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Commentary on “Some Outstanding Questions about Analogies”

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1. Preliminary remarks

Professor Govier’s paper includes both important insights and interesting examples. She draws our attention to short analogical arguments involving two cases. That the arguments involve only two cases, one source and one target, distinguishes the subject matter of her paper from what some other scholars have discussed. For example, Scott Brewer’s (1996) work on what he refers to as exemplary reasoning (or reasoning from exemplars) attempts to reconstruct analogical arguments in a way that tends to involve more than two cases. Consider his schematic:

Where x, y, z are individuals and F, G, H , are predicates of individuals:

Step 1: z has characteristics F, G, \dots

Step 2: x, y, \dots have characteristics F, G, \dots

Step 3: x, y, \dots also have characteristic H .

Step 4: The presence in an individual of characteristics F, G, \dots provides sufficient warrant for inferring that H is also present in that individual.

Step 5: Therefore, there is sufficient warrant to conclude that H is present in z .
(Brewer 1996, p. 996)

In ethics, law, or contexts of action assessment, x, y , and z are cases, and Brewer makes it clear that we are not restricted to three, that very many cases may be involved in abducting a generalisation from which we infer a conclusion about a case. In the limiting scenario, it may be that there is only one source and one target, and in that scenario, we have a reconstruction that is, in important respects, similar to Bruce Waller’s (2001) reconstruction. Elsewhere (Guarini 2004) I have argued against this type of reconstruction on the grounds that it requires a deductive reconstruction, so I am very much sympathetic to Govier’s position on non-deductively reconstructing analogical arguments. That said, I do not want to deny that there is something helpful in Brewer’s schematic reconstruction, though teasing out exactly what that is and how it contrasts with simpler arguments where two cases are at issue is a topic for another paper. For this commentary, I simply want to start by reinforcing that what Govier is discussing are arguments where two cases are at issue. How those cases may be related to a range of other cases is not at issue. And if it becomes an issue, then other kinds of argumentative moves may become relevant. However, from the existence of more complex argumentative scenarios involving case-based reasoning, it does not follow that the simpler scenarios require the argumentative strategies or tools of those more complex scenarios. A reconstruction like Brewer’s forces us to treat the simpler two case scenario – one source and one target – as a kind of limiting case (or degenerate version?) of a more elaborate process. There is something to be said for examining the simpler

cases to see if they can be treated in a more direct manner. One does not need to force them into a mould they do not fit. So, even if, in the end, there is a Brewer-like role for abducting some sort of generality from a wide range of source cases to argue for a conclusion about some target case, it does not follow that the simpler two-case arguments should be understood in the same way.

Govier treats the examples she focuses on as both non-deductive and *a priori*. The rest of this commentary is focused on some of the complexities involved in treating these examples as *a priori*. The first main point will be that at least some of them have a strong empirical dimension. The point will not be to deny that there are examples of analogies where the evaluation or assessment involves more in the way of reflective/*a priori* work than empirical work; rather, in a sense, it will be to make good on Govier's point that, "... the distinction between *a priori* and empirical can be somewhat wobbly" (these proceedings). I will express a preference for thinking of these arguments as coming on a sliding scale, where arguments can be more or less *a priori* or empirical. The second main point will consist in motivating the need for more work on how analogies can be *a priori* (or on that part of the scale) and non-deductive. Part of the process of doing this will involve showing that what Govier and Freeman are endorsing, analogies that are *a priori* and non-deductive, are in good intellectual company. A full examination of the issue would be too ambitious for a commentary, so the goal will be to sketch out why more could and should be said.

2. How *a priori* is it?

Govier draws on Freeman's (2013) work without committing herself to the details of his position. Both agree that in *a priori* analogies, there is an *a priori* element over and above other considerations that may be empirical, though as quoted above, Govier recognises that the distinction between *a priori* and empirical is not always so clear cut. Her examples bear this out. Consider example E in her paper (quoted from the appendix).

Example E. David Hitchcock, with regard to the issue of whether good reasoning should be taught by the teaching of fallacies, states that to claim that we should teach good reasoning by fallacies is "like saying that the best way to teach somebody to play tennis without making the common mistakes ... is to demonstrate these faults in action and get him to label and respond to them." <David Hitchcock, "Do Fallacies Have a Place in the Teaching of Reasoning Skills or Critical Thinking?" in Hans V. Hansen and Robert C. Pinto, editors, *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.> (Govier, these proceedings).

As Govier puts it, the conclusion of this analogical argument is that, "Good reasoning and critical thinking should not be taught through fallacies." To be sure, the conclusion contains an assessment about action (i.e. how to teach), and this is a common thing in analogies in ethics, law, and other areas that Govier would treat as *a priori*. That said, what is or is not an effective way to teach someone surely involves empirical considerations. The normative term "should" may mask what is a predictive or, at least, a partially predictive claim: that teaching someone in a certain way will, in fact, not work (or not work as well as another approach). But which pedagogical approaches will or will not work at achieving specific goals is an *empirical*

question. Depending on the details of how we would reconstruct this analogy, it might contain a premise or an assumption like,

T: how we teach should or ought to take into consideration empirical results on what actually helps us meet our educational goals.

T might well be said to be *a priori*. It might be said to embody a pedagogical intuition about good teaching. Moreover, someone could add to this that there is more to how we should teach than empirical data. For example, perhaps there is empirical data showing some technique is effective, but it turns out that it is highly unethical as well. And perhaps those ethical considerations are something that can be held to be *a priori*. So, T does not exhaust what is involved in good teaching, but it is an important contributor. Indeed, in this analogy, what seems to be at issue is not something purely or even largely *a priori*. The issue seems not to be about ethical constraints or the like, but on what *actually* works, and surely the evaluation of this analogy would largely turn on just that empirical consideration. A claim about how we *should* or *should not* teach may be a mix of empirical and non-empirical considerations, and depending on the details of how we might want to interpret what Hitchcock was claiming, at the very least, there is a *very* strong empirical dimension to this analogy. Indeed, even if we treat T as *a priori*, it is unlikely that T will be questioned in this argument. For those who would disagree with Hitchcock, the issue will almost surely be empirical.

This is not the only example of “*a priori*” analogy where empirical considerations tend to dominate. Let us have a look at the second half of Govier’s Example G, where Paul Krugman is remarking on whether European technocrats were being coherent in their recommendations for Greece.

“What’s more, they weren’t. The truth is that Europe’s self-styled technocrats are like medieval doctors who insisted on bleeding their patients – and when their treatment made the patients sicker, demanded even more bleeding.” Krugman then defends this second analogy, saying, “A ‘yes’ vote in Greece would have condemned the country to years more of suffering under policies that haven’t worked and in fact, given the arithmetic, can’t work: austerity provably shrinks the economy faster than it reduces debt, so that all the suffering serves no purpose.” <Paul Krugman, “Ending Greece’s Bleeding,” *New York Times* July 5, 2015.> (Govier, these proceedings)

The comparison between medieval doctors and European technocrats is more than a little thought provoking, and an important part of the reason it is so thought provoking is (a) the empirical understanding that if bleeding someone makes them worse, then bleeding them more will make them worse still, and (b) Krugman’s empirical claim that austerity shrinks the economy faster than it reduces debt, meaning that further austerity will make things worse still. Govier characterises the conclusion of Krugman’s argument as, “Europe’s technocrats should not prescribe austerity measures for Greece” (Govier, these proceedings). To be sure, as with example E, this is another normative conclusion about action. Depending on the details of how we would reconstruct this argument, perhaps a premise or assumption along the following lines would be included:

P: what we prescribe for other people should avoid making those other people worse off.

Someone might claim that they have an *a priori* intuition that P is the case. Even if that is true, attempts to apply P in examples like the one we have just seen will make *extensive* use of empirical considerations. We would not even have a chance of assessing whether bleeding people and recommending economic austerity are relevantly analogous without *extensive* consideration of the empirical evidence.

I am not suggesting that all of Govier's examples are like this. In example H, the conclusion is, "Four Muslim students should be permitted not to appear in a school photograph supporting diversity" (Govier, these proceedings). The comparison here is with abstaining from a petition. This example seems to rely much less on empirical considerations and more directly on a normative (*a priori*) intuition on when it is appropriate or inappropriate to abstain from some activity.

As Govier suggested, the distinction between *a priori* and empirical is "wobbly." It might be thought of as a kind of sliding scale, where arguments might depend more or less on empirical considerations. What Govier has called *a priori* analogical arguments I have referred to as classificatory analogies (Guarini, 2004). I have no objection to referring to the *a priori* dimensions or aspects of arguments, and in what follows, I will assume that when we refer to *a priori* analogical arguments, we are referring to arguments that are closer to the *a priori* pole of a sliding scale than arguments that are more thoroughly empirical.

3. *A priori* and non-deductive?

The paradigmatic examples of claims endorsed, assessed, or known *a priori* tend to come from domains where *deductive* arguments are central. The claims of mathematics are, perhaps, the best examples. Outside of mathematics, analytic truths such as, "bachelors are unmarried," can be used in deductive entailments. So, how is it, that there are analogies that can at once be non-deductive and still make use of *a priori* claims?

In starting to reflect on this question, it might be helpful to find good company, i.e. examples of paradigmatic *a priori* claims being used in non-deductive contexts. It turns out, perhaps surprisingly to some, that mathematics is helpful for this purpose. The deductive first order proofs can be seen as involving *a priori* claims, but where things get really interesting, for our purposes, is when we start looking at analogical arguments about how to prove a theorem; these are second order arguments about the first order proofs or arguments. Chapter five of Paul Bartha's *By Parallel Reasoning* is devoted to analogies in mathematics. He emphasises their importance for different reasons. One is that "mathematical similarities can be stated in precise terms" (Bartha, p. 152). Another reason "is the widespread agreement that analogical reasoning in mathematics works – that careful analogical arguments really do make their conclusions plausible" (Bartha, p. 152). Bartha emphasizes that the role of analogies in mathematics is to make it plausible that a conclusion is true, not to guarantee its truth deductively. He insists that the

Criteria used to evaluate the plausibility of analogical arguments must not depend on the final mathematical theory – otherwise they would be, practically speaking, useless. Furthermore, realistic criteria should be fallible: they should pronounce

some conjectures plausible even though they turn out to be false, and other conjectures implausible although they turn out to be true. (Bartha, p. 185)

He outlines three different types of similarity in mathematics – algebraic, geometric, and asymptotic – without claiming that they are exhaustive, and he develops criteria for their application. He even provides an example of a plausible mathematical analogy where the conclusion is false (Bartha, pp. 167-168).

I bring up Bartha's work not to insist that the kind of *a priori* analogies Govier discusses are exactly the same as *a priori* mathematical analogies, but to demonstrate that (a) the idea that an analogy could be non-deductive and *a priori* is not unprecedented, and (b) that such analogies exist in another domain of inquiry, mathematics, which is very respectable. Govier's examples focus on action and the assessment of action; what the above shows is that claiming that these action-assessment oriented analogies could be *a priori* and non-deductive is not a form of special pleading. They exist elsewhere and are well-regarded. Moreover, we should not be surprised that this is possible. To say that an argument is non-deductive is to make a claim about the nature of its inferential link; to suggest that there is something *a priori* about it is to claim (minimally) that at least one of its premises or assumptions is *a priori*, or that some warrant licencing the inference to the conclusion is *a priori*. These are different types of considerations, and they may combine in different ways.

4. Future work

In the case of mathematics, the analogical arguments are about the plausibility of being able to prove a theorem. The source theorem already has a deductive proof, and the question is whether there is reason to think the target theorem can be proved in a similar way. The analogical argument that this can be done is a second order argument, and it is not deductive because the truth of the premises does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The plausibility of the argument turns on articulating the similarity between the source and the target. The action-assessment examples provided by Govier are *not* second-order arguments, but when these arguments are plausible, they too turn on the similarity between the source and the target. Bartha spells out different types of similarity in a level of detail that I have not seen done for action-assessment analogies. Thinking through the different types of similarity may help us to better understand the inferential link (and its non-deductive nature) in simple two case action assessment analogies. Also, trying to understand the extent to which similarity between source and target comes in degrees, and how the degrees of similarity contribute to degrees of strength in action-assessment analogical arguments will help us to better understand the non-deductive nature of analogical argument. If we are dealing with an analogy in ethics, there could be various factors that contribute to the ethical similarity of the source and target, and various factors that contribute to ethical difference. That the factors contribute in the direction they do may be a matter of *a priori* assessment, and the inability of the overall similarity between source and target to guarantee the truth of the conclusion would render it non-deductive. What is needed is a richer account of the nature of such similarities, why we resort to them in the first place, and how they license varying degrees of strength in the arguments in which they figure. We also need a better understanding of the similarities and differences between different types of *a priori* analogies. The examples from mathematics do not make use of empirical information in the way that Govier's examples do. (For those who think mathematics is not purely *a priori*, we could say that

mathematical examples do not make use of empirical information to the same extent as Govier's examples do.) There are differences, but there are similarities too. There is much work to be done in fleshing out these ideas.

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