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# Commentary on Pinto

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**Author:** Derek Allen

**In Response to:** Robert C. Pinto's *Truth and Premiss Adequacy*

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In these comments I shall be mainly concerned with a selection of matters in Pinto's paper having to do with the relationship between premise truth and premise adequacy. The matters I shall consider will not include the topic of evidential asymmetry.

Truth is not necessary for premise adequacy if falsity in a premise never prevents the premise from being adequate. But this is not Pinto's view. Rather, he thinks that there are certain cases in which false premises are adequate; if this is so, then truth is not necessary for premise adequacy.

But though Pinto denies that truth is necessary for premise adequacy, he concedes that in certain cases "falsity in a premiss is a fault or defect in that premiss". The cases he has in mind are of the following sort: we have judged an argument to be good; later, we discover that the argument has a false premise, and this discovery causes us to reverse or qualify our earlier assessment of the argument; in such a case, Pinto holds, falsity in a premise is a fault or defect in that premise.

Here we might ask: *when* would (or, better, when *should*) discovering the falsity of a premise of an argument we had earlier judged to be good cause us to reverse or qualify our assessment of the argument? Pinto doesn't say. But remarks he makes later suggest he might say this: if the falsity of the premise significantly increases the risk that the conclusion is false, or cancels the probative force of the argument, then knowing this would (or should) cause us to reverse or qualify our earlier assessment of the argument. If Pinto would say this, he would also say, I take it, that falsity in a premise is a defect in that premise in either of these two cases, namely when it increases the risk that the conclusion is false, or when it cancels the probative force of the argument.

Does Pinto think that falsity in a premise is a defect *only* in cases where discovering to be false a premise of an argument we had earlier judged to be good would (or should) cause us to reverse or qualify our assessment of the argument? We might think so, given that he says that falsity in a premise is a defect in that premise "in *such* cases", where "such" is emphasized. But later Pinto presents an example of an inductive argument with many premises of which one or two inaccurately describe a few data points and are therefore false; Pinto says that the falsity of the one or two false premises "might well be considered a defect". He adds, however, that in the case of the inductive argument in question, it is not a defect that significantly increases the risk that the conclusion is false or cancels the probative force of the argument. Then I take it he would say that had we earlier judged the argument to be good and later discovered the falsity of the one or two false premises, this discovery would not (or should not) have caused us to reverse our earlier assessment of the argument. Nevertheless, the falsity of the premises, he holds, might well be considered a defect. If by this he means (as I believe he does) that the falsity of the one or two false premises might *properly* be considered a defect, we may ask why so. Since the falsity of the false premises does not significantly increase the risk that the conclusion is false, or cancel the probative force of the argument, it is hard to see what the answer could be except that the falsity of the premises is inherently a defect in them. But then falsity in a premise is *always* a defect. And, indeed, that falsity in a premise is always a defect is suggested by Pinto's talk of

"*tolerating* premiss falsity" in certain cases (emphasis added). But can Pinto say that falsity in a premise is always a defect consistently with what he says about the falsity of simplifying assumptions used as premises in an inductive argument? He says that the falsity of the assumptions should not be considered "a defect in the reasoning" -- at least not in the sort of case he chooses to illustrate the use of simplifying assumptions. If it is not a defect in the reasoning, does this mean that it is not a defect in the assumptions, or in the premises, of the argument? If so, then Pinto cannot consistently say that falsity in a premise is always a defect. As to whether he does think that falsity in a premise is always a defect, there is, I believe, conflicting evidence in his paper. But if he does think that falsity in a premise is always a defect, he must say that this defect need not prevent a premise from being adequate: he must say this, given that he holds that truth is not a necessary condition of premise adequacy. If, on the other hand, he holds that falsity in a premise *isn't* always a defect, he is free to say that when it is a defect, it always makes the premise inadequate.

It would be Jim Freeman's view that falsity in a premise always makes the premise inadequate. Pinto attributes to Freeman the following argument:

F1) Our epistemic goal in accepting an argument or making an inference is the acquisition of truth and the avoidance of falsehood.

F2) We have no reason to believe that false premises lead reliably to true conclusions.

Therefore,

F3) Truth of premises is a desideratum in inferences or arguments - i.e., we ought to prefer arguments with true premises to arguments with false premises.

Pinto holds that in the case of arguments that are not deductively valid, "it is possible that some subclasses of such arguments having false premisses may have an equal or greater probability of having true conclusions than do 'non-deductive' arguments having only true premisses". He gives two sorts of example, both of which I have already alluded to. The first of them I will call the "simplifying assumptions" example. Pinto says: "We often argue and reason from simplifying assumptions that we know to be false when we think that conclusions drawn from those assumptions have a high probability of being correct and when the simplifying assumptions will permit us to arrive at conclusions quickly and straightforwardly." Now the probability of the conclusions drawn from the assumptions is, of course, conditional on the assumptions -- that is, on their assumed truth. But, *ex hypothesi*, we know that they are false. Suppose we knew them to be not merely false but wildly inaccurate. Then our confidence in the correctness of the conclusions drawn from them would be low. If, however, we think that conclusions drawn from those assumptions have a high probability of being correct, even though we know the assumptions to be false, this can only be because we think that the assumptions are not wildly inaccurate, but are reasonably close approximations to the truth.

Pinto's second example compares two arguments that turn on inductive extrapolation of a relative frequency from a class of data points to a population. One of the arguments contains several thousand data points, of which all but one or two are accurately described. It is in connection with this imagined argument that Pinto says that "falsity of one or two premises - inaccuracy in the description of a few data points - might well be considered a defect but it is not a defect that significantly increases the risk that the conclusion is false, and is not ... a defect that cancels the probative force of the argument".

I believe that Pinto regards his two examples as counterexamples to the view that in the case of arguments that are not deductively valid, we ought (always) to prefer arguments with true premises to arguments with one or more false premises. The examples are not directed against Freeman's (F2) -- the claim that we have no reason to believe that false premises lead reliably to true conclusions. Nevertheless, I want to ask whether the examples refute (F2). Let us take them in reverse order. One of the arguments imagined in the second example has one or two false premises but many true premises, and its conclusion is highly probable on the premises. Is this a case in which we have reason to believe that false premises lead reliably to a true conclusion -- or to a conclusion that is probably true? I think not. Rather, it is a case in which we have reason to believe that the premises will lead to a conclusion that is very probably true because the conclusion is highly probable on the premises, and because all but one or two of the argument's many premises are true, and because, as Pinto puts it in a footnote, the likelihood that the conclusion is true "barely changes if (a) we subtract the erroneous data or (b) we substitute correct data for the erroneous data."

Next the "simplifying assumptions" example. Is a case of this sort one in which we have reason to believe that certain false premises will lead reliably to conclusions that have a high probability of being correct? I think it is. But the reason we have for believing this is that conclusions drawn from those premises are highly probable on those premises, and those premises, though false, are close approximations to the truth. For all the example shows, we have no reason to believe that false premises *as such* lead reliably to true conclusions.

The "as such" qualifier is surely implicit in Freeman's (F2) -- the claim that we have no reason to believe that false premises lead reliably to true conclusions. But then the claim is not refuted by Pinto's examples (not that he says otherwise).

Nevertheless, I find the first of those examples -- the "simplifying assumptions" example -- instructive in two ways, one of which relates to Pinto's criticism of a view I expressed in my 1997 OSSA paper (Allen 1997). There I said that a false proposition,  $p$ , has no tendency to show that a second proposition,  $q$ , is true. Pinto challenges this view. He holds that to *show* that a proposition,  $q$ , is true is to make it *evident* that  $q$  is true -- that is, it is to confer a certain epistemic status upon  $q$ . He further holds that for  $p$  to confer evidence upon  $q$  it is necessary not that  $p$  be true, but that  $p$  be reasonable to believe or accept. Two comments. First (and this Pinto would not deny), even if  $p$  is reasonable to believe or accept it may be false. Second, it can be made evident that  $q$  is true only if  $q$  is true. The thought I had in the paper to which Pinto is referring can be re-expressed as follows: it cannot be shown (that is, made evident) on the basis of a false proposition,  $p$ , that another proposition,  $q$ , is true. Or, to put it yet differently, if I argue " $p$ , therefore  $q$ ", and  $q$  is false, it cannot be the case that I thereby show (i.e., make evident) that  $q$  is true. Pinto does not refute this view in the section of his paper in which he comments directly on my 1997 OSSA paper. But he does persuade me by means of his "simplifying assumptions" example that in the case of "non-deductive" arguments it can be shown on the basis of false propositions that a further proposition is *probably* true -- but, I think, only if the false propositions are close approximations to the truth. This is one of the two ways in which I find that example instructive. The other can be stated more briefly: the example persuades me that truth is not after all necessary for premise adequacy; it does not persuade me, however, that a false premise can be adequate if it is not at least a close approximation to the truth.

But what about the "inductive extrapolation" example, in which one of the arguments has one or two false premises that for all we are told are not close approximations to the truth but

may be highly inaccurate? Does Pinto think that those premises, despite being false, are adequate -- that it is rational to accept them? He does not say, and I will not pursue the matter. Instead I will turn to remarks he makes at the end of his discussion of the argument of Freeman's that I stated above.

Pinto says that this argument "does bring into play the importance of considering the effect of tolerating premiss falsity when our goal is [to] encourage arguments whose conclusions are true. At this point it seems likely that we should want a criterion of premiss adequacy that tolerates false premisses in certain cases, but on the whole renders a negative verdict in the case of premisses that are false. But notice that making rational acceptance our criterion of premiss adequacy might well achieve this - if indeed premisses which it is reasonable to believe are for the most part true." I want to consider these remarks carefully.

First, note that here Pinto apparently equates rational acceptance with reasonable belief. But in a footnote to his "simplifying assumptions" example, he says that he is "now inclined to think that the criterion of premiss adequacy ought not to be formulated in terms of reasonable *belief* but in terms of reasonable *acceptance* - and in particular should turn on whether a premiss is reasonable to accept as a basis of reasoning in a particular context." But then when Pinto says that, on a certain condition, making rational acceptance our criterion of premiss adequacy might well achieve a criterion of premiss adequacy that tolerates false premisses in certain cases but on the whole renders a negative verdict on premisses that are false, surely he ought to have formulated that condition not in terms of reasonable belief but in terms of reasonable acceptance. He might then have said this: making rational acceptance our criterion of premiss adequacy might well give us a criterion of premiss adequacy that tolerates false premisses in certain cases but on the whole renders a negative verdict on premisses that are false -- if (and here is the reformulated condition) it isn't reasonable, other things being equal, to accept false premisses as a basis of reasoning at least when our goals are to accept arguments whose conclusions are true and not accept arguments whose conclusions are false. Three comments on this condition. (1) If what it says is true, then, given the "other things being equal" qualifier in the condition, a rational-acceptance criterion of premiss adequacy will tolerate false premisses in certain cases. (2) If what the condition says is true, then *in general* it isn't reasonable to accept false premisses as a basis of reasoning when our goals are to accept arguments whose conclusions are true and not accept arguments whose conclusions are false, and so a rational-acceptance criterion of premiss adequacy will on the whole render a negative verdict on premisses that are false. (3) The condition refers to the goals of accepting arguments whose conclusions are true and not accepting arguments whose conclusions are false. I formulated the condition in terms of these goals because in a footnote Pinto says: "two prominent contexts in which criteria of good argument will be employed are (1) the management of our individual and collective cognitive affairs and (2) the teaching of such things as critical thinking and reasoning skills. Among the most prominent goals operative in such contexts are the acceptance of arguments whose conclusions are true and the avoidance of arguments whose conclusions are false."

Next, suppose that we want a criterion of premiss adequacy that on the whole renders a negative verdict on false premisses. Then we must think that in general false premisses are not adequate. But then we will think that when we test a premiss for adequacy, part of what we must do is test it for truth or falsity. There are two scenarios to consider here. *Scenario 1*: We test the premiss for truth or falsity. If we find the premiss is false, we ask whether it nevertheless satisfies our criterion of premiss adequacy. If our criterion of premiss adequacy on the whole

renders a negative verdict on false premises, then, if the case is typical, the premise, being false, will not satisfy our criterion. *Scenario 2*: To appraise the premise by our criterion of premise adequacy *is*, in part, to test it for truth or falsity. If we find the premise is false, and if our criterion on the whole renders a negative verdict on false premises, then, if the case is typical, the premise will not satisfy our criterion.

If then our criterion of premise adequacy is rational acceptance, then on Scenario 1 it must be supplemented by a truth test, while on Scenario 2 an appraisal of a premise by that criterion will in part *be* a truth test. In either case, if we make rational acceptance our criterion for premise adequacy, we must still test premises for truth or falsity if we want our criterion on the whole to render a negative verdict on false premises.

A rational-acceptance criterion of premise adequacy might well render a negative verdict on false premises in typical cases, while tolerating false premises in certain cases, if (to repeat my reformulation of Pinto's condition) it isn't reasonable, other things being equal, to accept false premises as a basis of reasoning when our goals are to accept arguments whose conclusions are true and avoid arguments whose conclusions are false. But is it *true* that when we have these goals it isn't reasonable, other things being equal, to accept false premises as a basis of reasoning? An argument is needed here. And a premise of the argument (not, to be sure, the only premise, but *a* premise) might be Freeman's (F2) -- the claim that we have no reason to believe that false premises (i.e., false premises *as such*) lead to true conclusions. This claim, I have argued, is not refuted (nor does Pinto say it is) by Pinto's "simplifying assumptions" example or by his "inductive extrapolation" example. And Pinto might wish to avail himself of it in defense of the view that it isn't reasonable, other things being equal, to accept false premises as a basis of reasoning when we want to accept arguments whose conclusions are true and not accept arguments whose conclusions are false. Equally, and relatedly, he might wish to avail himself of (F2) to defend his view that when our goal is to encourage arguments whose conclusions are true, it seems likely we should want a criterion of premise adequacy that on the whole renders a negative verdict on false premises.

To conclude. The issue Pinto investigates in his paper is whether acceptability is a sufficient condition of premise adequacy, or whether truth must be recognized as an *additional requirement* that a premise must meet in order to be adequate. Truth fails to be an additional requirement of premise adequacy if it is not a *requirement* of premise adequacy or if it is a requirement of premise adequacy but is not a requirement *additional* to acceptability because (as a proponent of this view would hold) acceptability requires truth. Pinto holds that truth is not a requirement of premise adequacy, hence that it is not a requirement additional to acceptability. I think he is right that truth is not a requirement of premise adequacy, and that his "simplifying assumptions" example makes this evident. But I also think that for all Pinto's discussion shows, the following two propositions may both be true:

- 1) Other things being equal, in a context of argument appraisal in which our goals are to encourage or accept arguments whose conclusions are true, and not encourage or accept arguments whose conclusions are false, a premise is adequate only if it is true.
- 2) In such a context, a false premise may be adequate, but only if it is a close approximation to the truth.

As to whether acceptability is a sufficient condition of premise adequacy, I do not think that Pinto has yet shown that it is. Not because he has not shown that truth is not a requirement of premise adequacy (I think he has) but because he has not spelled out (indeed in his paper he says he will not there try to spell out) what acceptability is. Nor (and this would be a task that would presuppose some account of what acceptability is) has he provided protocols for deciding when a premise (in particular a false premise) is reasonable to accept as a basis of reasoning in a particular context. But of course he doesn't claim that his discussion of the issue he considers in his paper is final; rather, he says that he doesn't think it is.

### ***References***

Allen, Derek. 1997. "Should We Assess the Basic Premises of an Argument for Truth or Acceptability?" Hans V. Hansen, Christopher Tindale and Athena Coleman (eds.), *Argumentation and Rhetoric* CD-ROM (St. Catherines, ON: Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation).