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Commentary on Godden

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Commentary on: D. Godden's "Reconstruction and Representation: Deductivism as an Interpretive Strategy"

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David Godden has written a rich paper that makes one think about a lot of things. The scope of the paper is not restricted to the issue of Deductivism. For instance the claim that the Theory of Analysis needs to be independent of the Theory of Appraisal will be relevant for an assessment of Positivism and Conductivism as well (Cf. Johnson 2000, 45, 81. 84). I shall have to restrict my comment to a few issues. First, I want to have a closer look at different kinds of argument appraisal and argument analysis (Section 1). Then, I shall challenge the idea that the Theory of Analysis is independent of the Theory of Appraisal (Section 2), and see what follows for Deductivism (Section 3). I shall briefly discuss some of Godden's arguments against Deductivism (Section 4), and shall end with some conclusions (Section 5).

1. Goals of Analyses and Appraisals

A large part of David Godden's paper is devoted to a critical assessment of deductivistic reconstruction as an approach to the analysis of arguments. But whether Deductivism, or any other approach, can provide us with a good strategy of analysis (interpretative strategy) depends on what the analysis is supposed to achieve. Godden's interest is with arguments actually transacted (situated, natural arguments, or arguments on the hoof, as John Woods would say), with their analysis, and with their appraisal. The ultimate goal is the appraisal of these arguments; but to appraise them we must know what they are, and for this we need a Theory of Analysis: to tell us what this or that argument really is. Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis (that is: the interpretative strategy of understanding arguments as attempts to present deductively valid arguments) is one candidate that promises to fit the bill.

Different kinds of argument appraisal may be distinguished according to their different purposes. A participant in dialogue, for instance, may want to spot the weak points in her opponent's argument, in order to be able to best select her next move. A reader of an essay written in objection to a road building project may be primarily interested in whether or not he will now accept the conclusion. These are two types of participant situations. But, besides participant situations, there are spectator situations (cf. Govier 1987, 128). And again, spectators may orient them themselves towards various companies of discussants that differ in their normative standards about what constitutes a good argument.

Now one may wonder whether one and the same strategy of analysis of an argument suffices for all these different kinds of appraisal. Can we suppose there is something which is really the argument transacted, and that this object is just appraised from different perspectives? Or could it be that different kinds of appraisal pertain to different objects, and therefore presuppose a different kind of analysis? And if so, might it not be that Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis provides a good strategy for some kinds of appraisal, but not for others? For instance, could it be a good strategy when looking for "issues that need to be addressed in dialectical

exchange" (Groarke 1999, 9), but a poor one when a fast decision on whether to accept the conclusion is called for? In that case The Theory of Analysis would be dependent upon the Theory of Appraisal. But Godden claims the first must remain completely independent of the second.

2. Is the Theory of Analysis Independent of the Theory of Appraisal?

According to Godden, the descriptive project (finding out what the argument is) must remain completely independent from the evaluative one (the critical assessment). Though, no doubt, these two need to be carefully distinguished, I cannot at present agree with the idea that the former is wholly independent of the latter. However, if one accepts this idea of independence, it is clear that Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis won't work. A deductivist interpretative strategy in argument analysis tries to reconstruct arguments as valid. Since 'validity' is a concept from the Theory of Appraisal, deductivist strategies will mix things up.

This fast dismissal of Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis fails if one tolerates that the Theory of Analysis be, to a certain extent, informed by the Theory of Appraisal. In my view, we hardly have a choice in the matter, given that a purely descriptive approach to argument is impossible. But why is it impossible? The reason is a general one, and therefore rather trivial. It's the observation that describing any human activity is rather pointless if one does not take into account the point of the activity. For instance, what to say about a game of soccer? Why run after a ball of leather and then, when you finally get it, kick it away again? A physical description of the movements of players in the field misses the point; it doesn't get to the argument of the play. It will not do as a description preparing for evaluation. Neither will the hustle and bustle on the stock exchange make much sense when described in physical terms. Nor does your web page in machine language.

Similarly, argumentation must be described as a goal-directed activity, and to describe it in that way one needs normative concepts. The natural place to find these concepts is the Theory of Appraisal. Therefore, the Theory of Analysis must borrow some concepts from the Theory of Appraisal and cannot in all respects be independent of it.

3. Consequences for Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis

According to Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis, the interpretative strategy to be used in argument analysis makes one understand these arguments as attempts to put forward deductively valid arguments. Here the concept of "deductive validity" has been borrowed from the Theory of Appraisal. But if there is any good in what was said in the preceding section, this need not be held against Deductivism.

Of course, it does not follow that Deductivism provides what is in all respects a good Theory of Analysis. Let alone that its type of analysis would be good for all different purposes of argument appraisal. Deductivism may give us the right interpretative strategy for the "game of deductive persuasion", but not for that of other persuasion games. In fact, Godden presents some good arguments that detract from Deductivism's plausibility as a universally applicable strategy.

4. Does Deductivism provide a good strategy?

As Godden remarks in Section 6 of his paper: if Deductivism as a Theory of Appraisal were true, that is, if all good arguments were deductively valid, so would Deductivism as a Theory of Analysis. But in Section 9 of his paper it is shown that Deductivism as a Theory of Appraisal fails. There are other standards of evidence than that of validity and these standards cannot, generally, be reduced to validity. Therefore, it is not the case that only deductively valid arguments are good arguments.

To lend plausibility to the claim that a reduction of other standards to the validity standard is not feasible, Godden points out that deductively valid arguments are incapable of carrying evaluative predicates such as 'probability' or 'plausibility' from premises to conclusion. We know that if C follows deductively from A and B, and A and B are both true, C must also be true. And the same may perhaps be said for 'certainty'. (And for 'necessity' and 'possibility' we may add.) But if C follows deductively from A and B, and both A and B are probable (to a certain degree), C need not be probable (to the same degree). This is illustrated by the Lottery Paradox. Therefore, probable arguments cannot, generally, be reconstructed as deductive arguments from probable premises to probable conclusions. And therefore there is an irreducible plurality of standards of evidence.

I think this is an interesting argument, even though it does not exclude that other methods of reduction may be put forward. A closer analysis of the ways deductive (and other) standards of evidence relate to ways of fixing commitments is also needed.

In Section 10 of his paper, Godden shows the weakness of the so-called semantic arguments for Deductivism.

In his Section 11, Godden admits that theorists may sometimes have a special interest in deductive validity. In such cases he advises the deductivists to split the defense: Deductivism may, in circumstances, provide a good evaluative strategy (applying deductive standards, presumably without claiming that these are the only ones) but a bad interpretative one.

5. Conclusions

- (1) I think David Godden and I agree that there is no proof up till now for the correctness of Deductivism, either as a Theory of Appraisal or as a Theory of Analysis.
- (2) On the other hand, there is no proof either that Deductivism of either type cannot provide a good strategy in a number of types of context. If only because showing that the arguments of the deductivists are not cogent does not suffice to dismiss their position.
- (3) Theorists can have a legitimate interest in deductive standards, for this they do not need to subscribe to either kind of Deductivism.
- (4) Contrary to what David Godden supposes, I think it is legitimate to let the Theory of Analysis be informed by the Theory of Appraisal, to some extent.

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