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# Arguing Conductively or Arguing Strategically?

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that conductive arguments could be understood from a rhetorical perspective. It is contended that conductive arguments can be regarded as a particular mode of strategic maneuvering, rather than a new type of argument. Moreover, it demonstrates that the use of conductive arguments can be adequately analyzed and evaluated by adopting the theoretical tools developed in the extended Pragma-Dialectics.

**Keywords:** conductive argument, Pragma-Dialectics, rhetorical perspective, strategic maneuvering

## 1. Introduction

The topic of conductive argument has attracted much attention in recent argumentation studies. Following Wellman (1971) and Govier (1979; 1987), some informal logicians strive to justify conductive arguments as “an overlooked type of defeasible reasoning” (Blair & Johnson, 2011). They contend that conductive arguments should be treated as a new type of argument because of its special mechanism of justification and its particularly complex structure, both of which are calling for some new theory and methods for their analysis and evaluation. However, the notion of conduction has also its dissenters, who believe that the distinctiveness of conduction as an argument type is simply a myth (Possin, 2012), or the notion of conductive arguments is only a misconception, hence their existence is not possible at all (Alder, 2013). Now the controversy on conductive arguments remains unsettled (Govier, 2011; Blair, 2013; Xie & Xiong, 2013; Blair 2015), but most of the existing disputes are centered on a logical or epistemological perspective.

This paper offers an alternative point of view, namely a pragma-dialectical point of view, regarding the likelihood and importance of conductive arguments. The basic position to be argued against is that conductive argument can be analyzed in an adequate way from a *rhetorical* perspective. More specifically, it attempts to show 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*. And the theoretical tools pertaining to the analysis and evaluation of strategic maneuvering could be well employed in explaining and assessing conductive arguments.

## 2. The concept of conductive argument

The concept of conductive argument has always been traced back to Carl Wellman and his *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* (1971). In that book, Wellman claimed to have identified a type of argument that is neither deductive nor inductive:

Conduction can best be defined as that sort of reasoning 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)

Although conductive argument has been further distinguished into three “patterns” (Wellman, 1971, pp. 55-57), only the third one has received much attention from argumentation scholars:

The third pattern of conduction is that form of argument in which some conclusion is drawn from both positive and negative considerations. In this pattern reasons against the conclusion are included as well as reasons for it. For example ‘in spite of a certain dissonance, that piece of music is beautiful because of its dynamic quality and its final resolution’ or ‘although your lawn needs cutting, you ought to take your son to the movies because the picture is ideal for children and will be gone by tomorrow.’ (Wellman, 197, p. 57)

This pattern of conduction is also known as “balance-of-consideration argument” or “pro and con argument”. It becomes the representative form of conductive argument in later discussions, for 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. In this paper I am also concerned with this third pattern of conductive argument, and take it to be identical to “balance-of-consideration argument” and “pro and con argument”.

It is an undeniably true that in many occasions when we argue for a view on issues that are controversial, besides providing some reasons to support our conclusion, we do try to introduce some reasons that go against the conclusion. This common phenomenon is now to be captured by the concept of conductive argument. The beauty of conductive argument, then, lies in the fact that there is no other type of argument which explicitly collects both affirmative and negative reasons bearing on the conclusion into a single structure, and thereby indicates that the conclusion is reached in a way of *weighing* and *balancing*, a procedure that is commonly used for reaching a certain view on some unsettled issue. Accordingly, for the advocates of conductive arguments, the recognition and inclusion of counter-considerations in a conductive argument thus challenges our traditional theories for argument analysis and evaluation: it reveals our ignorance of a longstanding way of arguing (prevailing in some special contexts); it enriches our understanding of non-deductive support; it troubles our former definitions of “*reason*” and “*premise*”; and it calls for some new theory for its analysis and evaluation, especially, a method to pin down its argument *structure* and a theory to unpack the *mechanism of outweighing*. Meanwhile, the recognition of conduction as a new argument type would also broaden the scope of our argumentation studies. According to Blair (2011), there are now several broad questions about conduction that need to be explored, each of which also harbors several others: (1) issues of definition, (2) issues of conceptualization, (3) issues of analysis, (4) issues of assessment, and (5) issues of originality and connection (p. 1).

### 3. A rhetorical perspective on conduction

All these issues seem to be quite novel and promising, but I still have some doubt about the concept of conduction *per se* that is primarily related to the possible *role* of counter-considerations in our acts of arguing. Many proponents of conductive arguments have just presumed that the

presence of counter-considerations needs to be interpreted from a *logical* perspective: that is, they are provided as (part of) reasons or premises, or they have played a substantial role in justifying the conclusion. In this connection, they believe that the presence of counter-considerations indicates a need to formulate some implicit “on-balance premise”, and thereby adds some complication in argument structure. However, I suspect that there is an inferential leap taken from the argumentative practices to our argumentation theory: even though we do mention some counter-considerations in arguing, it is not clear that we are doing so exactly for logical concerns. In other words, the mentioning of a counter-consideration doesn’t necessarily mean that the arguer accepts it as a point relevant to the establishment of his conclusion. And yet there still seems to be a lack of evidence or argument for us to safely assume this connection. Therefore, it could also be possible to interpret the presence of counter-considerations from a perspective other than *logical*.

Why do we care to mention some counter-consideration that actually has the potential to undermine our claim to be argued for? In reality, the inclusion of counter-considerations in a conductive argument is often realized by the use of “even though”, “although”, “notwithstanding”, or “nevertheless” clauses. Hence the answer to that question could probably be highlighted by examining the pragmatics of those linguistic indicators. It goes without saying that the uses of those even-though-like clauses are definitely parts of the speaker’s communicative intent, trying to convey something more than that “the conclusion is established by reasons supporting it”. They could, from a Gricean point of view, serve to convey the conventional implications that “these reasons against the conclusion are outweighed”, and that “the speaker has taken account of not just favorable considerations, but unfavorable ones as well” (Adler, 2013, p. 247). Moreover, when these conventional implications are indeed recognized by the hearer, it could also have some practical effects on the speaker’s argument. 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. Actually, this speculation has already been verified, to some extent, by research evidence in the field of communication studies. It was reported by the works on message sidedness that the inclusion of counter-considerations will boost the communicator’s credibility and thereby enhance the message’s effectiveness, though in complicated ways within different contexts (cf. O’Keefe, 1999).

However, it is worth noting that neither the conveying of the above conventional implications, nor the achieving of those practical effects, would necessarily require the arguer to take counter-considerations as reasons or premises pertaining to the establishment of conclusion. Alternatively, it is possible to interpret the arguer’s communicative intention so as to strengthen her argument, not in a way of enhancing its justificatory power, but in a way that mainly increases its persuasive effect, i.e., makes the argument much easier to induce the adherence of audience. I would like to call this interpretation a rhetorical perspective on conduction, simply because it regards the presenting of counter-considerations as some sort of effort aiming for rhetorical concerns to achieve better persuasiveness.

In fact, this rhetorical interpretation on conduction has also its origin in the analysis of “although” and “even though” expressions made by logicians and linguists. Hansen (2011) has provided a brief review on former views on the “even-though relation” (pp. 2-48), in which we could find that logicians like Quine have believed that “consideration of ‘but’ and ‘although’.....brings out a distinction between what may be called the logical and the rhetorical aspects of language” (p. 43). There Hansen (2011) further discussed Ducrot’s and Adler’s

pragmatic analysis on the use of “even” expressions, and by the end he himself also concluded that the use of “even though”, as a conjunction, has its rhetorical roles (p. 47).

#### 4. Conductive argument and strategic maneuvering

Taking this rhetorical perspective on conduction, the persuasiveness of conductive arguments then can be explained in such a way that the reasons supporting the conclusion are offered to justify the conclusion, while the counter-considerations are (or recognized to be) provided by the arguer in order to better achieve effectiveness in persuading the audience. Hence in a conductive argument, the pursuits of two relatively different aims are delicately accomplished at the same time in simply one argumentative move. Understanding conductive argument in this way, then, could easily bring to our mind a parallel between conductive argument and the pragma-dialectical notion of *strategic maneuvering*.

Over the last decade, van Eemeren and his colleagues have developed the standard Pragma-Dialectical theory of argumentation into an extended version, in which a notion of strategic maneuvering was put forward as the primary theoretical tool (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002; van Eemeren, 2010). Basically, it is an attempt to further strengthen the connection of their theoretical framework with reality, by exploring more comprehensive analytic and evaluative tools to account for the phenomenon of *strategic design* in real-life argumentative practice. According to pragma-dialecticians, strategic design refers to an more realistic reconstruction and assessment of argumentation. In a nutshell, it could be easily recognized that “people engaged in argumentative discourse are characteristically oriented toward resolving a difference of opinion...[by] maintaining certain critical standards of reasonableness...At the same time, however, these people are also, and perhaps even primarily, interested in resolving the difference of opinion effectively in favor of their case” (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 39). But there is an inherent tension in their pursuing these two objectives simultaneously, because even though the two endeavors are supposed to go together, in many cases they may not. Accordingly, in making an argumentative move, an arguer will have to maneuver strategically to reconcile her pursuit of effectiveness with the maintenance of reasonableness, i.e., to try to keep the balance between them.

The notion of strategic maneuvering is therefore designed to capture those “continual efforts made in all moves that are carried out in argumentative discourse to keep the balance between reasonableness and effectiveness” (van Eemeren, 2010, p.40). In general, it provides us with an analytic instrument to deal with the fact that arguers would normally try to move toward the best position in view of the argumentative circumstances by some clever and skillful planning (van Eemeren, 2010, pp. 40-41). Adopting this notion of strategic maneuvering then adds a rhetorical dimension to the standard theoretical framework of pragma-dialectics. For one thing, the pursuit of effectiveness is now positively re-valued, and properly accommodated, within the dialectical framework; for another, the examination of strategic maneuvering overlaps with the studies in traditional areas of rhetoric, and benefits substantially from classic and modern rhetorical insights. In particular, in order to provide a precise characterization, three aspects of strategic maneuvering are distinguished, all of which are associated with distinct types of choices: (1) the choice made from the available “*topical potential*”, i.e., “the repertoire of options for making an argumentative move that are at the arguer’s disposal in a certain case and at a particular point in the discourse”, (2) the choice of how to adapt the argumentative move to meet “*audience demand*”, i.e., “the requirements pertinent to the audience that is to be reached”, and (3) the

exploitation of “*presentational devices*”, which involves “a choice as to how the argumentative moves are to be presented in the way that is strategically best” (van Eemeren, 2010, pp. 93-94). These aspects are inseparable; they always go together and are represented in every argumentative move. Therefore, they will serve as the basic theoretical tools for analyzing strategic maneuvering carried out in any argumentative discourse.

Seeing from the perspective of strategic design, the use of a conductive argument could also be regarded as an effort intentionally made by the arguer in order to achieve both effectiveness and reasonableness at the same time. The reasons for the conclusion are adduced obviously for the sake of maintaining reasonableness, because otherwise the conclusion cannot be accepted as justified, and the act would never be recognized as arguing. Meanwhile, some counter-considerations have been mentioned with an aim to achieve an optimal effectiveness in persuading the audience, because when considerations *against* the conclusion are deliberately juxtaposed with reasons *for* the conclusion, it implicitly employs some mechanism to enhance the arguer’s chances of persuading the others. This similarity, then, opens a possibility for us to understand conductive arguments simply as a mode of strategic maneuvering, and to analyze and evaluate them using the theoretical tools pertinent to the notion of strategic maneuvering.

### **5. Conductive argument as a mode of strategic maneuvering: Its analysis**

In the extended Pragma-dialectics, strategic maneuvering takes place not only in “all discussion stages”, but also in “all the individual moves” in the course of resolving a difference of opinion (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 45). Every instance of strategic maneuvering will be categorized into one of the four classes, based on the stage in which it takes place: *confrontational* maneuvering, *opening* maneuvering, *argumentational* maneuvering, and *concluding* maneuvering. Each of these four classes “encompasses a variety of specific modes of strategic maneuvering whose make-up is instrumentally attuned to realizing the dialectical and rhetorical aims pertinent to the discussion stage the arguers are in” (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 46). In accordance with this framework, conductive arguments would be simply regarded as a particular mode of *argumentational* maneuvering, for any use of a conductive argument will be reconstructed as part of the argumentation stage, more specifically, a move in the argumentation stage that is “dialectically allowed, and serves the arguer’s rhetorical interest with greatest effectiveness”(van Eemeren, 2010, p. 43).

When arguing conductively, besides giving reasons for the conclusion, the arguer chooses to explicitly offer some counter-considerations against it, while at the same time maintaining the conclusion to be unqualified, i.e., leaving it without any modification. By doing so, the arguer makes her argument appear to be more solid, and improves its persuasiveness. Therefore, 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*. Arguably, this consists of the most important feature that needs to be accounted for when analyzing a conductive argument. By adopting the theoretical tools pertaining to strategic maneuvering, however, making use of a conductive argument could be further analyzed into three aspects: *topical potential*, *audience demand* and *presentational devices*, all of which will be helpful in explaining its particular mechanism in achieving an optimal persuasiveness.

For the first, any use of a conductive argument involves a choice carefully made from the topical potential at the arguer’s disposal. When arguing conductively, the arguer not only chooses from a great number of positive considerations to construct an argument for the conclusion, but

more importantly, she also selects prudently only some of the available counter-considerations to be mentioned. The number of counter-considerations has to be limited, and their contents will always be restricted to points that count apparently and directly against the conclusion. For example, objections or doubts to the positive reasons given in the argument will be excluded. Moreover, the counter-considerations that are to be mentioned also need to be *meaningful*. In general, only those considerations that are (recognized as) worthy taking into account, and could potentially or actually be known by the audience, will be considered for mentioning. Accordingly, when those particularly selected negative points are offered along with the positive reasons, and after their value being recognized, it leaves to the audience an impression that the arguer really knows about the topic well, and has already thought about it in a thorough way. At the same time, the arguer herself will also be very likely to be perceived as an honest, objective or open-minded person, because it appears as though she is willing to take into account both favorable and unfavorable considerations in order to present a more candid and less biased appraisal of the conclusion. These effects would in turn contribute substantially to boost the arguer's credibility in audience and thereby enhance the chances of persuading them.

For the second, any use of a conductive argument involves an intentional adaption to meet the audience demand. Generally, when there is a need to argue for some claim to someone, it just means that this claim is controversial at the present stage, and that particular person is possibly or actually having some doubt or objection against it. In other words, the addressee of an argument will normally be preconditioned with an initial skepticism, and in many cases, she might already have had in hand some reasons against the claim to be argued. However, as indicated above, the counter-considerations to be mentioned in a conductive argument need to be meaningful in such a way that they are very likely to be recognized as considerable, or known to be worthy consideration, *by the audience*. In this connection, it is not surprising for us to find that, in many instances of conductive argument, the counter-considerations included are usually some points whose existence and significance are already quite familiar to the audience. It is quite rare to see a conductive argument containing a counter-consideration that is not commonly known, or a counter-consideration that makes no sense in the eyes of the audience. Therefore, by deliberately mentioning those specific counter-considerations, the arguer not only shows her respect for the audience's skeptical attitude and their opposing views, she also manifests explicitly her acknowledgement of their value and importance in thinking about the issue in question. This could easily be recognized as some concession that the arguer has made to her audience, which would in turn establish some communion between them. As a result, the arguer may have successfully reduced the audience's confrontational orientations, and increased the possibility of persuading them.

For the third, any use of a conductive argument involves the exploitation of a special presentational device. There are indeed different possible ways to include a counter-consideration in an argument. It could be mentioned and then further discussed, for example, by explaining its truth, relevance, or its justificatory power. More often than not, a counter-consideration is mentioned in an argument for assessment, and sometimes especially for refutation. However, in a 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. On the contrary, they have been juxtaposed straightforwardly with the supporting reasons in a particular comparative manner, by using an even-though-like clause (including "even though", "although", "notwithstanding", or "nevertheless" etc.). As indicated before, the use of these conjunctions just joins two propositions in a rhetorically unequal way with exactly opposite orientations, where the proposition in the

clause has been downplayed in importance, while the other is particularly emphasized (Hansen, 2011, p. 44). Presenting counter-considerations in such a delicate way, then, imposes to the audience an assumption of some outweighing-relation between the reasons for the conclusion and the counter-considerations against it, and thereby leaves to them an impression that the arguer has some good reason to believe the conclusion is certainly defensible against those counter-considerations. 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 she 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.

## 6. Conductive argument as a mode of strategic maneuvering: Its evaluation

Moreover, it is also feasible, and to some extent promising, to evaluate conductive arguments by treating them as a mode of strategic maneuvering and thereby adopting the corresponding normative standards. In the extended pragma-dialectical framework, strategic maneuvering is performed by an arguer in order to achieve effectiveness through reasonableness, however, "the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to ensure effectiveness do not necessarily always agree with the conditions that have to be met to guarantee reasonableness" (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 41). Consequently, in cases of strategic maneuvering where the arguer's pursuit of effectiveness overwhelms her commitment to reasonableness, they will "derail" into fallaciousness (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 198), for each instance of strategic maneuvering is basically a move made in the argumentative discourse, and every such move is primarily required to meet the dialectical norms of reasonableness. Therefore, "each mode of strategic maneuvering has in principle unreasonable, i.e., fallacious, counterparts" (van Eemeren, Garssen, & Meuffels, 2012), and "all derailments of strategic maneuvering are fallacies in the sense that they violate one or more of the rules for critical discussion" (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 198).

Seeing from this point of view, then, the evaluation of a conductive argument would become much simpler if it is taken to be a particular mode of strategic maneuvering: *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*. In general, any use of a conductive argument consists of a twofold effort: offering some reasons for the conclusion to establish its acceptability, and mentioning some counter-considerations against the conclusion to achieve an optimal effectiveness through persuasion. As a result, the uses of conductive argument could violate the rules of a critical discussion in several different ways.

On the one hand, things could go wrong in arguer's endeavor to adduce reasons for the conclusion. For example, she might possibly bring into discussion some claim that has not been granted by the other party, thus violate *the starting-point rule*. She might also afford some reason that is not relevant to the conclusion, thus violating *the relevance rule*. Moreover, she could possibly violate *the validity rule* by using some reason to support the conclusion by means of an invalid form of reasoning, or violate *the argument scheme rule* by applying an argument scheme incorrectly.



On the other hand, there could also be possible violations of critical discussion rules in the arguer's endeavor to mention counter-considerations, and it is in these cases that we could detect the most common and significant fallacious counterparts of conductive arguments.

First and foremost, it has been revealed that 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. In this connection, the arguer's use of a conductive argument could violate *the starting-point rule*, if the outweighing-relation assumption to be imposed simply fails the intersubjective identification procedure, i.e., it has not been granted by the other party. For example, consider the following argument coming from a student, who is asking the teacher to save him from the final exam that he has just failed in a terrible way:

*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 learn something in this course.*

When arguing in this way, obviously the student has taken for granted that the efforts made in a course, and the fact that a student will have acquired something from that course, could together outweigh a terrible failure in the final exam. However, it is easy to see that the use of this conductive argument could hardly work, simply because very few teachers would agree to take that assumption as acceptable. Hence it should be judged as a fallacious move violating the starting-point rule.

For the second, the use of a conductive argument could also violate *the relevance rule*, if the mentioned counter-considerations are indeed not relevant to the conclusion. To illustrate this point, let us consider the following example taken from Govier's textbook *A Practical Study of Argument* (2010):

*The American Revolution was not a typical revolution. For one thing, the people in revolt were mainly middle class or upper class—not peasants. For another, the object of attack was something far away—a government in England—not the close structure of the society in which the war occurred. Despite the fact that it is called a revolution, and despite its great importance for the history of the world, the American Revolution should not be thought of as a model for other revolutions.*  
(p. 367)

In this conductive argument, the arguer has just presumed some relevance between the fact that “the American Revolution has great importance for the history of the world” and the view that “the American Revolution should not be thought of as a model for other revolutions”. Therefore, she has decided to mention the former as a counter-consideration against her conclusion. However, as Govier (2010) has revealed, this counter-consideration is indeed not relevant, “because the importance of the events for world history has nothing to do with this issue of whether a revolution was typical or not” (p. 413). As a result, the use of this conductive argument violates the relevance rule, and should be judged as a fallacious move.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth noting that Govier's final verdict about this argument is positive, i.e., she thinks the argument is to be judged as good, for it could still satisfy the standards of Acceptability-Relevance-Goodness of grounds. This difference could be useful for further exploration of the discrepancies between logical norms and dialectical norms.

## 7. Conclusion

The concept of conductive argument captures a special way of arguing that is commonly recognized in our argumentative practice, but has long been overlooked in our argumentation studies. It really is a challenging task to explain why we collected both positive and negative considerations into one structure, and how it works to establish a standpoint and to achieve persuasion. Other than searching for a logical or epistemological account, this paper offers a pragma-dialectical point of view to understand the use of conductive argument. Based on a rhetorical perspective on conduction, it is contended that the introducing of counter-considerations in a conductive argument is mainly for some rhetorical concerns, particularly in order to achieve better persuasiveness in audience.

This interpretation establishes a linkage between conductive arguments and strategic maneuvering, and opens a possibility to theorize conductive argument as a particular mode of strategic maneuvering. It is argued that the use of conductive arguments could be analyzed and evaluated in an adequate way by adopting the theoretical tools pertinent to strategic maneuvering developed in extended Pragma-Dialectics. Accordingly, it is suggested that the special mechanism and the complex structure of conductive arguments could be well explained from a perspective other than logic, hence the appeal for treating them as a new type of argument is not necessary, if not problematic.

**Acknowledgements:** The basic ideas in this paper have been presented at the First Sino-Dutch conference on Pragma-Dialectics at Zhejiang University. I am very grateful for the valuable comments received on that occasion from Frans van Eemeren, Francisca Snoeck Henkemans, Bart Garssen, Eveline Feteris, and Jean Wagemans. The work in this paper is supported by the National Social Science Fund Projects (13CZX063), and the Chinese MOE Project of Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Universities (15JJD720014).

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