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# Commentary on Waleed Mebane's
# "Confidence in Arguments in Dialogues for Practical Reasoning"

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### 1. Why do prime ministers grow beards (if they happen to be men)

Imagine a regular prime minister – let's call him Mr. J.T. – of a regular country in mid-March 2020. During a Council of Ministers on Friday afternoon, he needs to deliberate with the ministers and make a decision from the three options, presented to him by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Economics, after the best experts have been consulted:

- *Option 1)* Introduce full lockdown: MH says with 80% probability this will save 1000 lives, ME says with 90% probability this will cost the country $ 1bln.
- *Option 2)* Introduce "intelligent" lockdown: MH says with 90% probability this will save 500 lives, ME says with 80% probability this will cost the country $ 0.5bln.
- *Option 3)* No lockdown: MH says with 85% probability this will save no lives, ME says with 85% probability this will cost the country $ 0.2bln.

Forget for the time being option 3), it seems "suboptimal" here (think of Sweden, though). But options 1) and 2) have very similar probability distributions and, crucially, each human life in these scenarios costs the budget exactly $ 1mln. What shall J.T. do by the time of the scheduled press conference? I would like to see Waleed Mebane's approach to confidence in arguments in dialogues for practical reasoning help us in such cases. Will it? For instance, how can a quantified confidence in the premise "We gotta safe lives at *any* cost", help us judging J.T.'s conclusion to go for option 1) as rational or not?

This is a very well-written paper that shows the author's competence in various streaks of argumentation theory: from Rescher's dialectic, to Bayesian models of argument strength, to Toulmin's warrants, to ethical and epistemic underpinnings of deliberative democracy, and more. It's an impressive paper that I have a suspicion is being readied for becoming a dissertation. Given the occasion for which it is written and the obvious time and space limits involved, however, the manuscript opens many rather fascinating lines of inquiry without quite closing them.

Accordingly, my aim here is to give a number of constructive remarks that might inspire Waleed to pick up the slack in some of his inquiries. I will go by a chronological order of his exposition, although, as I do so, the importance of the challenge also piles up.

## 2. Maximizing certainty?

Early in the paper Waleed claims the following: "One way of justifying a decision could be with arguments for the claim that the decision is *the best decision* for the *community* with regard to the issue of concern" (italics added). Going for the best decision – typically called *optimizing* or *maximizing* – is no doubt "one way" of justifying one's practical judgment. But there are other ways (see Lewiński, 2017, 2018). One is *satisficing*, going for the good enough solution: "As long as the budget doesn't spend more than $ 2bln on fighting the epidemic, we're good, sir!" Such "local" satisficing might contribute to global, "all-things-considered" optimizing, thus further complicating the decision model. Further, there are justifications by means of the *necessary* measures: "We gotta safe lives at *any* cost, no matter what!" There are various types of necessity (conceptual, de iure, practical), and one of them can be introduced via moral imperatives, such as this one. Taking these other options for licensing practical inference into account could significantly enrich Waleed's approach – but will also make it much more complicated! (I will return soon to the difficulty of defining "for the community" here.)

Further, the bestness of arguments is defined consistently with the overall focus on the epistemic confidence in arguments: "if we have *reduced the uncertainty as much as we could* have, then we can claim that our decision is rational on the grounds that we could not have done better" (italics added). Is rationality, then, synonymous with approximating certainty? For the traditionally dominant – formal, exact, static and sterile, but, frankly, boring – approach to rationality, perhaps it is. All the same, rationality of decision making under uncertainty, even *deep uncertainty*, is not only a booming area of philosophy, but also a necessary one, as reality typically presents to us choices that are urgently necessary, while being deeply uncontrollable and unpredictable. Sven Ove Hansson's (2008) paper "From the casino to the jungle" very well captures the sentiment here: most important real-life decisions cannot rely on the probability calculus of the casino, but rather need to factor in the deep uncertainty of the jungle. Among the sources of such "non-probabilistic uncertainty" are "unidentified consequences, undecided values, unidentified options, undetermined demarcation of the decision, unclear connections with later decision on the same subject-matter, and, unforeseeable dependence on decisions by others" (Hansson & Hirsch Hadorn, 2016, pp. 16-17). Given the way reality is, we should not "reduce the uncertainty as much as we can" if only because we simply *cannot* ("ought" presupposes "can"). We should instead look for rational ways of handling uncertainty – for instance, via open argumentative dialogues. Again, this is something Waleed's proposal can be supplemented with.

## 3. What's truth got do with it

Waleed entitled his paper "Confidence in Arguments in Dialogues for Practical Reasoning". These "dialogues" occur when "some small group" (I'll return to it) "deliberates about what actions to take" – which is in line with standard definitions of practical reasoning. However, further in the paper Waleed speaks of "truth-seeking procedures" on the grounds that "getting at the truth of some claim(s) will be considered an important purpose of the dialogue-type examined here." Maybe ambiguity clouds my understanding here but, given Toulmin's

inspiration, if "some claims" include the "claim", i.e., the *conclusion* of practical reasoning, I have no idea how we can get at the truth of conclusions such as "So, let's go for pizza then!" or "So, you must all stay home for the next 14 days" other than *doing* the thing concluded.

In his elaborate argument, supported mostly through the Bayesian approach to argument strength, Waleed also gets to define the first concept of his title, *confidence*:

> What we are looking for is a kind of *prediction*, a prediction of whether the argument will turn out to have true premises and a robust warrant of inference. This prediction of the truth-likeness of an argument, I propose to call 'confidence' rather than strength. With the idea of a prediction, we can get close in defeasible argumentation to the notion of 'strength' we inherit from ordinary language. Unlike strength, our prediction is inherently prone to change as new information comes in, but we will make it as stable as we can.

Again, there might be some ambiguity here due to the fact that Waleed is in effect defining a *meta*-argumentative confidence here, so that I can for instance construct the following confident, predictive argument: "I'm pretty sure J.T. will announce full lockdown, he's got all the arguments on the table, and I hear most of his senior advisers converge on this option." But if Waleed is discussing a ground-level concept here, he might just be blurring the difference between truth-relevant theoretical reasoning and action-relevant practical reasoning. Prediction, as a representative / assertive speech act can be true or false and, as such, is one possible conclusion of theoretical reasoning. However, conclusions of practical reasoning are by no means predictions: they are instead directive, commissive or declarative speech act such as proposals, calls, or declarations. Typically, their chief propositional attitude is not composed of truth-relevant beliefs, but instead of action-relevant intentions. (Of course, in the classic BDI model of practical rationality, Beliefs play a key role as a link between our Desires-Goals and the Intentions-Decisions: they select the appropriate means to our goals, thus constituting the means-goals premise of practical argument; see Lewiński, 2017.)

One argument for keeping this distinction sharp is given in Searle's (2001) treatise on practical rationality, *Rationality in Action*, where he argues forcefully that the propositional attitudes (or: "intentional states") of desires and intentions have conditions of satisfaction different from the propositional attitude of beliefs. Crucially, the former are voluntary and have a world-to-mind direction of fit, while the latter is involuntary and has a mind-to-world direction of fit. Further, desires might be inconsistent, while intentions characteristically involve gaps, such as the one between the decision to act and actual action, as well as between the beginning of an action and its completion. The consequence of all this is that "there is no deductive logic of practical reason" (Chapter 8) comparable to the classic logic of theoretical reason, with the principle of non-contradiction, formal deductive consequences, etc. This is something I think Waleed could clarify better.

### 4. And rationality for all…

My final, but possibly most important question, regards the locus of rationality of the practical arguments Waleed analyzes: whose rationality is his approach keeping in check? This is no trivial question for argumentation theory. In Waleed's work, we have concern for "the limits of individual knowledge"; we have an attempt to model dialogues with "exactly two participants" (proponent / opponent) and then with two participants and a judge / determiner; we have aggregation of judgments of "multiple participants", this including anything from "small groups" to "crowds" with their own "wisdom". All these loci of rationality have their rich intellectual

history. Bayes, especially on the dominant subjectivist interpretation of his theory of probability, was primarily concerned with the individual beliefs of a single reasoner. Dialecticians since Socrates theorized dialogues as argumentative activities possibly surpassing some of the individual limits, yet still dependent on the competence of at least one reasoner. Legal scholars have based their specific approach to rationality on the idea that the expected inability and unwillingness of the parties to legal proceedings to be beacons of impartial, quality reason can be corrected by the procedural grip guaranteed by the third party (judge, jury). Mathematicians, social scientists and philosophers – from Mandeville, to Condorcet, Simmel, Arrow, to contemporary deliberative democrats – have continuously exposed fascinating challenges and paradoxes of moving from individual rationality to group or "crowd wisdom". The *enfant terrible* of these discussions is of course Bernard Mandeville (1670 – 1733) who argued provocatively that the roots of collective virtue lie inescapably in individual vices. Today, the ideas of "Mandevillian intelligence" (Smart, 2018) have become an important area of investigation in philosophy, cognitive science and computer science: self-interested, dogmatic or forgetful arguers can produce argumentative discussions of very high quality whenever they foster collective epistemic virtues such as cognitive diversity (Mercier & Sperber, 2011; Smart, 2018). On the one hand, groups of otherwise critically minded and rational individuals end up having woefully irrational discussions due to well-known group dynamics such as groupthink, polarization, etc. (Sunstein, 2002). There is, in a word, no magic shortcut that would take us from the individual to the collective rationality. Unfortunately, as our work with Mark Aakhus on *polylogues*, argumentative discussions among many, has shown (Lewiński & Aakhus, 2014; Lewiński, 2014, 2017) argumentation scholars all too often forget about it.

However, back to Waleed's work. He very perspicuously identifies this problem – but doesn't quite draw its necessary consequences. He concludes his argument by referring to "a competent and diverse group of dialogue participants" as a sine qua non condition for (practical? See above) argumentative rationality. As just mentioned, this, at the risk of committing the fallacy of composition / division, does not amount to having a "diverse group of competent dialogue participants." Once we agree on that, *who* is then to make the subjective quantified probability calculations and for *whom*? In other words: who's "preference base" do arguers argue from in the practical dialogues Waleed projects? We have at least 6 options:

1) The proponent's
2) The opponent's
3) The group's composed of them two
4) The third party's (arbiter / determiner)
5) The smaller collective's they deliberate with
6) The bigger collective's they deliberate for

Back to Mr. J.T. For him, being merely 40+ and healthy, the probability of suffering serious COVID-19 related health consequences is somewhere in the range of suffering from a falling roof tile. Rational conclusion for private him – e.g. drawn by applying Bayesian methods – is then to continue business as usual: and this is what his GP might even advise him. However, for his country's head epidemiologist – thinking of the population at large – the rational course of action for Mr. J.T. and his fellow citizens, young and old, is to stay home whenever possible, wear a mask when out, and keep social distancing. And these are just two extreme options from

among many that his Council of Ministers needs to consider in their argumentative discussion before the press conference.

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