

May 22nd, 9:00 AM - May 25th, 5:00 PM

Are conductive arguments really not possible?

J. Anthony Blair

University of Windsor, Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Blair, J. Anthony, "Are conductive arguments really not possible?" (2013). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 24.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA10/papersandcommentaries/24>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Are conductive arguments really not possible?

J. ANTHONY BLAIR

Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric
University of Windsor
Windsor, ON
Canada N9B 3P4
tblair@uwindsor.ca

ABSTRACT: In “Are conductive arguments possible?” Jonathan Adler argued that conductive arguments (those balancing considerations for a claim, C, against counter-considerations against C) are not possible because they are committed to two incompatible propositions: (I) C is reached without *nullifying* the counter-considerations; (II) C is *accepted* is true, which issues in *belief*, so C is *detached* from these premises. This paper offers an analysis and an assessment of Adler’s case for his thesis.

KEYWORDS: Jonathan Adler, argument, balance of considerations, conduction, counter-considerations, defeasibility, detachment

1. INTRODUCTION

In his meta-ethics monograph, *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics*, Carl Wellman identified a type of reasoning and argument that he argued is neither deductive nor inductive, which he called “conductive” and which he defined as follows:

Conduction can best be defined as that sort of reasoning in which 1) a conclusion about some individual case 2) is drawn non-conclusively 3) from one or more premises about the same case 4) without any appeal to other cases. (Wellman, 1971, p. 52)

Wellman distinguished three “patterns” of such reasoning. In the first the conclusion is drawn from a single reason (*ibid.*, p. 55), in the second the conclusion is drawn from several reasons (*ibid.*, p. 56), and in the third, the conclusion is drawn from both positive and negative considerations (*ibid.*, p. 57).

I here focus on the second property, non-conclusiveness, and on its presence in reasoning and arguments of the third pattern. That is, the present focus is limited to reasoning or arguments in which a conclusion is drawn non-conclusively from both positive and negative considerations.

Wellman’s notion of conduction came to the attention of argumentation scholars thanks to a critical review of *Challenge and Response* by Trudy Govier in the *Informal Logic Newsletter* (Vol. 2, No. 2) in 1979. In that review, in subsequent articles (Govier, 1987, 1999) and in her textbook (Govier, 2012), Govier held out conductive reasoning and argument as a distinctive and important type. In particular, she saw it as one counterexample (among others) to the position she identified as “positivism,” according to which all arguments are either deductive or inductive. In

Wellman's opinion, which Govier supported, there cannot be a formal logic for conductive arguments. As such, the notion of conductive argument was seen as a point in favor of the emerging *informal* logic movement.

In 2011 the results of a symposium on conductive argument were published with the title, *Conductive Argument, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (Blair & Johnson, 2011). In response to this book the American epistemologist and argumentation theorist, Jonathan Adler, shortly before his untimely death in 2012, submitted a manuscript to the journal *Argumentation*, "Are conductive arguments possible?" (Adler, 2013), in which he argued that conductive arguments in which a conclusion is drawn non-conclusively from both positive and negative considerations are impossible.¹ That is, there can be no such thing. If Adler is right, that is a blow not only to Govier's and others' advocacy of conductive arguments, but also to the importance attributed to such alleged arguments by many in the informal logic movement, including most of the authors whose papers are collected in the 2011 proceedings. There is some reason, then, carefully to examine Adler's argument and consider its implications, and that is the objective of the present paper.

2. ADLER'S ARGUMENT

As the quotation cited above makes clear, Wellman regarded conductive arguments as non-conclusive. Although Govier rejects some of the defining properties that Wellman attributed to conductive arguments, she does subscribe to their non-conclusiveness. For instance, she writes:

In a conductive argument, one or more premises are put forward as reasons supporting a conclusion. They are put forward as relevant to that conclusion, as counting in favor of it, but not as providing conclusive support for it. (Govier, 1999, p. 157)

Others writing about conductive arguments have noted this feature without demure. Robert C. Pinto writes, for instance: "Both Govier and Wellman want to insist that conductive arguments do not exhaust the category of non-conclusive ... reasoning or argument, ..." (Pinto, 2011, p. 105), and does not pause to take issue with this characterization, although he is careful to criticize other details of their accounts.

However, according to Adler it is on this property of non-conclusiveness that turns the impossibility of conductive arguments. He writes, citing Wellman and others that "Conductive Arguments are inconclusive, even ones that are as good as it gets" (Adler, 2013, p. 7²) But what does this "inconclusive" mean? Adler laments that "... no definition or explication of the use of 'conclusiveness' is provided [in *Con-*

¹ Although he frequently refers to such arguments as "conductive arguments" without qualification, and the title of his article includes no qualification, it seems that Adler has particularly in mind these third pattern, balance-of-considerations arguments, for he uses them as his examples. However, as will become clear, his objection is centrally against the second property ascribed to these arguments—their non-conclusiveness—and so it applies to all three patterns, since they all by definition share that property.

² References to Adler (2013) are to the page numbers of the on-line version in *Argumentation*.

ductive Arguments]” (Adler’s footnote here: “‘Conclusive’ and ‘inconclusive’ are pervasive in the text, but they are not even listed in the index.”); and he proceeds to surmise: “‘Inconclusive’ is then, presumably a term for expressing the conviction that in Conductive Arguments there are uneliminated or unreduced, even if outweighed, counter-considerations” (*ibid.*). Indeed, earlier in the paper Adler had written of an alleged example of a conductive argument:

The argument yields belief in the conclusion. But this latter claim conflicts with the characterization of Conductive Arguments as *inconclusive*, since *undermining reasons remain viable*. (*Ibid.*, p. 4; italics added)

From these passages we can infer that Adler takes the “inconclusive” or “non-conclusive” property attributed to (third-pattern) conductive arguments to consist in their counter-considerations continuing to carry force and to weaken the argument even after the conclusion has been drawn.

Adler notes that in spite of their being characterized as inconclusive, many of the examples of conductive arguments provided by proponents of such reasoning as a distinct type, such as Wellman and Govier, are ones in which the conclusion is accepted without qualification. Here is one of Wellman’s often-quoted examples, which Adler cites: “... although your lawn needs cutting, you ought to take your son to the movies because the picture is ideal for children and will be gone by tomorrow” (Wellman, 1971, p. 57). Here Wellman clearly intends the conclusion to be “you ought to take your son to the movies,” full stop. Adler says: “If a Conductive Argument is *cogent*, meeting whatever conditions are necessary for a successful argument, the conclusion is correctly accepted as true The argument yields belief in the conclusion” (Adler, 2013, p. 4).

The problem is, Adler contends, that proponents of conductive arguments are committed to the following two incompatible propositions:

(I) The counter-considerations are irreducible or ineliminable – the conclusion C is reached without *nullifying* the counter-considerations. (II) C is *accepted* as true, which issues in *belief*. C is *detached* from these premises (reasons), so that what is accepted or believed is C itself. (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

Adler allows that there can be third-pattern conductive-type reasoning in which no conclusion is drawn because the reasoner cannot decide whether the considerations in favor of the claim in question outweigh the counter-considerations against it; but in such cases the appropriate response is to suspend judgment. He also allows that there can be conductive-type arguments in which the conclusion is qualified by some such term as ‘prima-facie’ or ‘probably’; but in such cases the conclusions are not detachable, for no “all things considered” conclusion is drawn. However, the cases he is interested in are those in which a conclusion is drawn without qualification, on the basis of a consideration of all the available epistemically relevant representative pro and con considerations (*ibid.*, p. 9). In such cases, the intent of the argument “is to settle what is true or what is the case” (*ibid.*, p. 7). The conclusion must be “detached” from the premises as a result of the reasoning or ar-

gument; and the conclusion can be detached only if the counter-considerations are “nullified”.

Here are a couple of my examples that illustrate Adler’s point:

- (1) If you have decided to marry Larry because he is a good man who is devoted to you and you love him dearly, although he has a lame leg, then his limp, which initially gave you pause, no longer has any bearing on whether you are going to marry him. Your decision to marry Larry is no less unqualified than it would have been if you could think of nothing at all about him to give you pause. Your decision is to marry Larry; it is not to marry Larry in spite of his limp. It is not a decision with a reservation. For the truth of “I shall marry Larry” the fact that Larry has a limp has become irrelevant, overridden as it is by the reasons to marry him.

Or again:

- (2) If you conclude that you should take your daughter to the circus because she very much wants to go and you promised her you would take her, then the fact that you will miss the chance to go fishing that suddenly came up, and that caused you briefly to reconsider your circus promise, is no longer relevant to your decision. Your conclusion is not qualified by the fact that it entailed giving up the chance to go fishing. That lost opportunity has been ruled out as having any bearing on your conclusion once you dismiss it as being overridden by your daughter’s wishes and your promise to her. For the truth of “I should take my daughter to the circus,” your missing the fishing is irrelevant.

Here is how Adler summarizes the point:

Detachment refers to separating the accepted conclusion from the premises that settled its truth. Since the premises served their function, there is no reason to retain them. ...

Detachment, or more carefully, entitlement to detach, reflects that inquiry on the matter is ended – all relevant considerations are weighed in. (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

Adler’s paper contains a detailed case for his key premise that if the premises of an argument settle its truth, the premises must be detached. I do not consider that case here because I take no issue with it.

One may ask, if the counter-considerations are nullified once the conclusion is drawn or asserted, why does or should anyone mention them in the argument to begin with? Adler’s response has two parts. First, relevant counter-considerations have to be taken into account in the reasoning leading to the conclusion if *the condition of total evidence* is to be satisfied, and one is not entitled to consider that a conclusion has been established unless the condition of total evidence has been met (see *ibid.*, p. 9). But the counter-considerations don’t need to be *mentioned* when ex-

pressing an argument based on that reasoning; they can be “left out of the explicit presentation” (*ibid.*, p. 11) of the argument. However, and this is the second part of Adler’s response, he has a conjecture about why they might well be mentioned:

In the case of Conductive Arguments the ‘even though’s’ are part of the speaker’s communicative intent. The conventional implication is that these reasons against the conclusion are outweighed. But it also conveys that the speaker has taken account of not just favorable considerations, but unfavorable ones. The speaker (arguer) is not subject to familiar biases like one-sidedness. (*Ibid.*, p. 3)

The mention of the counter-considerations serves as a rhetorical indication of the thoroughness and fair-mindedness of the arguer, not as a reservation against the probative force of the pro considerations.

Adler’s argument in a nutshell runs as follows:

1. If a conclusion is accepted as true, it is drawn conclusively and is detached from its premises.
2. If a conclusion is drawn non-conclusively, it cannot be accepted as true and is not detached from its premises.
3. Many so-called conductive arguments have conclusions accepted as true.
4. But by definition the conclusions of conductive arguments are drawn non-conclusively.
5. Hence, such so-called conductive arguments must satisfy incompatible conditions.
6. Hence, such so-called conductive arguments are impossible.

3. ASSESSMENT OF ADLER’S OBJECTION

What, if anything, can be said against Adler’s argument that if a conductive-type argument is cogent, its conclusion must be detachable from its premises, and so the argument must be conclusive; the counter-considerations do not linger on to weaken the cogency of the argument; the argument cannot be both cogent and non-conclusive; and as a consequence if conductive arguments are by definition inconclusive, then conductive arguments—at least cogent conductive arguments—are impossible?

The argument relies on what Adler takes ‘non-conclusive’ to mean. Recall that he wrote, “‘Inconclusive’ is then, presumably a term for expressing the conviction that in Conductive Arguments there are uneliminated or unreduced, even if outweighed, counter-considerations.” He takes Wellman, Govier, and other proponents of conductive arguments as a distinct type, to mean by its non-conclusive character that such arguments are inconclusive, undecided, or less than fully decisive, and that they have this feature because the counter-considerations are taken to remain in force.

Before adopting this interpretation, however, it is advisable to look at what Wellman, Govier and Pinto actually say. Referring to his definition of conduction,

Wellman writes:

This reasoning is not simply the application of deduction to the particular case, for it is inconclusive—that is, *it is always possible for the conclusion to be false even though the premises are true and the inferences are valid.* (Wellman, 1971, p. 52; italics added)

Or again, Wellman writes:

In such [third pattern] arguments the arguer often attempts to state all the relevant considerations, or at least all the important ones. Still, even this pattern is inconclusive. *By this I mean that, whether or not there are additional considerations in the actual case that would change the conclusion without showing the given premises either untrue or the original inference invalid, there always might be such. It always remains logically possible to find additional considerations to support or weaken the conclusion.* (*Ibid.*, p. 57; italics added)

In other words, for Wellman, conductive reasoning and arguments are inconclusive in the sense that they are not subject to deductive closure.

And Govier writes:

In a conductive argument, one or more premises are put forward as reasons supporting a conclusion. They are put forward as relevant to that conclusion, as counting in favor of it, but not as providing conclusive support for it. One characteristic feature of conductive arguments, *then, is that the reasons stated in the premises are not as such sufficient to entail the conclusion*, nor are they typically taken to be such by the arguer or the audience. (Govier, 1999, p. 155; italics added)

In other words, for Govier, the premises of conductive arguments do not supply conclusive support for their conclusions in the sense that those premises do not *entail* those conclusions. Govier goes on to explain that this is because in such arguments it is understood “that additional reasons might be put forward, which could provide further support” (*ibid.*). Clearly, then, by entailment Govier has in mind the standard definition in logic in terms of which if the premises entail the conclusion, then no additional reasons can provide further support since the support is already maximal. Govier means by “conclusive” support entailing support in that sense.

Finally, Pinto writes, and here I supply the ellipsis in the passage I quoted earlier: “Both Govier and Wellman want to insist that conductive arguments do not exhaust the category of non-conclusive (*or defeasible*) reasoning or argument, ... ” (Pinto, 2011, p. 105; italics added). And a page earlier Pinto had written:

Conductive arguments are *one* species of defeasible arguments. An argument is defeasible if and only if its conclusion and or its force can be called into question by considerations that are *consistent* with its premises and that do not call those premises into question. Arguments which are deductively valid are non-defeasible in the sense just defined. (*Ibid.*, p. 104; italics in the original)

In short, conductive arguments are non-conclusive, for Pinto, just in the respect that they are defeasible and in that respect they are unlike deductively valid arguments.

Given these accounts of how Wellman, Govier and Pinto (to name three prominent theorists) mean ‘non-conclusive’ to be understood, it seems clear that ‘non-conclusive’ is used in different ways by these proponents of conductive arguments, on the one hand, and by Adler in his criticism of the possibility of conductive arguments, on the other. The former mean that conductive arguments are non-conclusive in the sense that their premises do not deductively entail their conclusions, and they are defeasible; but Adler takes them to mean that such arguments are non-conclusive in the sense that their conclusions are not detached from their premises, but always remain qualified by the acknowledged counter-considerations. Adler simply mistakes what those theorists mean by ‘non-conclusive.’ There seems, on close examination, to be no incompatibility between Adler’s position on conclusiveness and that of the proponents of conductive arguments.

4. ARE THE CONCLUSIONS OF CONDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS NOT DETACHABLE?

However, even if the above is granted by way of criticism of Adler’s argument, it remains possible that, while the proponents of conductive arguments use ‘non-conclusive’ to mean “not deductively closed,” nevertheless they also believe that the conclusions of cogent conductive arguments are not detachable in Adler’s sense, and are weakened by the acknowledgment of counter-considerations. Is there any evidence that proponents of conductive arguments hold that the counter-considerations prevent detachment of the conclusion? A sample of such theorists is provided by several (not all) of the authors of chapters in the book that Adler cites, *Conductive Argument*. In what follows I examine the views that have implications for the detachment issue.

It is clear that Rongdong Jin (2011) does not hold the “no-detachment” view, based on the following passage, in which he is distinguishing counter-considerations from objections and rebuttals:

... counterconsiderations, acknowledged by the arguer and outweighed by positive considerations, *would not really weaken the case or undermine the force of the pro and con argument*, but by nature objections or rebuttals are put forward to undermine or undercut the force of the argument. (Jin, 2011, p. 25; italics added)

In other words, the outweighed counter-considerations do not weaken the conclusion. This is exactly Adler’s view of things, so Jin cannot be held up as a proponent of the “no-detachment” view.

Hans V. Hansen (2011) devotes a section of his paper to the place of counter-considerations in third-pattern conductive arguments, which he terms “balance-of-considerations or BC-arguments.” After reviewing and rejecting five other possible ways counter-considerations can be conceived to play a role in BC-arguments, he spells out the one he prefers. He sets out its structure, using an example that has the initial conclusion: “Conclusion 1: Hence, we should take an airplane to Chicago *even though* (i) taking the train is cheaper, and (ii) more comfortable” (Hansen, 2011, p. 39). This looks like exactly the sort of conclusion Adler warns against, for it does not detach the counter-considerations—(i) and (ii); they are retained as part of the con-

clusion. However, Hansen immediately goes on to add: “But there will be more to the argument than shown so far; a second inference must follow, namely that

Premise: Hence, we should take an airplane to Chicago *even though* (i) taking the train is cheaper, and (ii) more comfortable.

Conclusion: Hence, we should take an airplane to Chicago.” (*Ibid.*)

In other words, in Hansen’s view, the conclusion “must” be detached from the counter-considerations, just as Adler contends. Hansen cannot be considered a proponent of the “no-detachment” view.

Frank Zenker (2011) compares deductive, inductive and conductive arguments, and although he does not address the issue of detachment directly, a couple of passages hint at his view. For one thing, he begins a sentence by saying, “If a conclusion is the *conductive* consequence of a group of premises, ...” (Zenker, 2011, p. 79) which suggests that he thinks it possible that such a conclusion can be a consequence, and hence can be detached. For another, he goes on to give an example of a conductive argument, and it consists of four “counter-consideration” premises, four “pro-reason” premises and one “on-balance” premise, and from these he derives an unqualified conclusion (*ibid.*, p. 80). It seems evident that, like Hansen, he means the conclusion to be detached from the premises. So insofar as these hints from Zenker suggest his position on the issue, he does not belong to any “no-detachment” camp either.

Pinto’s (2011) paper culminates in a detailed proposal of how to weigh pro and con considerations in conductive arguments of the third pattern, and although he does not address the “non-detachment” question, his proposal seems clearly intended to guide reasoning aimed at trying to detach a conclusion from sets of such countervailing considerations. He writes that what he has sketched implies that:

- (1) for *both* (a) comparisons of the relative force of a *single* pro and a *single* con considerations and (b) comparisons [of] the relative force of a *set* of pro considerations and that of a *set* of con considerations, our ability to make such comparisons depends on our ability (i) to estimate *the degree to which the features on which those considerations turn are present* in the situation with which those considerations are concerned, (ii) to determine our *preferences* with respect to the combinations of features on which the considerations in those sets turn, and (iii) to estimate the *degree of risk* we undertake in relying on each of those considerations; and that
- (2) our comparisons of relative force based on such preferences and estimates will be *reasonable* if and only if both the preferences involved and the two sorts of estimates on which such comparisons depend are reasonable—i.e., are preferences and estimates *for which we have good reasons all things considered*. (Pinto, 2011, p. 125)

These methods of weighing are clearly designed to help in distinguishing which of two considerations or which of two sets of considerations outweigh the other, thus enabling the reasoner or arguer to detach one or the other alternative conclusion if the relative weights permit it. Pinto’s proposal thus seems at odds with a “no-detachment” position.

Mark Battersby and Sharon Bailin clearly allow for detachable conclusions in conductive arguments. Among their “guidelines for conductive reasoning” they in-

clude: “(xiii) *Make a judgment at the appropriate level of confidence—apportion one’s judgment to the strength of the reasoning*” (Battersby and Bailin 2011, p. 152), and among the list of four levels of confidence they list as examples, at the highest level they include: “*A very confident judgment* is warranted when the weight of reasons clearly supports the judgment and the issue is considered settled.” (*ibid.*). So according to Battersby and Bailin, the weight of the reasons can settle an issue, and so such conclusion are detached in Adler’s sense.

Govier also clearly allows for the conclusions of conductive arguments to be detached. In (Govier, 1999) she writes:

If we deem a conductive argument cogent, we commit ourselves to the judgment that the reasons in the premises, considered together, provide good grounds for the conclusion—even in the light of counter-considerations constituting reasons against that conclusion. (Govier, 1999, p. 170)

And in (Govier, 2011) she states how she conceives the structure of a third-pattern conductive argument, as follows:

The supporting considerations are stated (1) and it is then stated that *although* (2) there are counter-considerations, nevertheless, it is reasonable to accept the conclusion (4) because (3) (the implicit OB [on balance] premise) the pros outweigh the cons. (Govier, 2011, p. 275)

Both passages make it clear that Govier envisages the detachment of the conclusions of at least some conductive arguments.

The author of a paper in *Conductive Argument* that comes closest to taking the “no-detachment” position is James B. Freeman. Freeman notes that Wellman “specifies that the conclusion of a conductive argument ‘is drawn non-conclusively’ from the premises” (Freeman, 2011, p. 129) and goes on to add:

Clearly then truth-preservation is too strict a criterion for the ground [i.e., premise] adequacy of conductive arguments. Indeed, warrants for conductive arguments need to be qualified. We are not licensed to infer *simpliciter* but only *ceteris paribus*. (*Ibid.*)

Freeman takes the non-conclusive nature of conductive arguments to imply that one is entitled to draw from such arguments only conclusions that are qualified by the condition that other things are equal. He seems to understand Wellman’s term ‘non-conclusive’ the same way Adler does—as meaning “inconclusive.” Here is Adler’s comment on such qualified conclusions:

If the conclusions of Conductive Arguments are (implicitly) qualified, they are not detachable. For then [for example,] the (epistemically) qualified implicit conclusion of a Conductive Argument that explicitly concludes that outstanding teachers should receive merit pay is that *prima facie* teachers should receive merit pay, not the detached conclusion that teachers should receive merit pay. Subsequently, of course, when all things are considered, detachment can occur. (Adler, 2013, pp. 5–6)

On Adler’s view, then, if Freeman is right about conductive arguments authorizing

only “other things being equal” conclusions, there can be no (conclusion-detached) conductive arguments; such arguments are indeed impossible. It may be said in Freeman’s defence that he does not claim that conductive conclusions can be detached.

However, it is not clear that Freeman is right in his interpretation of Wellman. Freeman seems to suppose that Wellman thinks that any argument that is not truth-preserving (i.e., whose grounds or premises do not *guarantee* the truth of the conclusion) must have a qualified conclusion. From what we have already seen of Wellman’s position, however, that interpretation does not seem justified. In Wellman’s example, for instance, he has the father conclude that he ought to take his son to the movies, *simpliciter*—not that he ought to take his son to the movies, *other things being equal*. In all of Wellman’s examples of conductive arguments, the conclusions are detached. So Freeman’s reading of Wellman, while it supports Adler’s claim, arguably mistakes the nature of conductive argument that Wellman had in mind.

I conclude from this survey that at least several of the argument theorists who speak of conductive arguments hold that their conclusions are detachable, and so these theorists are not committed, by virtue of Adler’s argument, to the view that conductive arguments are not possible.

5. WHY ‘NON-DECISIVE’? IS IT THE BEST DESCRIPTOR?

Is Adler’s critique then to be dismissed? I have argued that his objection to the possibility of conclusion-detached conductive arguments when these are defined as, among other things, non-conclusive, is based on a misunderstanding of the way ‘non-conclusive’ is used by many, if not most, of the proponents of conductive reasoning and argument. So conductive arguments are, after all, possible—at least if Adler has identified the only reason for thinking that they are not. It may be asked, however, who is responsible for this misunderstanding. Perhaps Adler ought to have examined more closely the way Wellman and others use the terms, but the fact that he didn’t hesitate in presuming that by ‘inconclusive’ or ‘non-conclusive’ they meant “inconclusive” or “unsettled” suggests that the onus might be shared by Wellman and those who followed him in using those terms. After all, if they did not intend ‘non-conclusive’ to mean “inconclusive” or “unsettled,” perhaps they ought to have used another word for what they were trying to convey. One might thus speculate about why they did use these terms even though they did not mean them literally. One explanatory hypothesis is that deductivism continued to cast its long shadow on their thinking. By “deductivism” here I mean the view that a good argument is either deductively valid (with true premises) or it is defective. Deductively valid arguments with true premises are conclusive in the strong sense that their conclusions cannot possibly be false. Any argument that fails this test is thus held by deductivists to be defective and so (in that sense) inconclusive or non-conclusive. However, if one steps out of the shadow of deductivism, one can cheerfully recognize that deductive validity with true premises is not the only criterion of conclusiveness when that property is understood as the opposite of inconclusiveness or non-conclusiveness. Plenty of inductive and conductive arguments are conclusive

(and so not at all inconclusive or non-conclusive)—not in the respect that it is logically impossible for their conclusions to be false given the truth of their premises—but rather in the respect that one is entitled to accept their premises as fully justified and their conclusions as following with practical certainty.

If ‘non-conclusive’ or ‘inconclusive’ is not the term to be used for the property of an argument that its premises do not logically entail its conclusion, what is a better term? The reason the premises of such arguments do not entail their conclusion, no matter how conclusive or decisive the argument may be, is that it is always possible that there exist considerations that are consistent with the truth of the premises but inconsistent with the truth of the conclusion. This property is very close to what Pinto defined as “defeasibility” in a passage quoted above: “An argument is defeasible if and only if its conclusion and or its force can be called into question by considerations that are *consistent* with its premises and that do not call those premises into question” (Pinto, 2011, p. 104). Adler is quite happy to acknowledge that so-called conductive arguments are defeasible. He writes:

When a Conductive Argument is non-monotonic, as inductive arguments are, then one kind of defeasibility follows. Adding additional premises ... generate a new argument for which the previous conclusion does not hold, even though no premise in the previous argument is challenged. (Adler, 2013, p. 8)

So perhaps ‘defeasible’ should replace ‘non-conclusive’ and ‘inconclusive’ in the definition of conductive argument.

However, in a different passage in his article Adler introduces another term. He writes:

Detachment does not imply *unrevisability*. If new information becomes available, judgment may have to be suspended and the inquiry re-opened. What is settled on a given body of considerations, may be reopened if new considerations emerge and become salient. (*Ibid.*, p. 6; italics added)

This passage raises the possibility that the term ‘revisability’ might be used to describe the property of conductive arguments in question, for it seems to be the clear intent of the proponents of conductive argument that new information consistent with the premises can call the conclusion into question and require that the reasoning or argument be revised.

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 if 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.

A conclusion is detached from its premises on the assumption that all the available relevant information bearing on the conclusion has been considered. That

this assumption can in principle be called into question is the property of defeasibility, and it attaches to all conductive reasoning and arguments as well as to reasoning and arguments with other sorts of inferential links.

As well, new information calling the premises or the conclusion into question can appear, and for some arguments a reformulation of the premises or the conclusion in light of that new information can save the gist or spirit of the argument, although the revised argument will be literally different from its predecessor. That is the property of revisability, and it attaches to some arguments of any kind, including deductive arguments.

On this analysis of these two concepts, it seems clear that the property of conductive arguments that Wellman and others called “non-decisiveness” or “indecisiveness” is closer to defeasibility than to revisability. But a note of caution is in order here: Wellman *et al.* only committed to a property that consists of the absence of a property—non-entailment; they did not commit to a positive account of that property.

6. SUMMARY

We have seen that proponents of conductive arguments regarded the property of being non-conclusive as salient for such arguments. We have seen Adler argue that if ‘non-conclusive’ is taken to imply that the conclusions of such arguments are always qualified or weakened by the counter-considerations that were entertained, then their conclusions cannot be detached. That means no such arguments can ever be taken to establish their conclusions. Conductive arguments so defined with detached conclusions are not possible. However, we have also seen that the proponents of conductive arguments (or many of them) do not mean ‘non-conclusive’ in this way; they mean it to denote lack of deductive closure. Hence, Adler’s criticism is based on a misunderstanding. Moreover, many of these proponents agree with Adler that conductive arguments can have what he calls “detached” conclusions.

The misunderstanding behind Adler’s criticism is unsurprising, since the conductive argument advocates are using ‘non-conclusive’ and ‘conclusive’ in an unusual way, giving those terms a technical meaning that does not accord with their ordinary sense. In search of a better term for the property in question, after considering both ‘revisability’ and ‘defeasibility,’ it emerged that ‘defeasibility’ better describes it.³

³ Ralph Johnson, in correspondence, has noted that I write in this paper as if I agree that ‘deductive,’ ‘inductive’ and ‘conductive’ are correctly taken to name types of reasoning and argument. I do not so agree, but I do write that way because Wellman, Govier and Adler do, and it makes no difference to the arguments here. My thanks go to Ralph Johnson for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. That earlier version of the paper was presented at a research report meeting of the Centre for Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric at the University of Windsor, and I am also grateful for comments received then.

REFERENCES

- Adler, J. E. (2013). Are conductive arguments possible? *Argumentation*, 13(1).
- Battersby, M., & Bailin, S. (2011). Guideliness for reaching a reasoned judgment. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 145-157). London: College Publications.
- Blair, J. A., & Johnson, R. H. (Eds.). (2011). *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning*. London: College Publications.
- Freeman, J. B. (2011). Evaluating conductive arguments in light of the Toulmin model. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 127-144). London: College Publications.
- Govier, T. (1979). Carl Wellman's *Challenge and Response*. *The Informal Logic Newsletter*, 2(2), 10-15.
- Govier, T. (1987). *Problems in Argument Analysis and Evaluation*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Govier, T. (1999). *The Philosophy of Argument*. Newport News, VA: Vale Press.
- Govier, T. (2011). Conductive arguments: Overview of the symposium. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 262-276). London: College Publications.
- Govier, T. (2012). *A Practical Study of Argument*. Enhanced 7th ed. Belmont CA: Wadsworth/Thomson.
- Hansen, H. V. (2011). Notes on balance-of-consideration arguments. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 31-51). London: College Publications.
- Jin, R. (2011). The structure of pro and con arguments: A survey of the theories. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 10-30). London: College Publications.
- Pinto, R. C. (2011). Weighing evidence in the context of conductive reasoning. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 104-126). London: College Publications.
- Wellman, C. (1971). *Challenge and Response, Justification in Ethics*. Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Zenker, F. (2011). An attempt at unifying natural language structures. In J. A. Blair & R. H. Johnson (Eds.), *Conductive Arguments, An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning* (pp. 74-85). London: College Publications.