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# Commentary on Asquith

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**In Response to:** Peter Asquith's *Theory Dependence, Context Dependence, Tacit Knowledge, and Informal Logic*

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1.

Asquith suggests that informal logic, or the theory or philosophy of argument, may be usefully compared with science. The basis for this analogy is to be found, he says, in a number of similarities. These are (1) both deal with complex situations; (2) both try to describe or reconstruct what is going on in those situations; (3) both are able to do so in various ways--that is, there is a plurality of feasible descriptions and reconstructions; (4) both seek to transmit to students and others claims about the subject area and skills of handling material; and (5) both use illustrations and examples. Yet, there is major difference, acknowledged by Asquith, namely (6), whereas science seeks to explain and predict what is going on, in informal logic, one seeks not to predict the nature of arguments, but to *evaluate* them.

This difference strikes me as crucial, and would deem the cited similarities to be somewhat less significant. Similarities (1) – (5) would apply as much to music analysis, law, book reviewing, film criticism, or ethics and science, as they do to informal logic or the theory of argument, and yet these pursuits are not scientific in any common sense of the term.

I see the interpretive and evaluative functions as central to any philosophical study of argument, and indeed these are emphasized by Asquith in his paper. In view of the centrality of *evaluation*, I find the analogy with Kuhn's theory of understanding and progress in science to be somewhat off-the-mark, especially if (as would seem to be the case here) we are looking primarily at the study of argument from within philosophy and informal logic, as distinct from linguistics or communication theory.

2.

Asquith says there are "linguistic, anthropomorphic, psychological, and rhetorical accounts of arguments. He does not tell us whose theory he would put in which category, nor does he mention logical, philosophical, or critical accounts – despite his later emphasis on interpretation and assessment. The categorization strikes me as a little strange and not terribly helpful. Later, Asquith refers to entailment theory (which I take to be what is commonly called Deductivism), dialogue theory, and doubt theory. His references cite works by Johnson and Blair and by myself, but it is not clear in which of these categories our work would fall; nor is clear whether the pragma-dialectical theories of Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, and their Amsterdam colleagues would count as dialogue theories or as doubt theories. Asquith's point that different and incompatible things are going on in informal logic (or, if you prefer, Argumentation Theory, or the theory or philosophy of argument) is quite correct--and this may be regrettable--but his survey of what's happening seems selective and a little hasty.

## 3.

Despite these *caveats*, it may be useful to reflect on the present state of these disciplines from a broadly Kuhnian perspective. It seems to me clear that there is no one paradigm accepted by the scholars who study argument and informal logic. I cannot pronounce so confidently on linguistics and communication studies, so I will stay within *philosophy*, which is also Asquith's home discipline and also highly relevant as the discipline within which most courses on critical thinking and practical argument are commonly taught. Within philosophy it is not entirely obvious that the lack of a paradigm is regrettable. Questions tend to fall within philosophy precisely because they are intractable and admit of various responses. In comparable areas of normative philosophy such as ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of law, there are commonly several actively promulgated theories, not one accepted paradigm. By and large, philosophy tends not to have the hierarchical power structures that favor the dissemination of paradigms – although some individuals, locations, texts and institutions do have more power or influence than others.

Suppose that there are--as I think there are--several distinct, rather plausible, ways of reconstructing an argument from a conversation or an oral text. (For example, one might, for example, add 'missing premises' or 'missing conclusions', or delete or rearrange background material according to several different policies or not at all; one might take written arguments as a basis for approaching oral ones, or vice versa.) If this is the case, it is not clear that things would somehow be better if we were to all accept the same approach, on the basis of some kind of paradigm or exemplar we all agreed to adopt as the basis for our research and teaching. Asquith is correct in his observation that there is no paradigm in argument studies/informal logic, but whether this lack is regrettable, and why it is or isn't, seem to me to be highly discussable and important issues.

## 4.

The examples cited by Asquith seem to me to be too short, simple and clear to be suitable paradigms for a discipline founded on the claim that formal logic could not plausibly describe, interpret, and evaluate many arguments in natural language.

## 5.

I now come to the issue of the reconstruction of arguments and the viability of *ceteris paribus* rules. I appreciate Asquith's reference to my work in "The Poverty of Formalism" and agree with his sense that if there are going to be rules in this area, they will be *ceteris paribus* rules. However, I would take issue with some of what he says about *ceteris paribus* rules. Asquith says there are two possibilities if one attempts to learn how to reconstruct arguments by using such rules. Either (a) one will have available a full listing of all the conditions under which things are equal or not; or (b) one will have a set of rules that one can use to apply the *ceteris paribus* rules. I agree with Asquith that (b) is a non-starter because it will lead to a regress of rules. I also agree that we do not have (a).

Note, however, that such gaps do not appear only in the area of informal logic and the study of argument. If I say that other things being equal, if you throw a lit match onto a wheatfield, you will cause a fire, this too is a *ceteris paribus* remark. And if I say that if you

throw a lit match onto a wheatfield you will cause a fire, that claim can be true only if it is interpreted as having an implicit *ceteris paribus* qualification. Such claims may be acceptable and useful without my listing all the things that might possibly intervene to prevent a fire. (Somebody comes along with water guns and sprays the match; there is a sudden storm; a dog happens to urinate in just the spot where the match lands, at just the right time to put out the flame; and so on and so forth. Note: *and so on and so forth*, which is the most important part here.). The same is true, I think, if I say that *ceteris paribus*--other things being equal, 'normally' or *prima facie*--people should keep their promises. Such generalizations play a fundamental role in science and in life. They do not become unintelligible or useless because we are unable to give an exhaustive list of *all* the ways (a massive invasion, a sudden disability, insanity on the part of one of the parties, the need to run off to save a life, or whatever) in which normal circumstances might fail to obtain.

## 6.

Two questions arise here. First, is it a tough problem for the theory and pedagogy of argument evaluation, that one has to use *ceteris paribus* rules when offering guidance on the tough topic of argument interpretation and reconstruction? Second, if this is a problem, could it be solved by the use of exemplars serving (roughly) the role of Kuhnian paradigms? These are both deep questions, and I can only suggest answers in the time allowed to me here. To the first question, I am inclined to say that we are going to have to use judgment in applying rules, and this is inevitable not only in informal logic but in many other pursuits. The more specific and clear our rules are, the better, and the more agreement we have on how to use them, the better. But I don't think the elimination of *ceteris paribus* clauses is going to be possible. And I would submit that if formal logic rules are going to be applied to arguments expressed in natural language, *ceteris paribus* rules will also be needed at some points, as regards translation from a natural language to a formal one. I am not convinced that we have a deep problem here.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we do. Then the question would be, could we solve this problem by having a paradigm or exemplar, which would in some way embody and communicate *tacit knowledge*? The suggestion is a deeply interesting one, I think. Let me note that most textbook authors include examples and illustrations as well as rules, on such matters as argument reconstruction. By this practice, they suggest that some work is done by the examples, some by the rules--and that seems to me to be realistic. To use the exemplar as an exemplar, one would have to see how and why other cases were relevantly similar to it, and the articulated rules would specify some of the features to look for.

Is Asquith suggesting that roughly Kuhnian paradigms would be exemplars so powerful that there would be no need to articulate any rules alongside them? ('Here is an argument with a missing conclusion, indicated by a rhetorical question couched in emotionally loaded language.') The textbook author would not even need to say that *generally*, in such cases, the writer or speaker is making a claim that *may*, given the presence of other statements plausibly construable as premises, be interpreted as a conclusion. His or her example would be so vivid and powerful that it would stand alone. This does not seem to me plausible.)

Good examples on which there is broad agreement can be powerful tools for teaching and research, but it seems to me that they would suggest *ceteris paribus* rules, rather than replacing them. What *ceteris paribus* rules point to is the need for judgment. I suspect that the notion of

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tacit knowledge, far from replacing the need for judgment, is another way of pointing to the fact that some people seem to have it while others don't. They have this tacit knowledge of context, or background, or relevant skills, or whatever. And if we try to spell out what this tacit knowledge amounts to, we will have trouble. After all, it's *tacit* knowledge, that's the point. I suspect that, in attempting to understand tacit knowledge, we will arrive back at *ceteris paribus* rules or something like them. But I won't claim to know this is right--not even tacitly.