

**Complexity without Insight: *Ceteris paribus* Clauses
in Assessing Conductive Argumentation**

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1. Introduction

Trudy Govier (1987, 1999, 2005) has developed Wellmann's (1971) concept of a *conductive argument-scheme*. It is systematically distinct from the schemes of *de-*, *in-* or *abduction* with respect to the *support-relation* between premise-set and conclusion. In conductive arguments, premises may cite individual reasons for the conclusion *and* counter-considerations against it.

Crucially, if discussants modify (i.e., retract or add) some, but not other premises (i.e., reasons or counter-considerations), the conclusion is *still* supported. Contrast this with *de-*, *in-*, *abduction*. Here, premise-revision – unless trivial in the case of irrelevant premises – is either downright destructive to the argument or always influences the support that the premises can confer upon a conclusion. The “odd support behavior” of conductive argumentation has been explained by the *independent* relevance of the premises for the conclusion and the *prima-facie* character of the premises. In this paper, I critically assess the latter.

2. Conductive Argumentation and its Evaluation

Theorizing on conductive arguments is interesting and warranted insofar as one wants to incorporate objections into *argument-assessment* – rather than just representing them.

This step is urged, for example, in *Informal Logic* (Johnson 1996, 2000). How to assess conductive argumentation, however, is at the very least *unclear*. Govier points out, that one will not be able to avoid metaphors such as “weighing”. Nor – or so it seems – can one gain more insight through these metaphors.

At the same time, the conductive argumentation-scheme provides “the right slots” to model, e.g., public and expert debates on social policy issues about which we find (members of) our societies to be *de facto* in disagreement. Typically, when reconstructing such debates one finds (i) content-increase between premises and conclusion, and (ii) logical gaps.¹ A further characteristic of such debates may be expressed as follows: Either side *could* present its desired thesis as the conclusion of a valid deductive inference only on pains of accepting an unsound premise.² In other words, conclusive defenses are *dogmatic* – where conclusive can be equated with the absence of objections – while non-conclusive arguments with sound premises are prone to meet with objection.

Now, the evaluative reconstruction of such a debate can duly respect this result, but it will not do to state that such argumentation must be evaluated “simply” in terms of the soundness of its premises. For one thing, ‘its’ denotes a *dynamic* set of reasons for and counter-considerations against the conclusion. Typically, some premises appear only in response to and sometimes integrate an opponent’s objections successfully. Even if the premise group *were* fixed at a (motivated or arbitrary) point to represent a historical state of the debate, the well-intended advice to assess (not formal validity, but) the quality of the premises still needs a method.

To evaluate conductive argumentation, Govier has offered an informal method by which one judges a set of reasons – for or against a conclusion – with respect to their *comparative generality*.³ For example, the permissibility of *voluntary euthanasia* may be

defended by reconstructing the reasons offered in its favor by conditional generalizations.

Amongst them:

(1) 'If a practice would save great pain, it should be legalized' or

(2) 'If a practice would cut social cost, it should be legalized'. (Govier 2005:400)

Govier analyses (1) and (2) as *ceteris paribus* reasons to respect the fact that, although providing support for the conclusion, the reasons lack generality – a fact to which their proponents can even be held committed.⁴

Evidently, such reasons cannot be represented as strict, i.e., *exceptionless* generalizations of the form ' $\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ '. Rather, (1) and (2) are *defeasible* or *prima facie* reasons. According to Govier, one can nevertheless *compare* these reasons and *order* them as a direct function of to the scope of the *ceteris paribus* clause. Assessment of the scope-difference between (1) and (2) is performed by means of informally assessing the width of the class of exceptions that holds for each reason. She claims that an ordering of the reasons by increasing size of the *ceteris paribus* clause correlates with the ordering of the reasons by decreasing strength (Govier 2005:401). Hence, a reason with a narrow class of exceptions is a stronger reason than one with a wider class.

3.1 A meager yield

At best, the net-result of such comparison is always only an ordering over the reasons *or* the counter-considerations, but we will not achieve *joint order* over both. This is simply a consequence of the fact that, in this method, reasons and counter-considerations remain *unmediated*. Any premise will fall in either of two groups: for or against the conclusion;

yet, the premises fail to bear out any further relation to each other.⁵ Thus, perhaps *the* most interesting feature of conductive arguments – reasons and counter-considerations can (fail to) be successfully directed at each other – is neglected in the evaluation.

So dissected into two sets consisting of pro and con premises that each bear out less than perfect generality, an ordering over either set might, of course, have *practical* relevance, e.g., with respect to defense or attack strategies by the discussants. It will be, *if* one may assume:

(A) Failing to reach agreement on narrow scope reasons precludes agreement on wide scope reasons,

whence the former should be discussed first. The method may then claim to be of value in discourse-optimization, i.e., as a piece of social technology. To say the least, an assumption such as the above, is hard to warrant. Perhaps ironically, (A) is suspect of being another *ceteris paribus* generalization in Govier's sense. In any case, I see no reason to accept (A) as a sound assumption. Similar assumptions would seem to share the same fate.

3.2 Number of Exceptions vs. Pertinence of Objections

Generally, it is difficult to see what insight the particular method of ordering cp-generalizations would yield for an evaluation of the argument. On the appearance of it, assessing the width of the exception class comes down to grading the generalization, thus implicitly introducing degrees of premise-soundness. These degrees take on an air of objectivity, insofar as they suggest an answer to the following non-trivial problem:

A reason of the form ‘CP [$\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$]’ does not logically warrant a transition to *all and any* of the generalization’s saturated instances, ‘Fa \rightarrow Ga’, ‘Fb \rightarrow Gb’, etc. Nobody denies this; rather, it is the very logical fact that is exploited in Govier’s analysis of conductive argumentation. Surely, facts must be interpreted. It now appears, the cp-analysis is committed to the wrong of two possible interpretations.

On the first interpretation, ‘CP [$\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$]’ does *sometimes* warrant a transition to *particular* of its saturated instances, while other instances count as exception-ridden. We may think of well corroborated paradigmatic applications of empirical theories which nevertheless prove *anomalous* – read: exception-ridden – in neighboring applications.⁶ On the second and epistemologically stronger interpretation, the *ceteris paribus* generalization does *never* allow a transition to *any* of its saturated instances, because the cp-clause indicates that ‘Fa’, ‘Fb’, etc. are *never* sufficient to warrant a transition to ‘Ga’, ‘Gb’, etc.

The problem: Which of these two interpretations is the most suitable one? On the first, we sometimes have the right generalization and sometimes do not. We have corroborated belief (even knowledge), but not in every case. On the second, our state of knowledge/belief is always incomplete. Any cp-generalization is, at best, a “near-law”.

To reach Govier’s ordering of cp-generalizations, we must opt for the first interpretation. It is ultimately based on frequency. It assumes that past and future events are, in principle, subsumable under covering-laws or generalizations. Sometimes exceptions occur, i.e., *distinct* ‘Fe’, fail to imply ‘Ge’ at some distinct time, possibly even at all times. So, we ask, how *often* – we think – there is an exception to the generalization. Never mind how we reached an answer; we rank the generalization

accordingly among other generalizations. Crucially, we have assumed that, sometimes, ‘Fa’ in fact can be *sufficient* for a transition to ‘Ga’.

Clearly, however, the second interpretation does more justice to cases of real-life debate for which the concept of a conductive argumentation was meant to provide a model and evaluative method. The second interpretation states that, with certain reasons, e.g. (1), the antecedent – though not irrelevant (that is why it gets mentioning) –, is *not sufficient* for a transition to the consequent. What were sufficient? Well, to meet the objections against the thesis that social cost is *the only relevant factor* in a decision to legalize voluntary euthanasia.

How this may be done successfully is a different matter altogether. Yet, as it were, the *ceteris paribus* clause at the level of the associated conditional generalization is a burden to *every* instance. Consequently, all cp-generalizations are on equal footing; therefore, all must be placed on the *same* rank, whence the above method cannot be applied to begin with. On this view, a cp-generalization indicates: For any instance, ‘Fa → Ga’, ‘Fb → Fb’, etc., *objections have to be answered*. Otherwise, the antecedent cannot count as the only relevant factor for the consequent.

Understood in this way, it becomes apparent that the second interpretation does not allow an assessment in terms of the width of the class of exceptions. The dimension along which we must assess is not the *size* of a set or the *frequency* of an event. Rather, we would compare the *pertinence* of the objections that have been successfully met by a proponent in comparison to those that are still open, i.e., have not been met successfully.

3.3. Why generalize in the very first place?

Introducing a generalization which is hedged by a *ceteris paribus* clause is apparently problematic. It also seems unnecessary to follow a deductivistic model of reconstructing the major premise. In doing so, the reasons or counter-considerations are presented as *defeasible* rather than *strict* generalizations. Yet, introducing a *ceteris paribus* generalization marks the fact that a reason is not *general*, as the cp-clause has the consequence that ‘ $Fa \wedge CP[\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)]$ ’ does not imply ‘ Ga ’. This is defeasibility *qua* (a tweaking of) the rules for all-quantification. Thus, a particular reason’s being objectionable is reconstructed by fronting *ceteris paribus* to the reason’s associated conditional generalization. We have then construed defeasibility as a syntactic notion.

This is not the only alternative. If we seek to express that a reason is defeasible – because it faces an objection – we do not have to sidestep to the level of suitably hedged universal generalizations (whatever these may be). It *can* be done at the level of individual constants. Moreover, it *should* be done at this level. After all, a pro-argument for voluntary euthanasia may very well cite the potential cuts in social cost *for this case*, without its proponent having ever having uttered anything pertaining to the universalizability of this reason for *all* forms of social praxis.

Just why would we want to cp-universalize a missing premise into his argument, in order to evaluate it? For a reconstruction of conductive argumentation that is motivated by wanting to assess the argument, it seems already sufficient to represent the reasons in their “saturated form”:

(1’) ‘If voluntary euthanasia would save great pain, it should be legalized’.

(2’) ‘If voluntary euthanasia would cut social cost, it should be legalized’.

It is at this level that we must ask, if pertinent objections have been met by the proponent. Only this is relevant in evaluating the argument. If, to the reason adduced, a cp-generalization with an exception class of a given width can be reconstructed, however, is irrelevant. *That* a saturated reason does not by itself already suffice to lend the type of support upon the conclusion that we know from *de-*, *in-*, *abduction* – or so I would like to suggest –, is nothing different from its associated generalization being defeasible.

3.3 Case by case validity

By now, it may be apparent that nothing is gained by ordering the above generalizations as *ceteris paribus* reasons. Still, it may be objected that not everything is lost. Rather, there appear to be parallels. We can say that a defeasible reason has to meet particular objections, and we may list those to which the proponent's argument (of which the defeasible reason is a part) answers successfully. Alternatively, we can assess the size of the exception-class of the reason's associated cp-generalization, suggesting the following analogy:

(AN) A strong (weak) reason will be embedded in an argument that does (not) meet the objections forwarded against it, just as a strong reason has an associated cp-generalization with a narrow (wide) class of exceptions.⁷

Thus, one might think, assessing the width of the cp-generalization's exception class were but another (and equally informative) method for the argument's evaluation. Now, assume, for the sake of argument, that there were no problems with respect to, ultimately, *counting* exceptions – crucially, how to identify *one* (or one part of an) exception. Still, it

is not clear, if an order over the *cp*-generalizations has any validity whatsoever with respect to assessing the *particular* argumentation with which the analyst is concerned.

Consider the following: Proponent and opponent may even agree on an ordering of the *ceteris paribus* generalization as yielded by the method proposed, i.e., a rough estimate of the width of its exception-class. Still it must not therefore also be the case that the saturated forms take on the same order of strength *for a particular participant*.

For example, a *communitarian* may be expected to regard (2') as being a stronger reason than (1'), despite agreeing that the class of exceptions of its associated defeasible generalization is *de facto* wider than that of the generalization associated with (1'). Again, we do not ask through what reasoning processes the order is arrived at. However, not by definition, but by political principle, a communitarian may not (even see a reason to) care about the pain of *all* others. Nor, for that matter, may he care about the others' share in social cost. His concern – i.e., his reason for engaging in argumentation on social policy – can be exclusively with the share of his community (however defined). It is enough, if he accepts that, as a by-product of his political belief, everybody's share *would* decrease.

4. Implications

The above shows minimally that the strength of a defeasible reason against which a counter-consideration can be forwarded *cannot* be a function only of the width of the exception class of its associated defeasible generalization – *even if* that class could be measured precisely (which, I assume, it cannot). Seemingly, considerations with respect to the scope of *ceteris paribus* reasons add only complexity to the analysis, but do not

provide an advantage with respect to assessing the strength of a *particular* conductive argumentation.

Defeasible reasons, as we meet them in conductive arguments, invite a case by case analysis that asks, if proponents can successfully meet some/many/all counter-considerations which defeat the reasons forwarded. Possibly, proponents are able to integrate pro and con reasons to form a revised position. If so, then this would be at least one good criterion that we may use in assessing a conductive argument. Hence, if a proponent meets his dialectical obligations well, is certainly the more important question to ask. Again, this question finds its answer only at the level of saturated instances, not at the level of cp-generalizations, irrespective of what interpretation is preferred.

By focusing on the level of associated cp-generalizations, one ends up mimicking the addition of the major premise in a deductive inference for the sake of evaluating a particular argument. I have suggested, this approach may be rather fruitless. In fact, one misses out on appreciating that, *qua* its similarity to the schemes of de-/in-abduction, the conductive argumentation scheme suggests a stable “we position” – a suggestion that the discourse under analysis falsifies.

5. Outlook

As Wohlrapp (1998) has already pointed out, in Govier’s conception of conductive argumentation, the support from the premise-set to the conclusion is construed static, *because* the conclusion is taken to be fixed rather than dynamic. It is not clear, why this should be the preferred way of understanding things. In critical stance, this method for representing reasons and counter-considerations for and against a conclusion gives us but a static image of what really is an *ongoing*, i.e., a dynamic debate.

Crucially, in such debates positions may shift and new reasons/counter-considerations can be produced in response to objections. That various mutually inconsistent pro-con reasons will appear can – just as well, perhaps better – be explained by framing effects (cf. Wohlrapp 2006).

In sum, I fail to find anything helpful in the method here criticized. Of course, the challenge is to show that the *reasonedness* of both a conclusion and its negation can be based on something stronger than mere subjective opinion. Orderings of cp-generalizations do suggest that there may be something stronger, especially if one found wide agreement on such orderings. I have here tried to show that, if available, such results *would* warrant a very high degree of caution, as it is unclear (and therefore demands further study) under what interpretation they should be understood.

If the pun is allowed: *Ceteris paribus*, cp-generalizations are irrelevant to evaluating conductive argumentation.

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¹ These are Toulmin's (1958) criteria for *substantial* (vs. *formal*) argument. Cf. Wohlrapp (2006).

² Trivially, any argumentation of the form ' P_1, \dots, P_{n-1}, P_n ; therefore C ' can always be reconstructed in a deductively valid way by reconstructing a missing premise of the form ' $P_1 \wedge \dots \wedge P_{n-1} \wedge P_n \rightarrow C$ '. This would be the dogma. Any objection to an argument will not always amount to, but always imply the negation of this conditional.

³ According to Jim Freeman (personal communication), who had students perform such comparisons as a course exercise, these yield non-arbitrary degrees of intersubjective agreement (quantitative study and interpretation pending). Clearly, recourse to *arbitrary* subjective opinion cannot explain this result.

⁴ Note how the generalization enters the discourse. The proponent will adduce that a *particular* factor is a reason for legalizing a *particular* praxis, i.e., (P1): ' $Fa \rightarrow Ga$ ' and ' Fa '. The opponent may counter (O1): ' Fa ', but ' $Fb \wedge \neg Gb$ ', hence ' $\neg \forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ '. If the counterexample is sound, the proponent is committed to ' $\neg \forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ ' by the principle of non-contradiction.

⁵ Compare Govier's diagrams. Reasons and counter-considerations are always only connected to the conclusion by differently shaped arrows to express positive/negative support.

⁶ Cf. Roseveare (1982) on Mercury's perihelion-anomaly for Newtonian mechanics and the unsuccessfully iterated attempts at revising the theory, especially from 1850-1915.

⁷ For all practical purposes, the objections are the objections *de facto* forwarded in the discourse plus those the analyst can think of *right now* when intervening critically.