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J Anthony Blair

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COMMENTS ON A. FRANCISCA SNOECK HENKEMANS'S PAPER, "VERBAL INDICATORS OF ARGUMENTATION AND EXPLANATION"

J. Anthony Blair
Department of Philosophy
University of Windsor
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Introduction

Dr. Snoeck Henkemans is reporting on part of a large and, in my opinion, an important research project. It has to do with part of what I have called "argument management"[1](#): the identification, interpretation, and evaluation of arguments in use. Most textbooks that cover argument management hurry over the steps of identification and interpretation in order to focus on evaluation. Teachers know, however, that the steps of identification and interpretation are rushed in the classroom at everyone's peril. Still, we make do with crude and theoretically under-funded tools. "Look for argument indicators," we advise; then in the next breath we add, "But keep in mind that these are argument indicators only sometimes, not always." *We* know the difference (we believe), but we are hard-pressed to explain it, for there has yet to be developed a theoretically-grounded or principle-based account of how argument is linguistically marked by arguers and noted by their audiences. If I understand her paper, it is the project of producing such an account that Dr. Snoeck Henkemans is working on, and part of which she is reporting in this paper.

The scope of the overall project is broad: nothing less than a systematic, theory-grounded understanding of how it is that we are able to distinguish argumentation from other forms of discourse. The scope of the part of that large project that Dr. Snoeck Henkemans is reporting on today is more modest: some ways of distinguishing argumentation from explanation. While this is small part of the overall task, it is a vexing one-well worth the close attention she is giving it. First, it's disputed that there is a distinction here (Stephen Thomas, for example, seems to deny it [2](#)). Unquestionably there are cases where the distinction breaks down: the same text can be read as either as an explanation or as an argument. Second, even those who insist on a distinction in principle must grant that in actual texts it can be difficult to distinguish the two: the parsimony of language has the same words doing double-duty by introducing both (for instance, 'because,' 'for, and 'since' and their synonyms in many other languages). And third, if headway can be made in providing theory-grounded rules for distinguishing arguments from explanations, presumably the results can be applied generally to distinguish arguments from other functions of discourse.

As Dr. Snoeck Henkemans describes it, the project has three parts: (1) the inventory of potential argument indicating words and expressions, (2) the classification of these indicators from the perspective of the pragma-dialectical model for critical discussions, and (3) the description of the (felicity?) conditions for a verbal expression's serving as an indicator of a specific argumentative move. In my comments, I will focus on her proposals for (3), found in the second half of her paper in the section titled, "Verbal indicators of argumentative and explanatory relations."

Critical Discussion

If I understand her correctly, Dr. Snoeck Henkemans is proposing two sets of conditions, to be used along with the verbal indicators, to distinguish argument from explanation in a text. For reference, let me call these the "propositional content" conditions for explanations and the "acceptability" conditions distinguishing arguments from explanations.

Propositional content conditions for explanations:

1. The *explanandum* must be a factual state of affairs
2. The *explanans* must mention the cause of this state of affairs

Acceptability conditions distinguishing arguments from explanations:

1. *for arguments*: Argument is put forward when the speaker expects that the acceptability of the standpoint is at issue.
2. *for explanations*: Explanation only if the explained statement has already been accepted by the listener as depicting a true state of affairs.

It is clear that these conditions are at least rough-and-ready guidelines, but are they more than that? Are they either necessary or sufficient? Let me deal with each set of conditions in turn.

I begin with the propositional content conditions for explanations:

First, can only factual states of affairs be the subjects of explanations? I don't think so. I take it as a given, for example, that manipulating a weak person just to enjoy one's sense of power over them (in other words, bullying) is wrong. But why that is so is not a given. What makes such conduct wrong? We seek an explanation of the wrongness of bullying, but what we seek to explain is not a factual state of affairs. Another example: you want to know how to conceptualize a computer program, that is, you want a model. You are seeking an explanation, but again, a conceptualization of a computer program is not a state of affairs. If I am right about examples like these, they are counter-examples to the claim that only states of affairs can be subject to explanations.

Second, can there be non-causal explanations? Assuming that other things besides factual state of affairs can be the subjects of explanations, then their explanations will be non-causal. The explanation of the wrongness of bullying, for example, will not be provided by an account of what causes people to bully others (or, at least, such an account alone will not suffice as an explanation of bullying). The explanation that a computer directory is like a filing cabinet, that a sub-directory is like a drawer in the cabinet, and so on, does not constitute a causal account of how the program works.

Third, must a causal explanation explain only the state of affairs in question? Often we know how some state of affairs came about—we know what caused it—but we don't know what its effects will be. This question used to be asked about television; now it is being asked about communication using computers. What does it portend? We want someone to explain the significance of the phenomenon. Here the question is not about what caused the state of affairs, but about what effects the state of affairs is having, or might have in the future.

If these three counter-examples stand up, then the thing being explained does not have to be a factual state of affairs, and the explanation need not mention its cause. Hence, the propositional content conditions don't distinguish explanations from arguments in every case.

I turn next to the acceptability conditions, starting with the acceptability condition for arguments.

First, is it necessary? Is an argument put forward only if the speaker expects that the acceptability of the standpoint is at issue?

The answer is, no. For instance, arguments can be given to reinforce an already-accepted position. Examples are to be found in political speeches addressed to the party faithful and in religious sermons addressed to devout believers. Now, the following reply to this counter-example is available: a background condition of any such arguments is that the party's position is at issue among the electorate at large and that the church's teachings are challenged in the wider world, so it remains true that a condition of argument is that the arguer anticipates that the standpoint's acceptability is indeed at issue. However, in that case, the condition needs to be made more precise, for the examples do show that it is not a necessary condition of argument that the audience of the argument questions the standpoint.

Another kind of counter-example consists of the arguments that are given to provide new insight into an already-accepted position. We all agree that P , for good and sufficient reasons with which everyone is familiar. But there is in another argument for P that puts it in an entirely different light. Suppose, for example, that you oppose capital punishment because you believe it to be more expensive than the alternatives (given the costs of the inevitable appeals), because you believe that sometimes innocent people are convicted of capital crimes and the risk of executing the innocent is not worth any possible benefits, and because you believe that capital punishment is not an effective deterrent to capital crimes. In short, you are opposed to capital punishment on consequentialist grounds, not in principle. In that case, it would not be inappropriate for someone to try to persuade you that capital punishment is also intrinsically wrong, and to use arguments to do so. So here is another type of situation in which arguments may be appropriate even when the acceptability of the standpoint is not at issue.

I conclude that the acceptability condition for arguments is not necessary.

Is it sufficient? Obviously not. It is normal for people to resort to non-argumentative means of getting their way, or of persuasion, when they expect that the acceptability of their standpoint is at issue.

Finally, consider the second acceptability condition for explanations:




Is it necessary? Do explanations occur only if the speaker believes that the listener has already accepted the explanandum as true? No, explanations can be supplied when the listener does not accept the statement as depicting a true state of affairs. We often supply explanations with a view to convincing people of standpoints they don't accept. *Example 1.* Someone doubts that a cat can fit through such a narrow passage. You convince him by explaining how cats can turn their heads, shoulders and hips sideways, thus taking up a fraction of their "normal" width.³ *Example 2.* Someone doubts that she can operate a product so she doesn't want to buy it. The salesperson explains how it works, demonstrating how a child can operate the product, and thereby convincing the customer that she can operate it. These are cases of explanations used as arguments, or as parts of arguments, but they are explanations offered to people who do not accept the explanandum as true. So, the acceptability condition for explanations is not necessary.

Is it sufficient? Will a speaker always explain a statement that he believes the listener already accepts as true? Only if he is a dreadfully pedantic bore.

Conclusion

Well, if all of this is true, what follows? I don't believe that Dr. Snoeck Henkemans thinks any of these conditions is sufficient, but unless they are at least necessary, we do not yet have a tight theoretical account of the conditions under which typical argument-indicating terms signal the presence of arguments. So the above comments do seem to imply either that some refinements are needed, or else that claims to strict theoretical rigour will have to be qualified. But none of the above contests the methodology, the general approach, that Dr. Snoeck Henkemans is taking. And none of it implies, I hope, that the project is misconceived or unimportant, for I believe the opposite.

Notes

1. "Argument Management, Informal Logic and Critical Thinking," *Inquiry*, XV.4 (1996): 80-93. 
2. Thomas distinguishes explanations from justifications, but holds that explanatory discourse should be classified as argument no less than justificatory discourse. See his *Practical Reasoning in Natural Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2nd ed., 1981), pp. 11-14. 
3. A completely invented example: I have no idea whether it is true. 

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