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# The Epistemic Utility of Toulmin's Argument Fields[*]

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ABSTRACT: Toulmin's DWC model recognizes a plurality of argument cultures through the thesis of field dependency: that the normative features of arguments vary from one field to the next. Yet, little consensus exists concerning the nature and foundations of argument fields. This paper explores the question of whether Toulminian fields have any useful role to play in the epistemic evaluation of arguments.

KEYWORDS: argument field, argument justification, epistemological relativism, S.E. Toulmin, warrant

> *[…] it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk1 Ch. 3; 1094b 12-27)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In addition to his Data-Warrant-Claim theory of argument structure and the accompanying idea that the acceptability of warrants is a centerpiece of argument evaluation, Toulmin's notion of argument fields contributes prominently to his legacy in argumentation studies. Indeed it is primarily through the notion of field dependency—that the normative features of arguments vary from one field to the next—that Toulmin's model recognizes a plurality of argument cultures. Yet, the nature and foundations of argument fields is poorly understood, and a matter about which there remains little or no consensus. Further, unlike the time in which Toulmin introduced the notion of fields, the theses of pragmatism—that standards of good argument ought to be relative to the goals of argumentation (or, that a good argument is one that achieves its purpose)—and situationalism—that the standards of good argument ought to be situationally appropriate—are now more generally accepted by argument theorists and epistemologists alike. This raises the question of whether the notion of field has any useful role to play in evaluative theories of argument.

In this paper I will argue that evaluative theories of argument are better off without the notion of fields. While fields have embedded within them several important

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[*] This paper builds upon the groundwork of a paper I presented in Amsterdam, 2002 and develops an argument I first presented at the Alta Summer Conference on Argumentation, 2007.

notions that will aid in the evaluation of arguments, they also lead to a relativism best avoided.

## 2. FIELD DEPENDENCY AND NORMATIVE PLURALISM

From an epistemological perspective, the most significant feature of argument fields is the thesis of *field-dependency*. Toulmin distinguished those features of arguments that are field invariant from those that are field dependent. The former include similarities of procedure and form which "hold good throughout a wide range of fields" (2003, p. 21) such as the D-W-C structural form of arguments and the force of certain modal terms, while the latter encompasses components of the argument such as its type of data and backing as well as the evaluative criteria of pertaining to it.

Thus, a consequence of field-dependency is normative pluralism. Argument features like warrant, backing and the criteria used to employ logical terms are irreducibly normative features of argument. They capture the evidentiary and justificatory relations constitutive of 'good reasons' and in so doing, embody the canons and standards by which arguments are properly evaluated. Yet, these are the very features of argument which vary from one field to the next. So, the controversial aspect of the field-dependency thesis is normative pluralism.

Contrary to the aspirations of the formal logicians, there cannot be a single, universal and abstract model of all justification and hence of (good) arguments. Thus, one key thesis of theoretical import in Toulmin's program is the claim that "we must judge each field of substantial arguments by its own relevant standards" (2003, p. 216). Indeed, Toulmin (2003, p. 235) claims that validity itself is a field-dependent property of arguments.

> What has to be recognized first is that validity is an intra-field, not an inter-field notion. Arguments within any field can be judged by standards appropriate within that field, and some will fall short; but it must be expected that the standards will be field-dependent, and that the merits to be demanded of an argument in one field will be found to be absent (in the nature of things) from entirely meritorious arguments in another.

It is because arguments cannot all be evaluated by the same set of standards and norms that the theorist must appreciate the nature, boundaries, and inner structure of argument fields. Fields are, as it were, the natural kinds of evidentiary relations, and it is for this reason that fields capture something fundamental about the very nature of justification. (Godden 2003, p. 370).

## 3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

A problem with the ideas of normative pluralism and field-dependency is that together they seem readily to lead to a full-bodied relativism. A useful way of defining epistemological relativism can be found in Boghossian's (2006, p. 2) Doctrine of Equal Validity:

> *Equal Validity*: There are many different, yet "equally valid" ways of knowing the world […]

It would seem that Toulmin's view could easily result in the doctrine of equal validity. In the first place, normative pluralism entails that a given argument (understood as a premise-conclusion set, or a D-W-C collection of propositions) could be valid in one field and invalid in another. Thus, a conclusion could be acceptable in one field, but unacceptable in another. So far, this seems to be an unobjectionable and true descriptive claim about what arguers in different fields might judge to be acceptable.

But, when combined with the claim that all evaluative standards are themselves field-dependent, it seems that there is no way of ranking, comparing or otherwise evaluating the different and conflicting judgements of validity and acceptability. Rather, it seems that the rational judge is only able to offer verdicts of the following sorts: the argument is valid in field-A but invalid in field-B,[1] or according to my field-dependent standards the argument is (in)valid—but according to your equally field-dependent standards it might well be valid, or finally, according to some field-dependent standard the standards of field-A are better than those of field-B and so field-A judgements are preferable to field-B judgements—but again, according to your equally field-dependent standards the opposite might be so. In none of these judgements is one able to categorically claim that some arguments are simply invalid, some conclusions are simply unacceptable, or some judgements are plainly more acceptable than others. Being deprived of any field-independent standard of measure or comparison, the rational judge is further compelled to concede that judgements made in fields other than his own cannot objectively be deemed to be any better or worse than his own. Thus, we have landed in the realm of equal-validity.

For reasons that I won't explore in this paper, but which have been set out extensively and convincingly by authors such as Siegel (1987) and Boghossian (2006) I take it that such a view is unacceptable. Thus, the epistemologist must either find some account of fields that does not lead to such a relativism, or abandon them entirely.

In the remainder of this paper I will argue that, while there are valuable lessons to drawn from Toulmin's ideas about fields, evaluative theories of argument will best get by without them.

## 4. THE NATURE OF FIELDS

Recently, Roland (2008, pp. 240-242) has provided a useful inventory of the existing accounts of the nature of fields, which summarize (and amend slightly) as follows.

1.  Ontological: *Fields are subject matter domains* (and covary with ontological differences). (Klumpp 1981, p. 50)
2.  Anthropological: *Fields are communities of arguers or audiences* (and covary with human differences). (McKerrow 1980; Willard 1981, p. 24)

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[1] Importantly, as much as Toulmin (e.g., Toulmin 2006) rather ignored the relativistic consequences of his field-theory, it is seems clear that Toulmin would never embrace a relativism about facts. For example, the fact that argument A justifies claim C in field F is not itself field dependent fact. There is nothing in Toulmin to suggest that he views the facts giving rise to the data in some field or other as being field dependent. Rather, the limit of Toulmin's exposure to relativism seems to be about a special class of epistemic facts, eg., about whether argument A justifies claim C.

3. Linguistic: *Fields are domains of discourse* (and covary with linguistic or conceptual differences). (i) Epistemological: e.g., Kneupper's (1981, p. 81) "knowledge structures" and Wenzel's (1982, p. 204) "the propositional context of a disciplined rational enterprise with an epistemological purpose." (ii) Logical: (Godden 2003)

4. Sociological / Psychological: *Fields are (a) sociological or (b) psychological categories* (and covary with human or social or psychological differences). (i) Disciplinary: (Kneupper 1981; Klumpp 1981); (ii) Symbolic Structures: e.g., Gronbeck's (1981, p. 15) "collections of communicative rules"; (iii) Purely Psychological: Willard (1981)

5. Pragmatic: *Fields are practices* (which covary according to their pragmatic utility in problem-solving). (Roland 1981, 1982; Wenzel 1982; Hanson 1989)

While Roland (2008) argues that these different approaches are complementary rather than in competition with each other, it is not clear that this amalgamative approach[2] helps to solve the epistemological problems presented by many of the characterizations of fields here.

If the evaluative properties of arguments in fact depend on any of the psychological, sociological, anthropological, disciplinary, conceptual, linguistic, or symbolic, features of arguments then it seems that there is little prospect of avoiding the problem of equal validity. (So, combining them won't help either.) Let's consider a couple of examples.[3] If fields covary with audiences (NB: not the knowledge states of different audiences! but simply the audiences themselves) then what is a valid—not effective or persuasive—argument to one audience need not be valid for a different audience. Thus, that one audience finds an argument to be valid while another does not marks the final assessment that an evaluative theory of argument can give. Without any further measure to compare or evaluate them, each of these different findings must be equally valid.

Take a second example: suppose that fields are disciplinary. At first glace, the idea that the probative merits of an argument, or the acceptability of a claim, can vary from one discipline to the next seems to make some good sense. An argument about the chemical composition of a rock sample might be quite adequate in geology and quite inadequate in gemology. Yet should this be the final word on how the relative merits of arguments can be evaluated? Are there not some arguments of which we want to say that they are (no) good no good no matter what discipline belong to or are offered in? Do we really want to say that the prophecies of an astrologer are based on astrologically good arguments and leave it at that?

Put another way, one of the evaluative properties of arguments that is of paramount significance from an epistemological point of view is whether their premises provide good reasons for their conclusions. That is to say, whether, and to what degree, the truth of their premises establishes or demonstrates the truth—or likelihood—of their

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[2] It might be remarked that Toulmin himself seems quite content with this amalgamative approach to the nature of fields.

[3] For reasons that will become clear below, I do not reject the pragmatic approach just listed. Instead, I claim that the virtues of a pragmatic approach to argument assessment can be realized without invoking the problematic rubric of argument fields.

conclusions. The epistemic merits of an argument depend on whether, and to what degree, its premises conduct truth to its conclusion. Surely, in some disciplines (geology) we can accept a greater margin of error than in others (gemology). Thus different disciplines can adopt strict or lax standards according to their purposes. Yet, there are some arguments which *always* conduct truth from premises to conclusions, and the merits of such arguments should be recognized in every discipline. Similarly, there are other arguments which *entirely fail* to conduct truth from premises to conclusions. It does not approbate such arguments to say that they are in common circulation in some discipline, culture, practice or language game.

*An Attempt to Rescue Fields from Relativism*

Bermejo-Luque (2006) has recently argued that Toulminean fields do not entail epistemological relativism. She does this by focusing on the good idea that field-dependency pertains to the modality of claims: the criteria for the application of a modal term is field-dependent, while the force of a modal term is field-invariant. As she (2006, p. 72) puts it, for Toulmin "to argue is to try to establish the modality of a claim" and

> to evaluate an argument is to determine which modal qualification is appropriate for the claim, given the reason adduced for it, or whether the modal qualification provided by the arguer is correct or not.

As much as I applaud and agree with Bermejo-Luque's overall approach, I don't think that it saves Toulmin's view from the dangers of relativism. There are two main problems with this type of argument. First, it is not at all clear that the force of modal qualifiers really is field-invariant. For example, Toulmin describes the force of "impossible" as including "the implied injunction that something-or-other [i.e., some claim, *p*] has to be ruled out in this-or-that way for such-a-reason" and of "possible" as "[to] concede that it [again, some claim, *p*] has a right to be considered" (2003, p. 17). Yet, it is not clear that this entitlement to be considered, or ruling-out (obligation to exclude from consideration), really is invariant across fields. That something is technically or practically impossible does not mean that it should be ruled out from consideration in theoretical physics. Similarly, that something is logically possible does not mean that it merits consideration in a forensic or scientific investigation. Nor perhaps should its metaphysical impossibility exclude it from consideration in physics. Recall Kant's argument that it is metaphysically impossible that space be non-Euclidian. Physicists did not, nor should they have, ruled this out in advancing their theories. That something is theoretically impossible might mean that we should change our theory, not refrain from considering it as a possibility. Thus, the force of modal terms is not invariant across fields. That something merits consideration or should be ruled out in one context does not mean that it merits consideration or should be ruled out in some other context.

Perhaps, though, Toulmin means that the force of "physically impossible" is field invariant. Thus, that something is physically impossible does not mean that I should rule it out as a logical possibility. At this point, modal terms might well be field invariant, but it is no longer clear why we should accept that the *criteria* for establishing physical impossibility are field-dependent. Rather, it seems that every field is committed to the same criteria for establishing physical impossibility. Further, that different fields are

committed to different modal-criteria will be evidenced in that they treat the modal-force of claims differently.

Toulmin's claim concerning the difference between the criteria and force of modal terms seems to equivocate upon those modal terms. "Impossible" is interpreted as "impossibility *simpliciter*" when it comes to the field-dependency of the criteria and "physical impossibility" when it comes to the field-invariance of force. Sticking with the former, it seems that both force and criteria are field-dependent, while with the latter it seems that neither is field dependent.

A second problem arises when we note some additional 'modalities' of central interest when making and evaluating arguments: specifically truth and falsity. The claim that the force of "true" is field-dependent does not lead merely to the relativism of evaluative properties of argument, but to a full-blown relativism of all facts. Further, if the modalities of truth and falsity are field-dependent then claims across fields cannot even be compared. If field-A contains P amongst its truths, while field-B contains ~P, there is no genuine contradiction since P(field-A) is not a contradictory of ~P(field-B). To avoid the Doctrine of Equal Validity, the force of truth (as a modality) must be field-independent. But if this is so, then the criteria for this modality cannot be field-dependent.

## 5. LESSONS FROM TOULMIN

Toulmin (1989, pp. 380-381) sought to re-humanize the study of argument by distinguishing the formal and functional elements of argument, and changing the subject matter of argument from a "string of propositions" to a "human interchange." Many of the attempts to operationalize fields have sought to bring arguments closer to arguers as a way of finding more appropriate standards and means for evaluating them. In and of itself, this is a laudable project. Further, a number of useful insights can be drawn out of Toulmin's ideas about fields. Predominant among these might be the following:

1. *normative pluralism*: there are a number of non-equivalent, non-reducible standards of evidence against which inferences, including inferences used in arguments, can be measured / evaluated (Godden 2005)

2. *situationalism*: the standard of evidence used to evaluate a situated inference should be situationally appropriate (Godden 2005)

3. *pragmatism*: that standards of good argument ought to be relative to the goals of argumentation (or, a good argument is one which achieves its purpose) (Roland 2008)[4]

Yet, if these are the kinds of lessons to be learned from Toulmin's work, then it would seem that they can be implemented into workable normative theories of argument without any reliance on the problematic notion of fields whatsoever.

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[4] Notice that if normative pluralism is false, then pragmatism and situationalism are insignificant. The theses of pragmatism and situationalism are theses which guide rational actors in their selection of rational norms. If there are no normative options available, then guidelines for choices among them are not required.

## 6. CONCLUSION: DOING WITHOUT FIELDS

If what I have said in the preceding pages is correct then it is epistemically desirable to dispense with the notion of fields when evaluating arguments. How might this be done? One answer is to draw upon another idea from Toulmin's work: the warrant. Warrants, you will recall, are "general, hypothetical statements which can act as bridges [between datum and claim] and authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us" (2003, p. 91).

While Toulmin (2003, p. 93; 1992, p. 9) claimed that warrants are one of those field-dependent features of argument, recent work (primarily due to Hitchcock 1985, 1998 and Pinto 2006)[5] suggests that a robust and workable theory of warrants, suitable for the objective evaluation of argument, can be provided without reference to argument fields whatsoever.

A key feature of warrants is that they can be evaluated according to their truth conductivity or reliability.[6] While measures are entirely objective, preventing the slide to relativism, they can be applied in such a way as to make them relative to an arguer's goals or purposes, thus allowing for the situationalism and pragmatism that seem to follow as general mores of evaluation from Toulmin's work.

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[5] Building on Hitchcock's work, Pinto has advanced a normative theory of argument based on a qualitative evidence proportionalism (2006, p. 115-116) whereby

> the sort of doxastic attitude one adopts toward a proposition should be *appropriate* to the evident reasons which favor it" and where "rationality is a matter of making our *attitudes* towards propositions […] *appropriate to the evidence* which shapes them.

[6] Pinto (2006) offers a sketch of the reliability of warrants which he explicitly traces back to Toulmin (pp. 128-131) whereby "not all rules which are truth-preserving are fit to be relied upon, and […] not all inferences which are fit to be relied upon are truth-preserving" (p. 123). He does this by offering an explicitly pragmatic account of inferential virtue, whereby a good inference is, if I may put it crudely, one that gets you where you want to go. In doing this, Pinto (p. 127) shifts from a truth preservation conception of argument virtue to an entitlement preserving conception of argument virtue. It might be said that such warrants are satisficing rather than optimizing when it comes to their truth-preserving properties.

What is important to note for my purposes here is that, in focusing on the evaluation of warrants, one need not choose between a veritistic epistemology (Goldman 1999, p. 5) where the attaining of truth is ultimate goal of reasoning and argument, and a view which allows for a broader set of purposes by aiming instead at one some practically desirable degree of verisimilitude (cf. Pinto 2006, p. 115).

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