Commentary on Pinto

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Let me say first off that I found Professor Robert Pinto’s paper interesting, informative, and overall mostly both plausible and persuasive. It seems to me that it is of special interest--and challenge--to explore argumentation in the broad and general terms that will encompass both reaching conclusions held to be true, or justified by their premises, and aiming at an outcome that would issue in action--Aristotelian practical syllogisms and their several relatives. Some of the few--queries or objections I have for Professor Pinto’s project and its execution stem from uncertainties whether the architectonic Bob develops--or possibly any similar one--can very readily be adequate for or applicable to both of these kinds of argumentation. But I do mean that these are uncertainties--queries, questions, possible problems--and not clear or definite repudiations or refutations.

Perhaps because my deepest philosophical home is in metaphysics, I will begin my remarks with attention to the ontological picture that appears posed in Bob’s paper. An argument or body of argumentation may be viewed as a certain abstract object–either a set of propositions, or a set of sentence types, that have a relevantly argumentative structure–even if proposals to reduce or eliminate the abstract in favour of something concrete might be goals, or commitments, that might be pursued or avowed.

If attention is really on the argument, qua argument, then–it would seem–there might be merely verbal or rhetorical or other kinds of embellishments or encrustations that would in principle be separable from that argument. The argument, as abstract object, will be something able to be, and be presented, in any of indefinitely many distinct languages, natural, formal, or artificial, and independently of encrustations of any kind.

If we have this picture, then we will want to be careful to differentiate effects that the presentation of an argument might have, persuasive or non-persuasive, that really are effects of the presentation of the argument and effects that might be due to what I have been calling encrustations–to differentiate, we might say, effects of the matter from effects of the manner.

Next I will note that Bob’s notion of effects seems to be meant to be limited to intended effects. If I am understanding Bob accurately he is not particularly interested in accidental causal consequences that presenting arguments might have, but rather, or at least chiefly, in the intent someone might have in presenting an argument, whether that intent was achieved, or successful, or not. Indeed, it would seem that we could probably substitute either the word ‘intent’ or the words ‘intended effect’ for the word ‘effect’ wherever the latter appears (by itself) in the paper.

Something else that Bob does not appear interested in in this paper are cases where arguments are presented but the presenter is not seeking to persuade his or her audience–where there is an audience–of anything. There are argument presentations of the latter type. One example is where someone has come upon, or come up with, an argument that is so complex, or rests on premises whose truth is so problematic, that the person cannot decide whether or not it is a good or persuasive argument, and presents it to an audience who is being invited to go over it...
with the presenter, or provide their assessments, to try to determine whether the argument should persuade. Bob’s focus is not on presentations of arguments of any such kind as that, but, rather, on presentations that are intended to persuade. Still, the fact that there are arguments of the kind described and uses to which they are put, will at least complicate if not refute, Bob’s claim, on p. 5, that “[t]he uses of argument—the purposes realizable by argument—are limited to what can actually be achieved by offering reasons for doing something” (Bob’s emphases). Sometimes, rather, we want (just) to inspect, to figure out, what an argument is. Let me add, though, on Bob’s behalf, that it might be said in the kind of case I am referring to, the presenter has been misidentified in the description I have given. If I have dug an argument out of—say—an arcane philosophical text, and brought it—my construal—forward for our consideration, it is not me but the text’s author who is the real or primary presenter. Maybe, though I may have done quite a lot of doctoring, rational reconstructing, and anachronistic reconfiguring, in the construal I have produced. And, as well, someone can—philosophers do—come up with complicated arguments of whose soundness they feel quite uncertain, which they want to inspect, work through, then evaluate, on the presumption that they may be dealing with reasoning that is cogent, leading to a result that would be substantive and important, if it were successful.

I proceed to Bob’s Example #1. This appears to represent the case where evidence is presented for something which succeeds in inducing audience indecision. There had been a contrary body of evidence which had persuaded the audience to a contrary conclusion. Now, the newly presented evidence is insufficient to dislodge the old persuasive situation. Instead, it induces fence-sitting. No doubt this sort of thing happens. The argument offered then doesn’t persuade the audience of its conclusion. It is too weak to do that (or is so perceived); but it is strong enough to dislodge previous conviction (or resolve). So, as Bob explains what he means by non-persuasive effects, this is a case of one. Fair enough; but we will note nonetheless that this is still a case of being persuaded of something, by the argument and its presentation. Comparable things happen in the other two examples. That is, in all three the presentation of the argument has persuasive effect, rationally, of a conclusion, even if it is not the intended conclusion, via the intended means.

For the latter reason, it is not clear to me that Bob is reaching results that we ought to regard as surprising. The non-persuasive effects are rational consequences of the principles and considerations that have been brought forward in the argumentation, even if they aren’t adoptions of the outcomes the argumentation itself recommends. The situation seems comparable to learning that having a common cause is a kind of causal connection between events or states, even where neither of the items is cause or effect of the other. We might plausibly complain of being misled if someone told us that causality can hold between items where one neither produces nor is produced by the other, if it turned out that the common-cause relation was what they had in mind.

Some small further points. I don’t see that it lies within the power of the receiver of an argument either to understand or not the argument, its reasons and aims. If I get it, I may not have been able not to do so. It may be likewise, perhaps especially in very simple and straightforward cases, with accepting premises. Suppose someone wants to persuade me that since some things are in motion, then some things are in motion or at rest. I don’t know what power I have to resist accepting the one premise offered.

Indeed the picture intimated in this part of Bob’s account seems only to fit some, not all, argumentative situations; perhaps least well cases where the action intended to be produced by the argument is simply being persuaded of the truth of the argument’s conclusion (whether or not
one does anything further, having been persuaded). Where evidence offered is clear and (as we say) incontrovertible, it seems to miss the mark to think of its recipient as like a shopper pondering whether to buy, or not, an item presented for his or her predilection or pleasure.

A further query. I don’t quite see how a proposition could be accepted, but not assertable, at least within a single context. I would have thought that actual acceptance of a proposition—even if this does not imply believing it—should ipso facto make the proposition available for assertion, i.e., assertable, in the argumentative context in which acceptance has occurred. (It might not be permissible that it be asserted, for one reason or other; but it should still be possible that it be asserted.) Perhaps Bob would not disagree with this, and means only to affirm (as he rightly does) that a proposition accepted (and thereby assertable) in one context may not be (accepted and) assertable in some other.