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Robert C. Pinto  
*University of Windsor*

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# Reasons, Warrants and Premisses

ROBERT C. PINTO

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Windsor  
401 Sunset Avenue  
Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4  
pinto@uwindsor.ca*

**ABSTRACT:** I am interested in three questions that arise when one wants to deploy the idea of “rules of inference” which don’t reduce to logical truths, questions whose significance will become salient if we compare the two slightly different proposals that have been made by David Hitchcock and Stephen Toulmin. The three questions I’m interested in are these:

- a) What *form* should the statements that express such rules take? For example, in Hitchcock’s account, they typically have the form of a certain kind of “covering generalization” which contains no explicit normative expressions. In Toulmin’s, when warrants are “made more explicit” (Toulmin 2003 [1958]: 91) normative expressions occur in them.
- b) What *virtues* must *arguments and inferences* have if they are to be considered valid? Should we say that they must be truth-preserving? Or, with “inductive” arguments in mind, should we say that they must at least be such that it’s unlikely that their conclusions are false given that their premisses are true? But what about the possibility of “practical” arguments and inferences whose conclusions are intentions or prescriptions – things whose “propriety” does not consist in their being true? Should we say, using an expression drawn from Brandom, that what matters about inferences is whether they are *entitlement-preserving*?
- c) What *virtues* must *rule statements* have if they are to be *fit* to serve as norms for evaluating arguments and inferences? How we answer this question will, of course, depend very much on how we answer the preceding question. Hitchcock, for example, takes rules to be covering generalizations of a certain sort and often (though not always) appears to take *truth* to be the sole virtue such generalizations need if they are to confer validity on arguments. Toulmin, on the other hand, typically says that warrants must be *reliable*, and that they derive their “authority” from backing which shows that they are reliable. Such a conception might lead us in a quite different direction, and might possibly prove more robust.

The paper has five parts.

## 1. WHAT FORM OUGHT WARRANTS TO TAKE? HITCHCOCK’S ACCOUNT

Hitchcock’s account, as developed in a series of papers from 1985 to 1998, is reviewed and explained. In that account, one or more potential warrants can be extracted from any argument or inference containing “repeated content expressions,” by generating “a covering generalization”

formed by quantifying over one or more repeated context expressions in its “associated conditional.”

## 2. WHAT VIRTUES SHOULD ARGUMENTS AND RULES OF INFERENCE HAVE?

Hitchcock’s account is used to bring into focus questions concerning the virtues we should demand of rules of inference. Reflection on Hitchcock-type covering generalizations reveals several different “virtues” which might be thought to make such generalizations *fit* to serve as rules of inference – e.g., that they be true of the actual world, true in all “logically” possible worlds, true in all “semantically” possible worlds or true in all “nomically” possible worlds. None of these potential virtues appears to suffice.

Moreover, since there are good arguments which are not truth-preserving, none of the virtues considered so far would seem to be a necessary condition on rules of inference either.

## 3. AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF ARGUMENT VIRTUE

The common idea that arguments and inferences provide *justification* for their conclusions is unpacked as follows. An argument justifies its conclusion if and only if it *shows*<sup>1</sup> that it is *reasonable* to embrace (perhaps to assert) that conclusion, given that its premisses are reasonable to accept. An inference justifies its conclusion if and only if it *makes it reasonable* to embrace (perhaps to accept) that conclusion, given that its premisses are reasonable to accept.

To conceive of good arguments and inferences as those which *justify* their conclusions in such ways is to adopt the idea that good arguments are entitlement-preserving arguments. To adopt such a conception is to model or ground argument appraisal on epistemology rather than on logic as traditionally conceived.<sup>2</sup>

Two arguments are offered in support of the contention that the virtues of good *defeasible* inferences cannot be understood without invoking terms of epistemic appraisal. Though these two arguments may fall short of offering conclusive reasons for shifting from a truth-preserving approach to an entitlement-preserving approach, they provide sufficient motivation for investigating the potential such a shift in our approach to argument virtue might have.

## 4. THE FORM OF WARRANTS REVISITED: AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT BASED ON FEATURES OF TOULMIN’S TREATMENT OF ARGUMENTS

The paper identifies six features of Toulmin’s account of arguments and warrants which, in my view, any account of warrants should incorporate or make provision for.

In light of these six features, I sketch a quick, preliminary account of the *form* that warrants or rules of inference should take. The form is generated by enhancing a Hitchcock-type

<sup>1</sup> By “showing that such-and-such” I do not have in mind “providing grounds for concluding that such-and-such”, but rather *making it manifest* that such-and-such is the case. Presenting an *argument* for a proposition *makes it apparent* that it is reasonable to accept that proposition because in presenting the argument one *brings to light* the considerations that *make it reasonable* to accept that proposition. Recall Wittgenstein’s distinction between saying and showing in the *Tractatus*.

<sup>2</sup> Because logic as traditionally conceived studies the *truth*-preserving potential of arguments, even attempts at developing inductive and non-monotonic logics, I think it is fair to say, focus on truth-preserving potential.

covering generalization so that, for a given argument, we get a formula that looks roughly like this:

W3 (S)(x) If it is reasonable for S to suppose<sub>i</sub> that x is F then it is reasonable for S to suppose<sub>j</sub> that x is G.

In this formula, ‘suppose’ is employed as a generic term for positive doxastic attitudes,<sup>3</sup> and the subscripts ‘i’ and ‘j’ signal that different “species” of supposing can be referenced in the antecedent and consequent. For example, being reasonably *certain* that someone is a clergyman might make it reasonable to *expect* that he believes in God (without making it reasonable to be certain that he does). In my telling, a *functional* account of the doxastic attitudes is presupposed – an account in which doxastic attitudes are type-identified in terms of the *role* they accord their propositional contents within our cognitive economy.

## 5. WHAT VIRTUES SHOULD WARRANTS HAVE?

The concluding part of the paper explores the question of what makes a warrant *a good or acceptable warrant*. Following Toulmin, I suppose that acceptable warrants are *reliable* warrants. But of course (a) ‘reliable’ is itself already a term of appraisal (it means *fit to be relied upon*) and (b) invoking reliability is not much help until we spell out what reliability consists in.

A brief account of the reliability of warrants is offered, whose principal points are these. A warrant *endorses an inferential practice*, and endorses it under a *particular description*. A warrant is reliable if and only if the inferential practice it endorses is reliable (fit to be relied on). An inferential practice is reliable if its outcomes regularly (a) *serve the purposes* that have prompted us to rely on that inferential practice in the first place<sup>4</sup> and (b) do so *in the circumstances under which we rely on that practice* (as, for example, the practice of calculating gravitational forces using Newton’s inverse square law yields outcomes that serve the purposes of most engineers and physicists in the circumstances under which they rely on that practice). As a result, the reliability of an inferential practice is highly sensitive to the purposes – many of them non-epistemic purposes – that prompt reliance on inference. Moreover, the reliability of an inferential practice depends on *objective likelihoods*. But an objective likelihood can only be calculated with respect to a *reference class*.<sup>5</sup> The appropriate reference class for determining the objective likelihood of successful outcome must be fixed by the typical circumstances in which an inferential practice has been or will be relied upon. As a result, though the reliability of the

<sup>3</sup> We could make the form of warrant more general still if we (i) permit more than one attitude to be mentioned in the antecedent and (ii) admit propositional attitudes other than doxastic attitudes into the position occupied by supposing and its species– that is to say, admit things such *desiring it to be the case that, intending that, fearing that* to occur where supposing occurs. For example, we could then treat the following as a warrant: If it is reasonable for someone to desire that X be the case and to suppose that by doing A he/she could make X the case, then it is reasonable for that person to intend to do A. Warrants of this sort would enable us to accommodate the points made in my 1990 paper “Generalizing the notion of argument,” reprinted as chapter 2 of Pinto (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Recall that the outcome of inferential practices as conceived here is the adoption of one or another positive doxastic attitude toward a propositional content. An outcome may be deemed successful if adopting that attitude was appropriate and did no harm, even though the propositional content in question happens to be false. The upshot of a good inductive inference with a false conclusion *might* be considered successful, so long as the attitude adopted toward the false conclusion was an *appropriate* one and adopting it did not have significant negative consequences.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Brandom’s use of a similar point in his assessment of reliability theories of perceptual knowledge – for example in chapter 3 of Brandom (2000).

practice of expecting that a man believes in God when we know he is a clergyman will depend on an objective likelihood, the objective likelihood on which it depends *need not coincide with the objective likelihood that a man is a believer given that he's a clergyman*. What will matter will be the objective likelihood (a) of arriving at *an appropriate doxastic attitude* (b) when relying on the practice *in the typical circumstances in which it has been or will be relied upon*.

The upshot of these points is an account which makes the “authority” of warrants depend in part on the non-epistemic values of those whose reasoning is to be evaluated by reference to them, and makes the reliability of warrants highly context-sensitive. For these two reasons it might be called a pragmatic account of the authority of warrants. But *the position defended is not a “subjectivism” about warrants*, since it makes the authority of warrants depend on objective likelihoods. And because the position carefully distinguishes between entitlement-preserving rules and truth-preserving rules, it can *embrace a pragmatism about rules without embracing a pragmatist account of truth*.

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