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Commentary on Yun Xie's "Arguing Conductively or Arguing Strategically?"

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In his stimulating paper "Arguing conductively or arguing strategically?", Prof. Xie contends that conductive arguments mainly serve to satisfy arguers' intentions of strengthening the persuasive effect of their argumentations rather than their justificatory force. He points out that this is exactly the type of intention that underlies what Pragma-dialectics has named *strategic maneuvering*; and for this reason, he takes it that "the theoretical tools pertaining to the analysis and evaluation of strategic maneuvering could be well employed in explaining and assessing conductive arguments." In sum, the main idea of his paper is that "rather than imposing a new argument typology and searching for some new theory, we could simply treat conductive arguments as a particular form of *strategic maneuvering*."

I very much sympathize with Prof. Xie's misgivings about the need of special tools for dealing with conductions. Besides, I think that it is an important finding the interest of the rhetorical dimension of argumentation for dealing with that which is special about the use of conductive arguments. Yet, I am less confident about the project of analyzing this type of argument by adopting the theoretical framework provided by the pragma-dialectical notion of strategic maneuvering. My doubts have to do, on the one hand, with the adequacy of dealing with the rhetorical dimension of argumentation in terms of this notion, and on the other hand, with the adequacy of evaluating arguments (instead of the use of arguments in communicative exchanges) by considering the rules for critical discussions.

According to Prof. Xie's analysis, the persuasive power of conductive arguments has to do with the fact that when the arguer considers in her argumentation the points that count against her own thesis, she conveys to the audience an impression of honesty, objectivity and open-mindedness that contributes to boost the arguer's credibility. Moreover, in Prof. Xie's view,

by presenting counter-considerations in a particular comparative manner in a conductive argument, the arguer just imposes to the other party an assumption of some outweighing-relation which in turn makes those counter-considerations appear to be trivial (...) Specifically, by implying that the reasons against the conclusion are outweighed, the argument advanced would appear to be more persuasive, and by indicating that both favorable and unfavorable considerations are taken into account, the conclusion to be reached would appear to be more solid (...) Consequently, the audience would be oriented to recognize that the counter-considerations are weaker, wrong or no longer viable, or their importance has already been eliminated somewhere else for some possible reasons, even though the arguer has provided nothing to actually account for these judgements. As a result, the audience's own attitude towards the conclusion may be changed, and they might become more apt to accept it,

especially when she doesn't really have a good grasp of the justificatory power in those counter-considerations.

But, does the use of conductive arguments always involve an audience or addressee to be persuaded this way? Let's consider, for example, a person deliberating on whether or not responding to an insult. She is trying to make up her mind, and she comes to reason that even though it'd be perfectly right to respond, she'd better keep silent, since everyone is the slave of her own words and master of her own silence. Wouldn't it be a bit forced to say of someone reasoning this way that she is trying to better achieve effectiveness in persuading... herself? I think that, even though we would easily acknowledge that this person is using a conductive argument, we would refrain from explaining the particulars of her reasoning by appealing to the idea of strategic maneuvering. For, even if we agree that any type of argumentation might be reconstructed as a critical discussion – including argumentation put forward for oneself – it is not evident at all that we can make sense of an argumentative move as a strategic manoeuvre in absence of a real opponent to be persuaded.

As I see it, the problem of dealing with the rhetorical dimension of argumentation in terms of the pragma-dialectical notion of strategic maneuvering is that it seems to imply that, in general, arguments used for reasoning to oneself do not have a rhetorical aspect: after all, only a strongly divided mind could strategically maneuver against herself. Thus, for example, while I agree with Prof. Xie that the use of expressions such as “even though” “bring out a distinction between what may be called the logical and the rhetorical aspects of language,” it seems difficult to reconcile such a pragma-dialectical account of the rhetorical with the fact that we can use this type of expressions in private reasonings, when no attempt at “winning the argument” or persuading others is made.¹

My second concern has to do with the adequacy of adopting the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion as the framework for analyzing and appraising conductive arguments – instead of adopting them for analyzing and appraising the use of such type of arguments in the context of a critical discussion. Particularly, I think that at this point we find a recurring difficulty in Pragma-dialectics that has to do with the distinction between the justificatory force of an argument and its instrumental value as a move within a communicative exchange aimed at solving a difference of opinion on the merits.

As Prof. Xie explains, in *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics*, Carl Wellman proposed the term *conductive* for naming a type of argument in which “1) a conclusion about some individual case 2) is drawn non-conclusively 3) from one or more premises about the same case 4) without any appeal to other cases” (Wellman 1971, p. 52). So understood, the main feature of conductive arguments would be a negative one: condictions are arguments that are neither deductive nor inductive (probabilistic). At any rate, whatever conductive arguments happen to be, their idiosyncrasy would seem to be a matter of the type of inference that they amount to.²

¹ For my part, I prefer to think of the rhetorical dimension of a piece of discourse in terms of K. Burke's (1950) notion of *symbolic inducement*. Following Burke's ideas, in Bermejo-Luque (2011), I have proposed an account of the rhetorical import of a piece of discourse (as different from its speaker's meaning) as a matter of the doxastic and non-doxastic attitudes that this piece of discourse can be expected to induce in its addressee. So understood, any piece of discourse, including those that we produce for ourselves, has a specific rhetorical import.

² As I point out below, that being a conductive argument amounts to being a certain type of inference does not imply that we need a novel typology of argument for dealing with condictions.

By considering conductive arguments as a particular form of strategic maneuvering, Prof. Xie contends that “*a conductive argument is good when its use as an argumentative move doesn’t violate any rule of critical discussion, while it is bad when its use as an argumentative move violates at least one rule of critical discussion.*” Particularly, Prof. Xie considers three possible violations: 1) bringing into discussion some claim that has not been granted by the other party (against *the starting-point rule*), 2) affording some reason that is not relevant to the conclusion (against *the relevance rule*), and 3) using some reason to support the conclusion by means of an invalid form of reasoning (against *the validity rule*), or applying an argument scheme incorrectly (against *the argument scheme rule*).

Certainly, the ideal model of a critical discussion requires that parties use arguments that are inferentially good, i.e., that have justificatory force. This is the condition for the use of conductions that the third type of violation tries to capture. Yet, if using a conductive argument is drawing a particular type of inference, then we cannot just appeal to the validity rule or the argument scheme rule for appraising the justificatory force of conductive arguments, because the correctness conditions of conductive arguments would be idiosyncratic of this type of inference. Rather, we would need a model of what makes such inferences good – as different from those of deductive and inductive (probabilistic) ones. If Prof. Xie’s goal were to show that we don’t need such a thing because conductions are not a type of inference, then it would have been helpful to show us how to embed conductions in deductive or inductive (probabilistic) inferences.

In his paper, Prof. Xie provides examples of the first and the second type of violations (i.e., against the starting-point rule and the relevance rule). And I think he is right in saying that determining the relevance of the reasons adduced is the right way to appraise conductive arguments. But the reason is not that, as Pragma-dialectics says, solving a difference of opinion on the merits requires using premises that are relevant, but because determining the relevance of the premises is all that matters for determining the inferential goodness of a conductive argument. Actually, while relevance is a sound condition for determining the justificatory force of conductive arguments, using claims agreed by the other party is just a sound condition for successfully using conductive arguments with the goal of solving differences of opinion on the merits. Let me explain this.

In “Deduction, induction and conduction,” David Hitchcock (1981) said that, in contrast with deductive arguments, whose conclusions are meant to follow of necessity, and also of inductive arguments, whose conclusions are meant to follow probabilistically, conductive arguments are those whose premises provide non-conclusive relevant reasons for the conclusion. As Hitchcock pointed out, so understood, “it is hard to know how to refute a claim that an argument is conductively valid”. After all, whenever we say anything to someone, we put our addressee in a condition to work out by himself the relevance of what we say. If he cannot render relevant our words, the problem seems to lie on him for being unable to understand us, not on us, who benefit from the presumption that we are being cooperative – which means, among other things, being relevant. This fact would explain the rhetorical advantages of using conductive arguments for persuading others.

Wellman took conductive arguments to be typical of moral reasoning and argumentation, and he pointed at the need of having specific models for their analysis and appraisal. However, the flourishing of Informal Logic and, specially, of a material conception of inference such as Toulmin’s (1958), made us see that, as Prof. Xie points out, there is nothing special about such type of arguments. And not only because most everyday reasoning and arguing is conductive (“take your umbrella, it’s going to rain,” “she said she would come, maybe she’s just late,” “it’s

Christmas, cheer up,” etc.), but also because as Toulmin would have taught us, deductions, inductions and condictions all share the same structure, the only difference between them being that deductive arguments have warrants that are necessary, inductive arguments have warrants that are probable and conductive arguments have warrants that are plausible.

But what does it mean to say that a warrant is *plausible*? If the warrant of “take your umbrella, it’s going to rain” is “if it’s going to rain, then you should take your umbrella,” then we can say that this warrant is plausible when the fact that it is going to rain makes it plausible that one should take his umbrella. Consequently, the warrant of an argument is plausible if and only if the corresponding premise is positively relevant for the conclusion – actually, the most positively relevant the reason, the most plausible the warrant. This is why Hitchcock says that “the only valid objection to a properly filled out argument for which conductive validity is claimed is an attack on one of its premises.” Up to a point, this view comes close to Prof. Xie’s relevance condition: the only way a conductive argument may fail to have justificatory force is if it involves a premise that it is not positively relevant for the conclusion.

Now, Wellman distinguished three subtypes of conductive arguments: 1) those in which a single relevant but non-conclusive reason is offered in support of a conclusion, 2) those in which several relevant considerations are jointly adduced for a conclusion, and 3) those in which both pro and con considerations are adduced in favour of a conclusion. As most scholars dealing with conductive arguments, Prof. Xie focuses on the latter type, also called “balance-of-consideration argument” or “pro and con argument,” because in his view “it is only in this pattern that we could find the special mechanism of justification and the complex argument structure that seems to be attractively novel.” Let us then consider what goes on when we put forward such type of argument, in order to finally see why relevance is sound as a correctness condition for conductive argument goodness, whereas using claims that have been agreed by the other party is not.

As we have seen, in Prof. Xie’s analysis, “in a conductive argument, the specific maneuver that has been strategically performed is the *purposive* mentioning of some counter-considerations in such a way that just makes them *appear to be trivial*.” Because of this, Prof. Xie says that “the arguer just imposes to the other party an assumption of some outweighing-relation which in turn makes those counter-considerations appear to be trivial.”

I agree with Prof. Xie that in this type of conductive argument, “counter-considerations are simply mentioned in a *non-refutational* way, in which no attempt is made to scrutinize them or to remove them.” Yet, I do think that balance-of-considerations conductive arguments point at the existence of some outweighing-relation that is meant to restore the plausibility of the warrant. The goodness of a conductive argument of this type is a matter of whether or not there exists such an outweighing-relation after all.

For example, in “Even though I didn’t do well in the final exam, you should still consider letting me pass this course, because I really worked hard on this course for the whole semester, and did have learnt something in this course”, the warrant is “if it is true that even though I didn’t do well in the final exam but I really worked hard on this course for the whole semester and did have learnt something in this course, then you should consider letting me pass.” The plausibility of this warrant depends on whether or not, in the circumstances, the fact that a student didn’t pass the exam but worked hard and learnt something makes it plausible that it should be considered letting him pass. Is it the case? If it is, then the argument is not a fallacy. If it is not, then the argument is a fallacy, whether or not the professor granted the student’s claim at the opening stage. Of course, professor and student can only solve their difference of opinion if none

of them brings into discussion some claim that has not been granted by the other party. But this is different from determining whether the conductive argument is a good one or not.

When someone says to herself that it'd be perfectly right to respond and then says to herself that she'd better keep silent, since everyone is slave of her own words and master of her own silence, what she is considering is an outweighing-relation between having a right to do X vs. X being the best thing to do in the circumstances. Someone reasoning this way is not being strategic to herself.

To sum up, I think that conductions in general, and balance-of-considerations in particular, are a type of inference; but following Toulmin's model of argument, I think that Prof. Xie is right in saying that their analysis and appraisal does not require of specific tools. On the other hand, I am very sympathetic to Prof. Xie's idea that the use of conductive arguments involves certain rhetorical idiosyncrasy. But for the reasons pointed out before, I think that neither Pragma-dialectics, nor the notion of strategic maneuvering provide the right framework to deal with them.

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