions relevant to determining the goodness of an argument—Are the premises adequate? and Do the premises sufficiently support the conclusion? Concerning the first question, there is significant debate about what premise adequacy amounts to. For example, possible candidates include truth, necessary truth, known truth, acceptability, rational acceptability, etc. For some of these adequacy conditions, such as being known to be true, or being acceptable or being rationally acceptable, whether the condition is met or not varies from context to context. For others, such as truth and necessary truth, it apparently does not. Hence, whether context plays a role in determining premise adequacy will vary from theorist to theorist.

I do not wish to get embroiled in the premise adequacy debate here, but to simplify matters, I shall focus on one particular kind of argument goodness, viz. cogency, which I define as follows:

An argument is cogent in a context T iff the premises are true and the premises sufficiently support the conclusion in T.

Having true premises, I shall maintain, though not defend here, is not a context dependent feature. Once it is clear what statements are being expressed by a particular source, those statements are either true or not true.
By focusing on cogency, I also sidestep another possible influence that context might have on premise adequacy. One reason for the variety of premise adequacy conditions might just be that which premise-adequacy condition applies may itself depend upon the context in which the argument is made. For example, it seems quite plausible that when a mathematician attempts to prove a mathematical theorem to his or her colleagues, necessarily true premises are required; whereas when the mathematician attempts to demonstrate to his or her daughter that taking up smoking would be a bad idea, such premises are not required. Regardless, in this paper I shall focus on the role of context in determining argument cogency, at least as I understand cogency.

Concerning the question of sufficient support, i.e. whether the actual support is at least as great as the required support, I have argued elsewhere in more detail that both determining the actual strength by which premises support their conclusion and the strength required are context dependent. (See Goddu 2003a, 2003b.) For example, one can plausibly argue that all emeralds examined up until now are green provides a conclusion such as all emeralds are green one degree of strength against a backdrop in which it is assumed that the laws of physics are invariable and a different degree of strength against a backdrop in which it is not, in which case actual strength is context dependent. The required strength is also context dependent since the importance of accepting or acting upon various claims varies from context to context. For example, since the punishments of criminal offenses are often harsher than those of civil offenses, we require the evidence to provide more support in criminal cases than in civil cases. More generally, as Robert Pinto (1994, 120) puts it, sufficiency is relative to “the practical purposes which motivate our interest in [the] truth of the conclusion, to what we lose if we’re wrong and what we gain if we’re right.”(See also Govier, 1987.)

In both cases, significantly more needs to be said about the sorts of facts that are relevant to determining actual strength and required strength. Unlike the role of context with regard to argument interpretation, little literature currently exists concerning the role of context in determining levels of actual and required support. Regardless, even identifying that the relevant sorts of facts are those pertaining to determining actual and required support is sufficient for my current purposes.

To summarize: Argument contexts are those facts relevant to determining the identity of an argument and the goodness or non-goodness of the argument, i.e. facts relevant to answering the following questions:

(i) What argument(s) does a given source explicitly express?
(ii) Are there parts of the argument implicit in the source?
(iii) If a source expresses more than one argument, which is the relevant one or ones?
(iv) Which standard of premise adequacy is in play?
(v) Do the premises meet the relevant premise adequacy standard?
(vi) Do the premises sufficiently support the conclusion?

By limiting myself to one particular goodness property, viz. cogency, I sidestep questions (iv) and (v). I have also expressed reasons to limit the significance of questions (ii) and (iii). Hence, for my purposes, The Constraint is to be understood primarily in terms of questions (i) and (vi). In other words, contexts of arguments are, minimally, those facts relevant to answering questions (i) and (vi). Any general theory of context that fails to capture sufficient facts for answering these questions is an inadequate theory. I turn to examining some prospect theories now.
II

The Constraint itself can be viewed as an attempt to say something about the general nature of argument contexts. Unfortunately, The Constraint is not very informative, since we clearly need to know what facts are relevant to an argument’s identity and correct evaluation. The question then becomes whether there is a more informative way of identifying, as a class, those facts relevant to the argument’s identity and correct evaluation. For example, one could hold that the context is the set of facts held in common by both the arguer and the audience. Whether this general articulation of context suffices depends on whether the set of facts that is held in common by both arguer and audience captures all the facts relevant to determining the identity of the argument and evaluating it. In the remainder of this section I shall present and discuss four attempts to provide a general articulation of argument contexts.

Consider first a fairly intuitively plausible answer:

The context of an argument is just the particular situation in which the argument is made.

The context of my current arguments then would be the particular situation in which they are made, namely at the University of Windsor on a particular day at a particular time to a certain number of people comprised primarily of academic philosophers, speech communication theorists, rhetoricians, etc. Unfortunately, the plausible initial answer is unilluminating and at best incomplete.

Suppose the particular situation in which an argument is made satisfies The Constraint, i.e. no facts relevant to the identity or cogency of the argument are not in the particular situation. Unfortunately, the particular situation view is no more helpful than The Constraint, for clearly not all parts of the particular situation in which an argument is made have a bearing on the argument. For example, the fact that I made my particular arguments today, or at the University of Windsor, or in this room, are, I take it, irrelevant to either the identity of my arguments or the correct evaluation of them. Indeed, so many aspects of the particular situation in which an argument is made are irrelevant that just appealing to the particular situation is hardly illuminating. So what parts of the situation are relevant? Those parts that determine argument identity and correct evaluation. But then, just saying that the context is the situation in which the argument is made is, ultimately, no more informative than The Constraint.

Of course, if some facts relevant to determining an argument’s identity and cogency are not in the particular situation, then the view is mistaken. Whether this is so is unclear, since what the particular situation in which an argument is made amounts to is also unclear. The current situation in which I am making my arguments might be relatively straightforward, but what about my arguments as read from the proceedings of this conference, say ten years from now? What if I say something today that clarifies exactly what one of my arguments is and one of you writes this clarifying remark down. Ten years from now is my comment or the written note of it part of the situation in which my argument is made? Just how extensive is the particular situation in which an argument is made? Clearly this last sort of concern is quite general. What exactly, for example, is the particular situation in which one of Plato’s arguments, as read today, is made? (See Turner, 2001.) Without being able to answer these questions, just saying that the context of a given argument is the particular situation in which the argument is made is significantly incomplete.
Part of the situation in which an argument is made is that the argument is made by an arguer with certain beliefs and assumptions to an audience with its own beliefs and assumptions. This suggests another initially plausible suggestion for argument contexts, viz. 

*The context of an argument is some subset of the arguer’s and audience’s beliefs/assumptions.*

More specific versions of this view can be obtained by specifying more precisely what subset is the context. For example, someone might hold that the beliefs/assumptions that the arguer and the audience hold in common constitutes the context, while someone else might hold that the union of all the beliefs/assumptions of the arguer and audience constitutes the context.

The latter possibility is interesting since it is the most permissive possibility. If it, being the most permissive, fails to satisfy The Constraint, then no version of the view will satisfy The Constraint. Indeed, the most permissive version does not satisfy The Constraint. Firstly, it is possible for both the audience and arguer to be mistaken about what argument is expressed by a given source. For example, both arguer and audience might be mistaken about the actual meaning of certain terms in the source and so take the source to express an argument other than the one it in fact expresses. In this case there will be facts relevant to the identity of the argument not in the set comprised of the arguer’s and audience’s beliefs/assumptions.4 Secondly, it is also possible for the arguer and audience to be mistaken about the facts relevant to both the actual strength by which the premises support the conclusion and the required strength. For example, consider a group of scientists who present their work to other members of their department and suppose that the evidence they have supports a particular hypothesis to ten decimal places. But also suppose that unbeknownst to the arguers or audience, recent theoretical work has shown that incompatible explanations of the hypothesis in question can match up to eleven decimal places. Hence, some facts relevant to determining cogency are not in the set comprised of the arguer’s and audience’s beliefs/assumptions.

The general problem with the most permissive possibility is that the arguer and audience might have mistaken beliefs about truly relevant facts. Merely restricting the set of beliefs to the union of all the arguer’s and audience’s true beliefs will not solve the problem, for, assuming that the arguer and audience have consistent sets of beliefs, the truly relevant facts are not believed and so not in the set. Hence, the most permissive possibility does not satisfy The Constraint and so the view is inadequate for all possible versions. (This is not to say that the arguer’s and audience’s beliefs and assumptions are not at all relevant to argument identity and evaluation, since clearly we often resort to these facts in determining argument identity and certain evaluative properties such as convincingness, etc.)

The set of arguer’s and audience’s beliefs may be too narrow, but certainly some facts about the arguer and audience are relevant to argument identity and evaluation. The question is--what are those facts? Charles V. Blatz (1989, 108), suggests that the contexts in which critical thinkings take place “are located in what I call communities of discussion.” According to Blatz (1989, 109), “It is in virtue of the commonality of purposes, the shared guidelines, and the accountability for following the latter in pursuit of the former that it is justifiable to speak of such individuals as constituting a community of discussion with respect to some set of issues or problems.” Blatz’s examples include the communities of scientists, ethicists, theologians, and legislators.
According to Blatz, contexts are located in communities of discussion, but whereas Blatz explicates ‘communities of discussion’, he fails to specify where in these communities contexts are located. Just identifying contexts with communities of discussion is inappropriate, since contexts are comprised of facts whereas communities are comprised of individuals. But what makes a group of individuals a community of discussion can be articulated as a set of facts and perhaps this set is the context of critical thinking Blatz advocates. Put another way, all the factors that make a particular group of individuals a community of discussion, viz the “set of shared purposes, aims, or uses of reasons” and the “shared set of basic assumptions and procedures of reason” (Blatz 1989, 109) also constitute the context of any arguments made within that community of discussion. Given this interpretation of Blatz, the present proposal is the following:

_The context of an argument is the set of facts that identify and specify the community of discussion in which the argument is made._

So, for example, mathematicians, roughly speaking, aim at generating new mathematical proofs from those mathematical truths already established via necessary-truth preserving methods. Blatz (1989, 109) acknowledges that the community need not share “similar detailed understandings of the communities shared enterprise, guidelines, and procedures of accountability.” Hence, given the scientific evidence guiding principle that adequate evidence must provide sufficient accuracy to discriminate between competing hypotheses, a group of scientists might believe they have adequate evidence when in fact they do not. It is the norms of the community to which they belong, not their particular beliefs about what the norms are or whether those norms have been satisfied that will be relevant for determining cogency. Hence, Blatz’s view, at least as I interpret it, avoids the problem of the previous candidate.

Regardless, Blatz’ view has its own shortcomings. At the very least the view is incomplete, since the degree to which individuals must share guidelines and reasoning practices in order to be a community of discussion requires significantly more clarification. For example, different groups of scientists may disagree significantly on acceptable standards and evidence gathering techniques, even if they agree in very broad detail about general scientific method. To what degree are these various groups of scientists a single community of discussion or distinct communities of discussion? More significantly, can the previous question be answered without violating The Constraint?

Suppose, in accordance with Blatz’ examples, we identify communities of discussion very broadly, i.e in terms of scientists, ethicists, etc. But then, as long as competing groups of scientists are adhering to the general scientific guidelines, there is no way to adjudicate between their competing applications of the principles in particular cases. For example, they may disagree about what the required strength of support needs to be. But then merely identifying the community of discussion in broad terms will fail to capture all the facts relevant to what the required support needs to be in particular cases. On the other hand, if we identify the communities too narrowly, then the various groups of scientists will not be arguing with each other at all—they will only be able to argue within their community of discussion. In fact, Blatz (1989, 111-112) admits that questions and arguments about what guidelines a particular community should adopt are external to a community of discussion. But if such arguments are external to communities of discussion, then his theory will not be a satisfactory general theory of the contexts of arguments.
In addition, one might question the degree to which Blatz’ proposal has application outside fairly straightforward institutional settings. For example, mathematics and formal logic have, for the most part, clear and definitive guidelines. Philosophy, scientific and medical research, and legal settings still have fairly clear and articulated guidelines, though already significantly more room for debate over the guidelines and practices exists. But what about arguing in an everyday setting? What is the community of discussion in those cases?

Finally, facts about linguistic practices are required to be part of the context in order to determine what argument a given source expresses. But to what degree is shared linguistic practice a part of identifying ‘communities of discussion’ as Blatz understands them? English has become the standard language of scientists, but this is for ease of communication rather than necessity. Scientists could present their arguments in different languages and still be considered part of the same community of discussion. But then identifying contexts with the factors that identify communities of discussion will leave some relevant facts behind. Hence, Blatz’ contexts of critical thinking, i.e. communities of discussion, while clearly significant, are not universally adequate as contexts of arguments. I turn now to the final candidate I will consider here, viz. Terence Parsons’ ‘settings’.

According to Terence Parsons (1996, 167), settings include at least “[a] set of statements that are taken for granted: the set of assumptions. [and a] set of inference rules that are taken as acceptable for purposes of reasoning.” If we interpret Parsons’ settings as argument contexts, then Parsons’ proposal is close kin to Blatz’. What assumptions are allowed and what reasoning procedures are allowed are part of what defines a community of discussion for Blatz.

Admittedly, interpreting Parsons’ settings as contexts is to take liberties with Parsons’ text. For example, Parsons distinguishes source arguments from refined arguments and holds that refined arguments are the results of interpreting source arguments. Parsons’ refined arguments include settings, targets, and reasoning structures (Parsons 1996, 167). So, for Parsons this means that settings are (i) part of the argument and (ii) the result of interpreting a source argument. From my perspective both of these results are problematic, if we wish to interpret Parsons’ settings as contexts. The first is problematic because if settings are part of the argument then there are no context dependent features of arguments, since arguments will not survive moving from one setting to another. In other words, there is no saying that argument A has property P in one setting but not another, since there is no such thing as argument A in two distinct settings—if the settings are distinct, so are the arguments. The second result is problematic, since one of the prime roles of contexts is to be that against which sources express particular arguments. In other words, for contexts to contain all the facts relevant to argument identity, contexts must be prior to source interpretation and not post interpretation.

The first issue can be avoided if we focus on reasoning structures (which are close kin to my arguments, though Parsons (1996, 169) takes them to be similar in structure to a derivation in logic). Reasoning structures can be compared in different settings and in fact this is exactly what Parsons does. Indeed, much of Parsons’ discussion of successful and unsuccessful arguments can be interpreted in terms of successful and unsuccessful reasoning structures. The second issue, however, can only be avoided at the cost of restricting Parsons’ view to an attempt to articulate the facts relevant to argument evaluation. This, I think is consistent with Parsons’ own focus on argument evaluation.

With these caveats aside, an adapted Parsonian view can be encapsulated as follows:
The context of an argument, at least that part concerning argument evaluation, is a set of background assumptions and rules of inference.

Clearly, more information is required about both the set of background assumptions and the rules of inference. Firstly, whose assumptions are in the set of assumptions? Parsons’ examples seem to indicate the arguer’s assumptions. For example, Parsons (1996, 167) writes: “Moore’s assumption [there is a hand in front of his face] is part of the setting within which his arguing takes place. Descartes cannot argue as Moore does, because his assumptions are different.” But if it is the arguer’s assumptions, then it seems that the actual strength will not be what it should be. For example, if we allow Moore’s assumption, then we, speaking in terms of possible worlds, restrict the domain of relevant worlds to those in which there is a hand in front of Moore’s face in which case the strength that “Hands are material objects” provides to “Material objects exist” is 100%. But the skeptic might fairly rebut that the actual strength that “Hands are material objects” provides to “Material objects exist” is less than 100% because given that Moore is trying to refute skepticism concerning material objects, it is illegitimate to assume that there is a hand in front of his face. But the skeptics' rebuttal concerning the actual strength will only be legitimate if the set of assumptions includes more than just the arguer’s assumptions. Hence, in order to satisfy The Constraint, settings must contain more than Parsons indicates.

Secondly, are there any constraints on allowable sets of inference rules? Concerning inference rules, Parsons (1996, 184-185) writes: “The principles of inference assumed should be principles such that, if you know certain propositions and an inference rule leads from them to another proposition, then reflection on this fact should enable you to know that other proposition too.” But if the inference rules preserve knowledge, then assuming that knowledge is at least justified true belief, they preserve truth, and so any support weaker than validity will be insufficient. Assuming some arguments are properly evaluated by standards less than validity, Parsons’ settings will not be generally applicable.

But Parsons (1996, 174, n.11) also mentions that his view can allow for the context sensitivity of principles of inference such as statistical syllogism. Statistical syllogisms are not, however, validity preserving, so what, if any, constraints there are on allowable sets of rules remains unclear. In fact, what seems eminently plausible is that what rules of inference are acceptable or not acceptable is itself a context dependent matter. Whether using disjunctive syllogism is legitimate or not may well depend on the very nature of the possibilities being considered. If what counts as a possibility is a complete possible world, then disjunctive syllogism is legitimate; but if the possibilities are more akin to the situations of relevance logic, which are not complete, disjunctive syllogism will not be legitimate. (See Beall and Restall 2000.) But if which inference rules are legitimate is context dependent, then the inference rules themselves cannot be the context. And as argued above, what Parsons takes to be the set of assumptions is inadequate for providing all the facts relevant to actual strength. Hence, regardless of whether Parsons’ settings adequately perform Parsons' desired role, they cannot be co-opted to be the contexts of arguments.

Conclusion

What then are the prospects for a general theory of argument contexts? Based on my criticisms of the four proposals just considered, many might say, “Not good.” I think such a
response is premature. What the shortcomings of the various proposals do, I think, is show that a
general theory of argument contexts is unlikely to be a simple theory articulable via a single
sentence. At the very least we may need to separate the context into two parts, i.e. the
identifying facts part and the sufficient support part and work on producing theories of each part
separately, and then conjoining the results. In addition, I have been considering a minimalist
account of argument and a quite minimal account of contextual influence. If either of these
aspects gets expanded, then the complexity of articulating the nature of contexts will increase.
So I reiterate that it is unlikely that what contexts are is going to be informatively captured in just
a few sentences--the context is doing too many diverse tasks for this. But this in itself is not yet
sufficient reason to think a general account is impossible. Either a general account will be
forthcoming or an argument as to why it will not be is required. Either way, more work on the
nature of argument contexts is required.

Notes

1For example, Michael Gilbert writes that in symbolic logic, “the details of context, language,
nuance, purpose, intention, ideology, person, emotion, location, intuition, and truth are stripped
away so that a universal structure can be exposed.” (Gilbert 1995, 130.) For the record, I am not
convinced that symbolic systems eschew all non-structural matters, but the reasons why are
beyond both the scope of this note and this paper.

2I have used this definition as part of my arguments against (i) the need for a distinction between
inductive and deductive arguments (Goddu, 2002) and (ii) Pargetter’s and Bigelow’s argument
that so-called inductive arguments are really enthymematic valid arguments of a very particular
kind (Goddu, 2003b).

3If one is worried about why one might use S4 in England with the British interpretation of
‘bomb’, consider someone who is trying to show an example of a bad movie--he or she may have
heard from a friend that a particular movie is a good example and so shows it, but realizes after
viewing it that it really isn’t a bad movie at all.

4Suppose the set also contains the correct belief that the arguer and audience are speaking, say,
English. Will this belief being in the set be enough to generate the correct argument identity?
No, for the correct identity does not follow from the mere fact that the language in use is English,
but rather from the facts that (i) the language in use is English and (ii) in English the meaning of
term x is ________. But if the arguer and audience have mistaken beliefs about the meaning of
term x, then (ii) is not in the set of beliefs held by the arguer and audience. (Assuming neither
arguer nor audience has inconsistent beliefs.)
5Surely some aspects of linguistic practice help define certain communities—consider, for example, the definitions of key terms in a discipline.

6Similar arguments will show that the arguer’s assumptions are inadequate for generating the required strength as well.

7Of course, the possibility exists that the best we will be able to do is to attempt a list of the sorts of things the context contains. For example, consider, “The context contains all sorts of assumptions, presumptions, background beliefs, facts relevant to interpreting what is meant, rules of conduct, etc.” from Fisher 2001, 50. Note that even Fisher's list is open-ended.

References


