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G. C. Goddu
University of Richmond, ggoddu@richmond.edu

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Against the Intentional Definition of Argument

G. C. GODDU
University of Richmond
ggoddu@richmond.edu

Intentional definitions of argument, i.e. the conclusion being intended to follow from the premises, abound. Yet, there are numerous problem cases in which we appear to have arguments, but no intention. One way to try to avoid these problem cases is to appeal to acts, in which case one has to give up on the repeatability of arguments. One can keep repeatability and intentions if one resorts to act types, but then it appears that the problem cases re-emerge.

KEYWORDS: acts, act-types, argument, definition, example, intention

1. INTRODUCTION

Peruse various logic and critical thinking textbooks and one will encounter definitions of 'argument' such as the following:

> In logic, argument refers strictly to any group of propositions of which one is claimed to follow from the others, which are regarded as providing support for the truth of that one (Copi and Cohen, 2009, pp. 6-7).

> the term argument ... will be used to connote any set of assertions that is intended to support some conclusion or influence a person's belief (Nickerson, 1986, p. 68).

> An argument, in its most basic form, is a group of statements, one or more of which (the premises) are claimed to provide support for, or reasons to believe, one of the others (the conclusion (Hurley and Watson, 2018, p. 2).

> As used in the study of logic, an argument is any group of
> propositions (truth claims), one of which is claimed to follow
> logically from the others. The key phrase here is 'follows
> logically from.' For a group of propositions to be an argument,
> one of them must be claimed to follow logically from the
> others (Soccio and Barry, 1992, p. 5).

> One or more statements (premises) offered in support of
> another statement (a conclusion) (Kahane and Cavender,
> 2002, p. 378).

Additional examples abound.[1]

Nor is this sort of definition restricted to textbooks—it shows up
in theoretical discussions as well.

> An argument may be described as [a] set of propositions, one
> of which is designated as the conclusion and the remainder as
> premises, whereby the conclusion is claimed to be based upon
> (e.g., derived from, supported by the premises (Ben-Ze'ev,
> 1995, p. 189).

> I take an argument or inference to be a collection of claims,
> one of which, the conclusion is put forth as following from the
> others, the premises (Berg, 1987, p. 13).

> a set of statements or propositions that one person offers to
> another in the attempt to induce that other person to accept
> some conclusion (Pinto, 2001, p. 32).

> From the pragmatic point of view, then, an argument is
> discourse directed toward rational persuasion. By rational
> persuasion, I mean that the arguer wishes to persuade the
> Other to accept the conclusion on the basis of the reasons and
> considerations cited, and those alone (R. H. Johnson, 2000, p.
> 150).

All of these examples are instances of what I call 'intentional' definitions
of argument. They are intentional because, to have an argument, we
need more than just sentences or statements or propositions, but also
the intention, sometimes expressed in terms of claiming, affirming, or
supposing that the statements are related in the correct way.

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[1]For example, see also: (Stratton, 1999, p. 135); (R.M. Johnson, 2007 p. 2);
(Layman, 1999, p.2); (Kelley, 1998, p. 89); (Klenk, 2002, p. 4.)

Contrast such definitions with what we might call 'minimalist' definitions of argument: An argument is a set of propositions, one of which is the conclusion.[2] Here, no intention is required to have an argument. But with intentional accounts you can have the propositions, or whatever one takes the constituents to be, and still not have an argument until there is the intention that the constituents be related in the proper way. As Berg (1987, p. 13) puts it:

> An argument is not merely a collection of claims, nor even a collection of claims bearing a certain logical relation to each other, but rather a collection of claims intended, by an arguer, to bear a certain logical relation to each other.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, p. 3) write:

> It is important to realize right away that verbal expressions are not 'by nature' standpoints, arguments, or other kinds of units of language use that are interesting to argumentation theorists. They only become so when they occur in a context where they fulfil a specific function in the communication process. ... a series of utterances constitutes an argumentation only if these expressions are jointly used in an attempt to justify or refute a proposition ...

Despite the ubiquity of intentional accounts of argument, I shall argue that such accounts are seriously flawed.

2. PROBLEMS FOR INTENTIONAL ACCOUNTS

Why might intentional accounts arise? What at first appears important in identifying arguments is the relationship between the constituents of arguments, between the premises or reasons and the conclusion—this after all is what should distinguish arguments from mere lists of sentences or sonnets, say. But of course, bad arguments might be bad exactly because the relationship between premises and conclusion is lacking, so it cannot be the actual presence of the relationship that makes the constituents an argument—what's left? Presumably, some sort of intention that the relationship holds (even if in fact it doesn't).

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[2] See for example: (Kalish and Montague, 1964, p. 13); (Skyrms, 2000, p. 13); (Godden, 2003, p. 1); (Bergmann, Moor and Nelson, 1998, p. 7); (Tomoczko and Henle, 1999, p. 1).

But intentional accounts raise puzzles of their own. Firstly, there is the problem of dealing with conflicting intentions. I intend or claim statement X follows from others, but you do not—do we have an argument or not? If we do, then why does the intention that X follows trump either the failure to intend X follows or the active intention that X does not follow? If not, then why does the failure to intend or the active intention that X does not follow trump the intention that X follows. Either way, the intentional accounts owes us an explanation of why, especially in the case of two conflicting active intentions, one intention has priority over the other without also undermining the need to appeal to intentions in identifying arguments in the first place.

One could avoid this problem by relativizing arguments to agents. Since I intend X follows, the group of statements is an argument for me, but since you do not so intend, either by failing to intend or by actively intending X not follow, the group of statements is not an argument for you. But such a solution makes substantive debate about whether someone is giving an argument or not impossible and yet argumentation theorists argue and debate about whether a particular passage of text is or is not an argument all the time.

Secondly, intending or claiming something to follow seems too easy. I hereby intend every sentence to follow from every possible set of sentences. Did I just make every set of sentences, i.e. mere lists, sonnets, etc., an argument? If so, then we have not solved the alleged problem the intentional account was supposed to solve., i.e. demarcating arguments from mere lists or other groups of sentences. But if not, why was this intention not enough to make all sets of sentences arguments?

In general, intentional accounts face the challenge of trying to specify the sort of intention that makes sets of propositions or sentences or statements arguments without somehow letting all sets of statements in as arguments. For example, I might consider several candidate 'arguments' for inclusion in this paper—but, prior to inclusion, I certainly do not intend or claim that any of the conclusions follow— indeed, some of the candidates may eventually be rejected precisely because I judge that the conclusion does not sufficiently follow from the premises given in the candidate 'arguments'. But if these candidate arguments are arguments, what is the intention that is making them arguments—my mere wondering if the conclusion follows? Or hypothesizing the conclusion follows? I can wonder or hypothesize about one sentence or statement or claim or proposition following from others, for any set of such things, in which case the intention again appears to be doing no distinguishing work—any set of statements say,

be they a random list sentences or a sonnet or an instruction manual, and so on, can be an argument.

3. A SOLUTION?

There is a fairly straightforward solution to the debate between minimalist accounts and intentional accounts — they are actually accounts of two different kinds of things — objects, such as groups of propositions on the one hand, and actions, such as acts of arguing on the other. The minimalists are trying to identify the *thing* that is composed of propositions or sentences or whatever, whereas the intentionalists are trying to identify the *acts of arguing* (as opposed to acts of explaining or prophesying, etc.) It is not uncommon to try to distinguish acts in terms of intentions—the difference between murder and manslaughter, for example, hinges on the presence or absence of certain sorts of intentions. The minimalists certainly do not deny that there are acts of arguing; nor do the intentionalists deny that there are sets of propositions or statements. They might try to dispute which entity is properly labelled 'argument', but this would be a pointless terminological dispute—clearly, we use the term 'argument' to refer sometimes to sets of statements, such as Anselm's Ontological Argument and sometimes to acts of arguing such as in "their argument over the morality of capital punishment was sometimes loud, and certainly sustained, but always respectful".

If we solve the dispute by distinguishing two sorts of entities of concern, we can now make sense of my considering various arguments for this paper—my considering which arguments to include is not itself an act of arguing, since after all, there is no relevant intention of "claiming the conclusion follows" or "intending to convince anyone of the truth of the conclusion" or whatever the arguing making intention might be. But the relevant sets of propositions I consider are arguments—there is just no arguing going on yet.

I have no problem with this solution. There are arguments in the sense of sets of propositions and there are arguments in the sense of acts of arguing. I just ask that theorists (and textbook writers) make clear which entity they are talking about—the group of propositions or statements on the one hand or the acts of arguing on the other. Unfortunately, many definitions do not make clear what the target entity type is, with the result that some theorists mix the intentions of acts with abstract objects such as sets of propositions with the puzzling results we saw in section 2.

In some cases the mixing seems deliberate. For example, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, p. 1) write of their definition of argument that a virtue of their definition is that it maintains the "process-product" ambiguity of the word "argumentation". Elsewhere I have argued (Goddu, 2011) that the process/product ambiguity is a confused version of the act/object distinction I have used above to make sense of intentionalist accounts of argument. If van Eemeran and Grootendorst are interpreted to have a definition that makes arguments both acts and objects, then I say the result is not a virtue, but rather a vice, since any definition that puts an object in two distinct ontological categories simultaneously is problematic.[3]

Even if the mixing is not deliberate, I suspect the mixing is an attempt to get the intentionality of arguing while keeping the generality afforded by objects such as sets of propositions.[4] After all, the theorists and textbook writers often go on to talk about assessing various properties of the arguments such as truth of the premises or the validity or support strength of the argument. But acts happen — they are not true or false or valid or strong. Acts are not composed of propositions or sentences. Perhaps some acts can contain statements or claims, but only in the sense of claimings or statings, and not in the sense of the content of those claimings. But it is the content that is being appealed to when we talk of truth or relevance or inferential strength.

Defenders of intentional accounts might grant that it is the content that is true or false or valid or whatever, but still maintain that the acts of arguing that express that content, derivatively at least, have the relevant properties, as in "she argued validly". Again, I do not have a problem with this solution — I just ask that theorists make clear that the arguments they are talking about are acts of arguing, where some of

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[3] Their definition is, in part, as follows: **Argumentation** is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of ... Given the crucial word 'activity', despite their own claim of respecting the process/product ambiguity, the best interpretation of their definition is likely to be that they are trying to define acts of arguing.

[4] For example, David Hitchcock (2007) tries to utilize the generality of sets, but the intentionality of acts by defining arguments in terms of sets of acts. In the face of criticism (Goddu, 2009; Freeman, 2009) Hitchcock (2009), and in conversation, briefly reverts to sets of propositions. But in the paper Hitchcock (2018) gave at this conference he returns to sets of acts (or perhaps act types) but within a two-tiered categorization of 'arguments in general' and 'actually used arguments.' Whether Hitchcock is trying to define arguments as objects or acts of arguing remains unclear to this author.

the properties of those acts may be derived from the properties of the content expressed in the act.

Suppose we grant the intentionalists that they are trying to define acts of arguing and have granted them a way of talking about the validity of those acts or the truth of some of the sub-acts. A significant problem still remains. Most argumentation theorists take arguments to be repeatable—it makes sense to ask our students or ourselves to reconstruct the arguments of others, i.e. to repeat them. But acts, which happen at specific space-time regions, are not repeatable. Hence, one can keep an intentional account of arguments, it seems, only by dropping the repeatability of arguments. To date, few, if any, theorists have pursued the non-repeatability option.

4. ACT TYPES

I conclude with one final attempt to salvage the intentional account of argument. Perhaps arguments are not acts, but act types. Act types are not spatio-temporal particulars, but rather are instantiated by spatio-temporal particulars. Two different spatio-temporal particulars might instantiate the same act type, and so act types are repeatable. Act types clearly involve intentions since that is how, at least in part, we distinguish something as a type of action rather than as a mere behaviour. So perhaps we could define an argument as follows:

> For any set, possibly empty, of propositions, P and for any proposition C, an argument, A is the act type that is the expressing of P and C with the intention (or claim) that P supports C.

Even with this definition, one might wonder how weak the intention that P supports C can be. Is wondering or hypothesizing whether P supports C enough to make an act instantiating that type an argument. If so, then my reciting a Shakespearean sonnet while wondering whether the last line follows from the previous lines is enough to make an act of arguing happen. But if the intention must be stronger than mere hypothesizing or wondering, then I cannot consider (and reject) arguments for inclusion in this presentation that do not have this stronger intention, since without it they would not be arguments. But beyond hypothesizing for as long as it takes me to realize that the conclusion does not follow, for at least some of the candidate 'arguments', I have no stronger intention. But then, despite appearances,

on the current proposal these candidate 'arguments' are not arguments at all.

According to the current proposal it also seems impossible to give an example of an argument without also arguing. After all, for the example giving to be an example of an argument, the example giving must instantiate the expressing of P and C with the intention that P supports C, and the expressing of P and C with the intention that P supports C is just arguing for C on the basis of P. But we consider examples of arguments all the time without also arguing. For example, here is an argument I do not want to make (regardless of my attitude toward the conclusion):

> A: There are fewer than a million people in this room, so all my arguments are good ones.

I am certainly not arguing for that conclusion based on that premise and in fact, nothing I say in this paper I take to be an arguing for the goodness of all my arguments. And yet A still seems to be an example of an argument I am not making, i.e. one I am not actually arguing.

Finally, according to the current proposal it is impossible for me to program a computer (assuming computers have no intentions) to generate new arguments of which I am not aware. The computer could spit out millions of examples of the form 'P, so C' and none would be arguments since none would instantiate an act type that is the expressing of P and C with the intention that P sufficiently supports C. The computer has no intentions and I am aware of none of these outputs, so I certainly do not intend any of the C's to be supported by any of the P's. And yet, for any of the given examples, there is a fact, regardless of whether we know it or not, about whether the P's are all true in a given case, or whether C follows from P—the very properties we are often interested in with regards to arguments.

5. CONCLUSION

Being able to distinguish acts of arguing from other sorts of acts such as explaining or holding an incoherent press conference is certainly an important task for argumentation theorists. If intentional accounts of argument restrict themselves to this important task, then they can avoid the odd results of seemingly talking about some special 'intentionalised' kind of set of propositions. Understanding the properties of the content of actual and potential acts of arguing seems relevant to grasping the

rationality or goodness of the inferences made in such acts of arguing and so is an important task for argumentation theorists. But the 'logical' properties of the content is independent of the intentions and so intentions should be kept out of any definition trying to capture the object that is the content of an arguing. If what I have argued above is correct, then trying to mix attempts to capture the content and the intentionality that makes some act an act of arguing into a single definition of argument is problematic. Even appeal to act types which are both repeatable abstract object and involve intentions fail to capture all the desired cases, most especially examples of arguments that are not arguings. The upshot: we should not mix and match the intentional language of acts with the abstract objects that may be the content of those acts.

In other words, stop trying to make ice sculptures out of the rolling waves.

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