

Act or Object A Time for Argument Theory Differentiation

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Article abstract

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Act or Object: A Time for Argument Theory Differentiation

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Abstract: Many standard definitions of ‘argument’ that recognise an ambiguity between its active and objective senses seek to subsume these in various ways into a single, composite whole. This, it is argued, glosses over the distinction instead of exploiting its elucidatory potential. Whilst optimistic about the prospects of theory integration, the paper recommends a methodology of differentiation as a first necessary step towards any such goal. It starts by assuming that ‘argument’ refers—simultaneously and independently—to two different things, making space between them for a theory of argument based on the then necessary externality of the relation between them.

Résumé: De nombreuses définitions standard de « argument », reconnaissant une ambiguïté entre ses sens actif et objectif, cherchent à les subsumer de diverses manières en un tout unique et composite. Ceci, soutient-on, occulte la distinction au lieu d'exploiter son potentiel d'élucidation. Tout en étant optimiste quant aux perspectives d'intégration de la théorie, l'article recommande une méthodologie de différenciation comme première étape nécessaire vers un tel objectif. Il commence par supposer que « argument » se réfère - simultanément et indépendamment - à deux choses différentes, en faisant de l'espace entre elles pour une théorie de l'argument fondée sur l'extériorité alors nécessaire de la relation entre elles.

Keywords: act, object, argument, ambiguity, claim, theory integration, compatible, assertive

1. Introduction

At the beginning of his short 2005 paper, “A Time for Argument Theory Integration,” J. Anthony Blair wrote the following: “Theoretical integration is not theoretical assimilation. Incompatible theories cannot be assimilated.” But then he asks, albeit hypothetically, “What if two apparently conflicting theories turn out to be

about different subject matters, and so not incompatible after all?" (Blair 2005, p. 3).

The question is posed with the hope of eventually finding opportunities for integration where "historical antagonisms" have existed and "incompatibilities thought to exist." Yet the criterion for potential compatibility, implied by the question, is the opposite of integration. It is differentiation; moreover, it is extreme differentiation such that theories cease to conflict with one another because they are about different things altogether. Compatibility established on this basis makes space for coexistence; two theories can both be correct, each in its own subject domain, without either necessarily contradicting the other, but it is not obvious how that contributes to any subsequent programme of integration. The way to view it, as I understand Blair's proposal, is as a precursory step, a paving of ways. Discovering whether these ways lead anywhere, and where, if at all, they intersect with others, is a separate exercise and a worthwhile one whatever the outcome. Even if it turns out that two theoretical domains are incommensurate, that they have nothing in common on which to frame an integrated theory, that too would be instructive.

The first set of "antagonisms" that Blair addresses in his paper—and that I focus on here—consists of "differences in conceptions of argument and argumentation." He begins by citing the well-known dichotomy discussed by O'Keefe (1977) between arguments *qua* things "made" (given, presented, etc.), which he labels "arguments₁," and those "had" or engaged in—viz "arguments₂." It is, O'Keefe says, an "obvious distinction ... embedded in our everyday use of the term [and] that underlies the curiosity of statements such as: 'Bob and I had an argument and it was refuted.'" (O'Keefe 1977, p.122). He might conversely have mentioned the incongruity of statements like 'Bob made an argument and he won it'—*it* being an instance of argument₁ but belied by the context. In short, the English word 'argument' is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can be used to mean a reasoned case singly or jointly authored, and on the other, a dispute or disagreement between one or more parties.

O'Keefe's twin conceptions of argument would clearly test the hypothesis implicit in Blair's what-if question; that is, that there

are conceptions of ‘argument’ differing in kind sufficiently to coexist without compromising one another. They certainly differ, and they are also compatible insofar as one can be given as the defining context for the other, or as a necessary ingredient of the other, or both. Such definitions abound, among them the “new definition” proposed by Douglas Walton (1990):

Argument is a social and verbal means of trying to resolve, or at least to contend with, a conflict or difference that has arisen or exists between two (or more) parties. An argument necessarily involves a claim that is advanced by at least one of the parties (Walton 1990, p. 411).

The term ‘argument’ is used here in two ways, if only grammatically. In the first sentence, it has the mass, generic sense of a kind or quality of discourse, coexistent we are told with ‘argumentation’ (ibid) and quite clearly consistent with argument₂. In the second sentence, it has the countable sense of *an* argument; that is, any one argument. It might be assumed from the context that this means any token of argument₂, which it might mean, but need not; for as O’Keefe and Walton are agreed upon, an argument₁ can be made in the course of argument₂. The ambiguity exists, therefore, but it does not compromise Walton’s definition since whichever argument type it might turn out to be it would not contradict the generic characterisation Walton assigns to *argument*. (What is more pressing for Walton’s definition is the arguable ambiguity of ‘claim’—but more on that below.)

Blair does not dwell on O’Keefe’s distinction but instead focuses exclusively on arguments₁. Drawing from a survey of dictionary and textbook definitions, he claims to have identified a number of distinct varieties, or subdivisions, specifically within that sense of ‘argument.’ Of these, he selects the following three examples:

- (a) propositions such that one is implied (or supported) by the others
- (b) propositions taken to imply (or support) another
- (c) propositions offered in support of a claim

Which of these, he asks, is the correct conception of argument₁? His answer:

any of them. It depends on your interests. If you are interested in the syntactic or semantic implication relationships among propositions, then what's of interest to you are simply groups of propositions. Those relationships obtain whether or not anyone thinks of them or knows about them. There is a tradition in which implication-related proposition sets are called arguments, but in that case, you are talking about something different from arguments understood as what people take to be reasons why something is true or something should be done, which is also a sense of 'argument' with a tradition of use behind it. Both these senses are different from the third... (Blair 2005, p.4)

There are, of course, appreciable differences between propositions respectively *implying*, being *taken* to imply, and *offered* in support of another. But given that the purpose for which the examples were selected was to carve the concept of argument at its joints so to speak, they are surprisingly alike. If there are deemed to be compatibilities between (a), (b), and (c), it might seem more apposite to ascribe these to what the examples have in common than to what divides them. First, as we are told, all three are culled from logic textbooks; second, and therefore unsurprisingly, all of them cast arguments as objects—sets of propositions, related by implication (or its converse). The variation that exists is modular rather than substantive, resting on how the inter-propositional relations depend upon, or involve, human action or agency: not at all in the case of (a) and in different ways in (b) and (c). But none stands out as representative of the countervailing body of theory wherein argument is conceived of primarily, if not exclusively, as performative.

Third, and given the above, it is questionable whether the three examples represent variants of O'Keefe's argument₁ at all or whether they are instead collectively at variance with it. O'Keefe refers to arguments₁ in strongly illocutionary terms, "on a par" he says, "with promises, apologies, warnings... and the like" (O'Keefe 1977, p. 121). Although, as noted, he refers to these as things people *make*—which might suggest that they are objects or

products of some kind—it would be simplistic to take that form of words quite so literally. ‘Making a promise’ just means promising, ‘making an apology’ just means apologising, and so on. There is nothing in O’Keefe’s paper to suggest that he is drawing an overt distinction between acts and objects.

This is not to say, however, that there is no such distinction, or corresponding ambiguity also “embedded in our everyday use of the term ‘argument.’” (O’Keefe 1977, p. 122). There is, as Blair says (above), “a tradition in which ... proposition sets are called arguments,” a view to which he himself has given some backing (Blair 2004, 2012). There is also a tradition in which certain kinds of *acts* are called arguments. Both are contested, either by theories that give primacy or exclusive title, to one or the other conception. Simard Smith and Moldovan (2011) deny the ambiguity of ‘argument’ altogether, conceiving of arguments as abstract objects *tout court*. By contrast Vorobej (2006, p. 3) begins with a definition of argument as “a fairly discrete communicative act with fairly well defined spatio-temporal boundaries... a social activity... an attempt at rational persuasion ...”

Overwhelmingly, however, the preferred solution tends to involve some degree of hybridisation. Vorobej himself concedes that being composed of propositions, arguments too are therefore, in part, abstract objects. More precisely, arguments occur when individuals *use* certain ordered pairs of abstract objects in a particular way while engaged in an exercise in rational persuasion (Vorobej 2006, p. 8).

It is unclear what “in part” signifies here although the impression it gives is that the object-sense of argument is subordinate to that of the act-sense. But it may also, or instead, mean that an argument is an abstract object defined by its parts, the constituent propositions which, when used for argumentative purposes, form the intentional objects of an act of argument. From another angle, arguments are viewed as *products* of argument acts or processes; or, to use Ralph Johnson’s colourful metaphor, they are “the distillate of the practice of argumentation” (Johnson 2000, p. 168). Hansen (2002) comments that

...although Johnson insists that an argument is a product, he holds that arguments eventuate from a process, and his concept of ar-

gument inherits both elements of a product and elements of a process. It is not too far-fetched, I think, to hypothesize that Johnson has forged a new concept of ‘argument’ out of two distinct traditional senses of ‘argument’ (p. 269).

Many definitions thus promote the act or process as the dominant, generic sense of argument and arguments. There are others, however, that recognise a dual meaning of ‘argument’, but give primacy to neither. Goddu (2011) writes that “restricting ourselves to talk of arguments as acts on the one hand and objects on the other in no way supports the intellectual or ontological priority of one aspect of argument over the other” (p. 87).

I take this statement by Goddu as a favourable starting point and as concordant with Blair’s suggestion that coexistence and compatibility (between competing conceptions of argument) can be accorded, not just *despite* extreme difference, but because of it; moreover that the difference itself has an elucidatory potential that hybrid definitions—and that includes Blair’s three examples as well as fully fledged constructs like Johnson’s—are liable to blur.

In what follows, therefore, I propose to apply Blair’s question to the difference between what examples (a) to (c) and similar definitions have in common—viz their dominant object sense—and the contrary presumption that an argument is an act, pure and simple. I start with the former, proceed to the latter, and conclude with a necessarily tentative proposal for resting a theory of argument on the distinction itself. In sum, the purpose of the paper is not to frame another composite definition that merges the two conceptions but to test a third hypothesis, namely that an argument is both things—act and object—simultaneously and, above all, independently of one another.

2. Arguments as objects

Charles Hamblin wrote, “The concept of an *argument* is quite basic to Logic, but seldom examined” (1970, p. 224). Few would disagree; the principal task in logic is to determine which arguments are valid and which are not so that the real concern for the logician is whether the definition of validity is fit for the purpose of evaluating *any* putative argument that comes before it. To en-

sure that the calculus is complete, the fewer constraints that are put on the definition of an argument the better, for which reason some authors of logic textbooks, Simpson (2008) for instance, are quite content to define arguments *simply* as “collections of statements.” Obviously, he does not suggest that this is the everyday understanding of argument or, for that matter, that right-minded logicians think it is. As Hamblin also says (though not with validity as the criterion), we should not spend time asking what arguments *are* but get on with appraising and evaluating them (Hamblin 1970, p. 231). To say that an argument is merely a set (group, collection, ...) of statements apt for appraisal certainly gives it an untrammelled object sense. But it is not so much a definition as a means of proceeding without one.

For purposes of logical appraisal, this minimalist account has a virtue. However, there are other academic and pedagogical disciplines (informal logic, pragma-dialectics, speech-act theory, critical thinking) in which argument appraisal plays a part but for which the definition of the entity being appraised cannot be left so open or so arbitrary. Wherever a methodology is required for analysing and evaluating texts containing ‘real’ (natural language) argument, so too are some criteria required for distinguishing between arguments and *non*-arguments. Recognising argument texts in practice is not so hard, most of the time, largely thanks to linguistic cues, context, and judicious applications of the principle of charity (see e.g., Fisher 1988, pp. 17-18). But identifying criteria for distinguishing arguments from non-arguments in a general and applicable theory is a different matter.

A typical textbook approach,¹ as we have seen, is to define an argument as a structure formed of propositions (statements, sentences) and their variously determined interrelation(s). Blair’s three examples are of that ilk. Recall that in (a) the relation, that is, the implication, is conceived of as a property of the propositions

¹ Textbooks are cited here not as authorities but because they nonetheless *have authority*, and that, therefore, it is important to keep abreast of what they are asserting. Tony Blair has made the valid point that *philosophers* “have an obligation not to mis-educate their students about arguments, and hence to be sure that what they are teaching is the state of the art” (Blair 2009, p. 4). Many teachers would have something similar to say to the authors of some textbooks.

themselves, distinguishing it from the other two on which the relation is generated by acts of one sort or another. This idea is broadly similar to Woods' (2016) "threefold distinction between and among: (a') consequences that premisses *have*; (b') *spotting* consequences that premisses have; and (c') *drawing* spotted conclusions." Woods also says that "consequence-havings obtain in logical space"; the other two in "psychological space", a metaphor that he further divides into "recognition subspace" (for b'), and "inference subspace" (for c') (Woods 2016, p. 93f). But can these various goings-on in psychological space not also go on in logical space? In other words, cannot all three variants simply be subsumed under the logical definition of an argument as a premise-conclusion complex? Woods' answer to both questions is a firm No:

An argument in logical space is nothing but a sequence of formulas, whose "conclusion" is just its last member, and whose "premisses" are the ones left over. "Conclusion" is especially suspect. Conclusions are the result of concludings, but there are no concludings going on in logical space. The reason why is that there are no *people* there. (Woods 2016, p. 94)

Nonetheless—and Blair could have added it to his list—there is a tradition in which arguments are conceived of as sets of propositions one that is a conclusion while the others are premisses. It is indeed a venerable tradition, dating back at least to the Stoic philosophers.² It is also a standard textbook opener for courses in logic (informal and formal) and critical thinking. Copi and Burgess-Jackson (1992, p. 12) define arguments as "...a group of propositions of which one, the conclusion, is claimed to follow from the others, which are premisses." Copi calls this "a logician's definition": objects for analysis and evaluation by the criteria of the discipline in question.

²According to Sextus Empiricus, the Stoic logicians held that "an argument is a complex of premisses and a conclusion. ... The conclusion is the proposition established from the premisses. For example, in 'If it is day, it is light. But it is day. Therefore it is light.'" (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book 2. See Long and Sedley 1987, p. 36)

Sets of propositions can certainly count as objects, albeit abstract ones, but characterising them as sets consisting of premiss(es) and a conclusion immediately runs into difficulty. It is a problem Copi acknowledges himself with the following simile: “‘Premiss’ and ‘conclusion’ are relative terms like ‘employer’ and ‘employee,’” (Copi and Burgess-Jackson 1992, p. 6). Likewise, propositions (or sentences, assertions, or claims) do not divide up into those that are premisses and those that are conclusions. In a complex argument, the same sentence can be *the* intermediate conclusion of a sub-argument and, simultaneously, *the* premiss to a further conclusion. There is nothing characteristically recognisable about “*a* conclusion” or “*a* premiss” outside the context of the particular argument whose respective components they are. On a practical level, we understand the concepts of premiss and conclusion via the concept of argument, that is, by the relation that holds between elements in an argument, namely ‘following from...’ *vel sim*. That these relations, so described, are any more intelligible than the definiendum itself is, I think, implausible. Would the “following” of one proposition from another have any non-circular meaning for someone not already familiar with the concept of argument and/or the activity of arguing? To “follow” may mean nothing more than “come after”—which of course it does mean, by convention, in a list of premisses and their putative conclusion. It might seem trite to say that what *follows* A, in a sequence $\langle A, B \rangle$, might not follow *from* A. But it is not entirely trite if it flags why characterising the premiss-conclusion relation as “following from” is problematic—and obviously so. For, if the last element in the list does not follow *from* the preceding ones, then either the list is not an argument, or an argument is just a list. That problem is not solved by referring to the relation instead as “consequence-having”; or implying or justifying (of one proposition by the other(s)); or, it would seem, by any relation that that belongs to what Woods refers to (above) as “logical space.” Either there are no bad or invalid arguments, which is plainly counter-intuitive, or there are arguments that lack any defining relation, which is equally counter-intuitive because then any random set of propositions would qualify as an argument. (It is true that we sometimes say of a bad argument: “That’s no argument,” meaning that B does not

follow from A; it is a non-sequitur. But that still leaves us with the unanswerable *sorites* question, “How bad is bad?”)

For Copi the solution lies in the single word ‘claimed’ (much like ‘taken’ in Blair’s example). So, none of the propositions need actually follow from, or be a consequence of, any of the others. It is sufficient that one is *claimed* to follow. Introducing the verb ‘claim’ solves the immediate problem and enables the existence of bad arguments as well as good, but it comes at a price for the view that an argument can subsist independently of human minds or actions.

It cannot be denied that there are acts of argument—trivially ‘arguing.’ Concluding is an act of argument. Propounding, too, is an act of argument if what is propounded is an argument (in some object-sense). Nor can it be denied, and I do not, that these acts can be enlisted to modify the object sense. However, the expressed purpose of this inquiry (in the spirit of Blair’s hypothetical) is to separate these “aspects” of argument (as Goddu terms them) and view them as wholly distinct. In the present instance, this means strenuously endeavouring to reduce ‘argument’ to its naked object-sense, if it has one.

2.1 Arguments and argument-claims

Responding to Copi’s definition, Douglas Walton (1990), asks, “Claimed by whom?... By the proponent, one would suppose.” He continues,

In this sense, the term ‘claim’ tacitly presupposes an interactive (dialectical) framework of a proponent upholding a point of view and an opponent questioning that point of view. A claim is an upholding of some particular proposition that is potentially open to questioning.

Copi’s definition, however, only goes part way toward the dialectical conception of an argument. In this regard, it is typical of the logician’s use of the term ‘argument’ in logic texts and manuals since Aristotle, where there is an attempt to suppress the idea of an interactive context of discussion. The perceived need is to see the concept of argument as a purely objective notion that can be captured by the formal logic of propositions and truth values.

In this standard approach, the dialectical meanings of the term 'claim' are suppressed and never again mentioned.

Among those not corrupted by logic courses, however, the term 'argument' has a broader meaning. (Walton 1990, p. 409f)

It might equally be said that Copi's definition goes only part way toward the objective conception and its correspondingly narrower meaning. Walton selects the sense in which, he says, 'claim' presupposes a dialectic framework, but that is not its only use either in ordinary language or in philosophy. To be sure, claiming is an act similar to stating or asserting. But a claim can also be understood in the object sense of what is (but need not be) claimed or 'claimable.'³ The ambiguity of 'claim' can even be viewed as a "convenience" (Grice 1975, p. 380) and used with its ambiguity intact as a general-purpose term for the components of an argument. Beall and Restall (2006, p. 35) take such liberty with an instruction to "Read our neutral term 'claim' as picking out sentences, propositions, utterances, statements, or anything else you think might feature in the premises and conclusions of an argument." Under that licence, the passive voice used in Copi's "claimed to follow," need not be taken so literally as to imply only the intentional act of an agent.

Mark Sainsbury (2001, p. 23-5) draws a different kind of distinction between arguments and what he calls "argument-claims," which I think comes as close as any to isolating the object sense of the former. By his account, an argument is something about which an argument-claim can be made, in particular the claim to an argument's validity (or otherwise). Sainsbury interprets the expression

³ The notion of a 'claimable' has a parallel in the 'assertibles,' which in Stoic logic were the constituents of arguments (though not arguments themselves). They also have a parallel in Fregean 'thoughts' (*Gedanken*), which McDowell (1994) disambiguates as 'thinkables.' The ordinary word 'thought,' like 'claim,' carries the usual act-object ambiguity of locutionary nouns. Frege's term *Gedanke*, however, has the strictly object-sense, which is captured by 'thinkable.' A thinkable need not be thought, but (trivially) only thinkables can be thought. Claimables are analogous in this respect.

(1) $A_1, \dots, A_n \vDash C$ (or: $A_1, \dots, A_n \not\vDash C$)

as:

(2) “ $A_1, \dots, A_n; C$ ” is valid, (or : “ $A_1, \dots, A_n; C$ ” is *not* valid).

In the affirmative case, this is in the same spirit as saying that C follows from A_1, \dots, A_n , or that C is a consequence of A_1, \dots, A_n . For if C follows (in this logician’s sense) from the rest of the complex, the complex is valid. By this account, the turnstile is a metalinguistic expression. The semicolon, as deployed in (2), is also metalinguistic. But whereas the turnstile is an indicator of actual logical consequence, the semi-colon is not: it is simply a separator that marks off the final sentence in a given list from the preceding sentences, thus imposing on it the necessary form for logical appraisal. By convention, the final sentence is termed the ‘conclusion,’ and the whole ‘an argument.’ But on those terms, being a conclusion just means being the item judged to follow or not follow (as the case may be) from the conjunction of the others. Put another way, the grammatical subject of an argument-claim is just a set:

(3) $\langle \{A_1, \dots, A_n\}, \{A_{n+1}\} \rangle$

The argument-claim, expressed symbolically by (1) and paraphrased by (2), is true if the argument is valid and false otherwise. By contrast, (3) itself is neither true nor false, because it makes (expresses) no claim. That, Sainsbury observes, is the key difference between an argument claim, as he is using the term, and a (mere) argument. In the context of (2), where the claim explicitly regards the validity (or non-validity) of (3), this seems correct and accords unequivocally with the notion of an argument as an *object*—something which can be propounded (but need not be) and is distinct from what may be done by a proponent. Sainsbury firmly endorses this notion by reducing the argument solely to an object of evaluation: “something about which the question arises whether or not it is valid” (Sainsbury 2001, p. 24). To be assessable for validity, all that is necessary is that the set be such that one

of its members has been *designated* a conclusion. On the classical conception of validity, the argument is valid if and only if the conjunction consisting of all the premises and the negation of the conclusion is an inconsistent set. On these criteria, it is not necessary for anything to be actively claimed in order for the evaluation to hold; the set is consistent or inconsistent, the conjunction true or false, a consequence had or not had, something implied or not implied regardless of any claim “made” by it or made on its behalf. If we are looking for a clear expression of what it is to be an argument in the object-sense—bedrock, so to speak—then (3) is it. This conception of argument is unapologetically logicist given that the selected criterion of appraisal is deductive validity and no doubt regarded by some as a corrupting influence. However, there is no obvious requirement that the sole criterion of argument appraisal be validity, nor that “consequence” need relate only to logical consequence. The austerity of the criterion of logical validity makes it an obvious paradigm. But as Sainsbury himself observes: “One correct dimension of assessment for an argument is whether it is valid or not; another is whether it is persuasive or not” (2001, p. 24). It is, I think, a moot point whether there are any non-logical criteria, such as persuasiveness, that can maintain the same degree of objectivity. Certainly, there are significant differences between judging whether B follows from A and, for example, whether A is a reason for B (persuasive or otherwise). These differences (see Harman 1984, 2002)⁴ muddy the water. But they do not alter the general, if over-simplistic, point that it is from the appraiser’s perspective that we get the clearest view of arguments qua objects.

Returning to Walton’s question: yes, a speaker (proponent) does make a claim when he or she utters a complex sentence of the form: A: {A₁, ... A_n} (and) therefore B. In fact, as Sainsbury points out, the proponent makes two claims: first that A, and second that B follows from A. Being claims, these might not be true though constitutively (like assertions) they are claimed *as* true (see Wil-

⁴ Harman (1984, p. 126) rejects the hypothesis that ‘all immediately intelligible implications expressed in language are logical implications,’ having ‘reluctantly conclude(d)’ that there are significant counter-examples.

liamson 2000).⁵ Moreover, whether they are true or not, the first might not imply the second or have it as a consequence. What is claimed by the proponent when propounding an argument is thus a conjunction, which is why we can and often do include ‘and’ before ‘therefore’ or ‘so’ when framing an argument. The claim is *that* A_1, \dots, A_n , and *that* therefore C . So, it is not wrong to say that when, in a context of argument₁, A is claimed to imply B —or to have B as a consequence, or to be a persuasive reason to accept B , and so on—the author of the claim is the proponent. What is wrong is to deny out of hand that there is a second sense of ‘claim’; namely, the *what* of what is claimed when a claim is made but which remains unchanged (objectively speaking) when it is not made, or denied, or simply entertained. This is the meaning that Sainsbury gives to argument-claims such as “‘ $A;B$ ’ is valid.” Whilst ostensibly the author of such a claim is the person who appraises the argument, it is no less legitimate to say that the claim is implicit in the designation of A and B (in that order) as components of an argument. But importantly, they are still the components of an argument in a claim that ‘ $A;B$ is *not* valid,’ the importance being that it clearly captures the object sense of argument and defines it starkly as ‘any set of propositions,’ collectively valid or invalid, good or bad, or indifferent.

‘Indifferent’ is a good word on which to end this first part of the paper. For *if* we wish to conceive of an argument₁, and/or its components, in purely object terms, we need it to be indifferent not only to its validity (or persuasiveness) or otherwise, but also to its provenance. We cannot invoke the relation of following from or implication or consequence without encountering the problem of how to give meaning to the notion of bad arguments—those that lack one or other of these relations. But nor can we invoke modifiers like ‘taken to’ or ‘offered as’ without shifting the dependency of the concept on to acts or attitudes of one sort or another; an expedient which, *ex hypothesi*, defeats the purpose of the inquiry. It may not be how an argument is recognised by the proverbial

⁵ For Williamson (2000, Ch. 11) it is a “constitutive rule” of assertion that P be asserted only if P is *known* to be true by the speaker. The rule holds however many errors of judgement are made or lies told.

passenger on the number 35 bus, but it is all we are left with if we are serious about the distinction being drawn.

2 Acts of argument

In contrast, an act of argument is performed by and requires the input of an agent (speaker, author). If, *pace* Simard Smith and Moldovan, ‘argument’ has an independent act-sense, it may be understood to refer to a type of complex illocution consisting of reason-giving, or to conclusion-drawing, or both. To acknowledge such a meaning, alongside a strict object sense, amounts to saying that ‘argument’ is ambiguous, along lines similar to that alleged of simple nominalised illocutionary verbs such as ‘claim,’ ‘assertion,’ and ‘statement.’ The ambiguity of these nouns is argued for, or taken as read, by many philosophers, including Searle (1968), Alston (1996, pp. 14-15), and Williams, who writes, “‘Assertion’ like ‘belief’ ... may refer to what someone asserts (the content of the assertion), or to his asserting that content” (2002, p. 67). Can ‘argument’ be included in this list of alleged ambiguities? If so, then presumably the act of argument would have as its dual the set of propositions to which ‘argument’ *qua* object was reduced in the previous section.

Simard Smith and Moldovan’s objection to the ambiguity of ‘argument’ is not with the object sense but with the act sense. Yet, although they deny that as a word of natural language ‘argument’ has a speech-act meaning, they allow that the *theoretical* word ‘argument’ may be so defined for its theoretical utility. This concession accords with the *modus operandi* adopted in this paper, which is initially to *entertain* differing conceptions for what they might contribute to a theory, rather than to adjudicate pre-emptively on their respective merits and thus constrain the theory.

(J)ust because the English word ‘argument’ is not ambiguous in the sense mentioned, it does not mean that there can be no interesting theoretical study of speech acts of arguing. A definition of ‘argument’ as speech act could be useful as part of that study. The theorist is free to choose both her object of study and the terminology she wants to use. ... We could simply have two theoretical terms, such as ‘argument-o’, to name a certain kind of abstract ob-

ject, and ‘argument-p’, to name the speech act by which the former is conveyed (Simard Smith and Moldovan 2011, p. 244f).

Personally, I have no objection to the ambiguity claim although I appreciate that it is not universally accepted, or if it is, then selectively for different illocutions. Ulrich (1976), on what he calls the “ambiguity thesis (AT),” rejects it across the board although he too adds a not-dissimilar proviso that his objections concern the sense of the terms, not necessarily their reference:

I do not deny that there is a distinction between speech acts and their objects, nor do I deny that propositions are the objects of illocutionary acts. What I do deny is that the nominalizations of illocutionary verbs are ambiguous between "act" and "object" senses (p. 119).

So, rather than attempting to defend the AT, I welcome these concessions since it is with theory that the present discussion is concerned. Besides, the question of whether there is or is not ambiguity is something of a red herring. When referring to what people assert when they make an assertion, there is a perfectly good substitute in the word ‘proposition,’ and for acts, there are the gerundial forms of verbs: (the acts of) asserting, inferring, arguing.

Nonetheless there remain obvious difficulties in identifying acts of argument in and of themselves. For example, the specific meaning of ‘giving’ in the context of an act of reason-giving, is dependent upon its object being recognisable as a reason, and on there being something for which it is a reason, and vice versa. Just as ‘premise’ is a relational term whose identity is dependent upon the argument for which it is a component part, so it is with the act of ‘giving’ (as a reason). If a premise or a reason is just a proposition, how does the *giving* of it differ from the mere *stating* of it? How then, theoretically speaking, is a sequence of assertions any more distinguishable as an act of argument than a sequence of propositions as an argument-object unless or until we know what is stated and for what purpose?

Pretheoretically we know—we can abstract from repeated experience—what it is like in general to *infer* (something) or to *give*

(something) without needing to be specific about what is inferred or what is given and why. In the same way, we know what kinds of things we can give as reasons and from what kinds of things we can conclude them. Suppose I am on a beach watching the tide going out and I infer that it will soon be possible to reach a nearby island that would be unreachable at high tide. The noun for the act I perform is ‘inference,’ a term that has the same theoretical ambiguity as ‘claim,’ ‘assertion,’ ‘statement,’ etc. If you ask me in one breath *what* I inferred (from the state of the tide) and in another *what* my inference was, the same answer would typically suffice, viz, “*that* the island could be reached”: a that clause, a proposition, an inference-o.

This is not to say that ‘inference’ and ‘proposition’ mean the same thing nor that ‘inference’ and ‘assertion’ mean the same. An inference-o is a special kind of object—coloured, as it were, by the mental or speech act whose object (or content) it is. Accordingly, inferring is a special kind of thinking or speaking. But the point to emphasise here is that what is inferred is not a different object for being inferred. Its truth conditions are unaffected by whether or not it is inferred. Instead of *inferring* that the island could be reached, I might have seen with my own eyes that this was so without any thoughts about the tide and asserted it without any reference to the tide. Similarly, I might have claimed or asserted that the tide was out without meaning it as a reason to think anything about the island. *What* I simply assert or claim, and *what* I give as a reason for the conclusion, is just that the tide is out. In giving it as a reason on one occasion and as a plain assertion on another, I do not bring about any real or intrinsic change to it either way.⁶ The thing that is plainly asserted and the thing itself that is given as a reason are one and the same object.

‘Reason-giving’ is a plausible enough descriptive term for what goes on in an argument, and, for some argument theories, serves to define the act (e.g., Hitchcock 2007). But under scrutiny, its adequacy is questionable. Bermejo-Luque (2019) attributes this to vagueness on the part of the word ‘give’ and an ambiguity when

⁶ As opposed to so-called (mere) ‘Cambridge change’ (see e.g., Cleland 1990; Weberman 1999).

the given object is a ‘reason’—the latter point is echoed by Harman (2002). Not all reasons are of the kind that illuminates the concept of argument; there are practical considerations, motives, explanations, and more, which answer to the name ‘reason,’ and which may prompt actions or inform decisions but not in ways normally associated with arguing a case. Nor does ‘giving’ have any special affinity to reasons of the required sort: the sort used to support a target claim or from which a conclusion can be drawn. Besides, formally speaking, reason-giving is a composite definition more dependent for meaning on the putative nature of the object (the reason) than on the nature of the act. It is not the kind of generic definition of the argument-act that is needed to complement the reductive definition given in Part 1 of the argument-object. There the component corresponding to a reason was reduced to a bare proposition. To deconstruct the concept of ‘reason-giving’ on similar lines, the question to ask is what a speaker *does to* a proposition when giving it as a reason. The answer that comes most readily to mind is that he or she *asserts* it. Or, to situate it in Searle’s taxonomy of speech acts, reason-giving belongs to the class of assertives.

It is worth noting that Searle (1979, p. 13) also places deducing and concluding in the same class, adding only that these acts differ from plainly stating by “the added feature” of the relation they have to the “context of discourse,” which would naturally include any reasons given for the conclusion. Presumably, and conversely, an act of reason-giving would mark a relation to some object of the sort Bermejo Luque (2019) terms a ‘target-claim.’ But Searle does not add this, perhaps because he sees reason-giving as *plainly* assertive. If so, he is not alone. Hitchcock (2007), also classifies acts of reason-giving as plainly assertive, in contrast with concluding, which can take the form of questions, commands, even emotional reactions: ‘The tide’s turned, so should we leave the island?’; ‘The tide’s rising, so hurry!’ or ‘The tide’s rising,’ therefore [feeling of anxiety].⁷ Surprisingly Hitchcock does not allow the same latitude to reason-giving, despite obvious candidates such as, ‘Look at the tide, let’s go back.’ Besides, it is not hard to see

⁷ For the author’s own example, see (Hitchcock 2007, p.107).

how all of these sentences could be transposed into declaratives with no loss of sense. Possibly the asymmetry was intended by Hitchcock to emphasise the assertive force of reason-giving.

Robert Brandom offers a somewhat different account of the relation between assertion and inference. Developing a point that he takes from the early writings of Frege, he sees assertion as “issuing an inference license,” adding, “Since inferring is drawing a conclusion, such an inference license amounts to a warrant for further assertions, specifically assertions of those sentences which can appropriately be inferred from the sentence originally asserted” (Brandom 1983, p. 639). ‘Warrant’ here has a subtle but significantly different meaning from that which it has in a Toulmin model. Brandom’s warrant to infer comes *from* the assertion; it is implicit *in* it. It is not conceived of as an extra assumption in the step from reason to inference. Although the two philosophers have different motives—Hitchcock’s being to categorise reason-giving, Brandom’s to explicate assertion—they would probably agree that the act of warranting inference is characteristically assertive. It would probably be an overstatement to say that warranting inference is the whole point and purpose of assertion (though Frege came close to it). There are other ways to explain why we assert things, the most obvious being to convey information, as Brandom himself observes. However, this does nothing to detract from his contention since the point and purpose of issuing information is no less in need of explaining than assertion itself. The value of an item of information (about the state of the tide, say) is in what we do with it, which can in large part be understood in terms of what we infer from it or how we act on it or think as a result of it, which is also a mark of what we infer from it.

3 Acts and objects: Some conclusions

The objective so far has been to consider two fundamentally different conceptions: (1) that of an argument as a bare object versus (2) an argument as a bare act. It was then asked what, in each case, that would amount to or, more accurately, *reduce* to. If the argument-act is conceived of as *giving* (offering, etc.), and the object is identified as a *reason*, and the resulting complex is referred to as

‘reason-giving’ or the like, then not only are there problems of the nature discussed by Harman and by Bermejo-Luque, but the condition of separation required to test the compatibility hypothesis implicit in Blair’s question has clearly not been met. To address both issues, it was therefore proposed that ‘giving’ in the context of ‘reason-giving’ comes down at base to asserting (something).

Prior to that, and independently, the referent of the object-sense of ‘argument₁’ was reduced to a set or list of propositions. This was not on the basis of propositions being standardly held to be the objects or contents of assertions—that would blatantly beg the question—but because propositions (or the sentences that express them) are the objects of logical appraisal, the bearers of consequences or implications. When we reflect on propositions critically, we do so, as John Dewey succinctly put it, “...in the light of the grounds which support it and the consequences to which it tends” (1909, p. 9). However, it so happens that propositions are standardly held to be objects or contents of assertions. Therefore, it would seem feasible to conclude that a theory of argument as an act (of asserting) *is* potentially compatible with a theory of argument as an object (of appraisal). And given the hypothetical nature of the question and the special dispensation claimed by Simard Smith and Moldovan for the theorist “to choose both her object of study and the terminology she wants to use,” I take it as a safe conclusion that the two conceptions can co-exist in a single theory. As to the more ambitious question of whether a theory can be framed that maintains both the strict independence of each of the two conceptions and shows their compatibility, I can do no more in the remaining few paragraphs than express optimism and offer a tentative sample of what such a theory might include.

First, on the object side, it is understood that speech acts “have” objects in the sense that is mirrored by the grammar of sentences reporting acts generally—for example, “Sal broke *the window*”—and of reported speech in particular—for example, “Sam asserted *that the tide was out*.”⁸ Second, objects of the latter variety “have” consequences but not in virtue of their being inferred or of any

⁸ To put in Davidson’s apposite words: “Sentences in indirect discourse wear their logical form on their sleeves” (Davidson 1968, p. 142)

other specific act or attitude. As Geach (1965) said—he called it the “Frege Point”—“a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition.”⁹ On these counts, I would argue, the conceptual independence of a bare object sense of ‘assertion’ can be upheld.

Turning to the act sense, I have already backed the idea that reason-giving (premissing, adducing) is reducible to asserting. But although that may be correct, which intuitively I take it to be, it does not explain how asserting, simpliciter, can explain what it is to adduce a premise or give a reason (of the required kind to make an argument). One route that was suggested is to invoke Brandom’s Fregean conception of assertion, which broadly speaking says that it is in the *nature* of asserting to “give a reason” or in his words to warrant an inference. This is similar to Pinto’s (2001) well-known claim that an *argument* is an invitation to inference (and to Toulmin’s sense of ‘warrant’) but stronger in that it locates the warrant in the assertion itself. (Brandom might reasonably be interpreted as saying that assertion is an invitation to *argument*.)

There is much to be said, I think, for this view. Certainly, it accords with the notion of propositions objectively *having* consequences (recall Woods 2016). Typically, any one proposition will have many possible consequences. It seems likely, though not certain, that all propositions have some possible consequences, but for Brandom’s proposal ‘typically’ is sufficient. Clearly his definition of assertion would need elaborating and defending but unfortunately not here. Instead, as an endnote, I will offer just one quasi-empirical observation as evidence that plain assertion has an implicit reason-giving or argument-forming potential. I call it the ‘so-what argument’ (for a reason-giving sense of assertion).

On occasions in natural discourse, speakers do make plain assertions; that is, they say something in the declarative mood but for no apparent reason or motive. However, making assertions out of the blue is relatively unusual, so much so that speakers often feel impelled to excuse it with a phrase such as ‘apropos of nothing’ and/or hearers may feel impelled to respond, ‘So what?’

⁹ Geach (1965) said that the Frege point was so obvious it did not need saying but that it needed saying anyway. I would agree.

Sometimes, but not always, this elicits a response aimed at a target-claim. For example:

Sam: The tide's out.

Sal: So what?

Sam: (*So*) we can get to the island.

If Sam's reasoning is sound, the tide's being out *has* the consequence that the island can be reached. Asserting it in the above context is to *give* it as a reason. Of course, there are other responses that Sam's first sentence might have elicited and other motives or purposes for which it might have been *apropos*. But in the above context, Sam's first sentence is clearly a putative reason to accede to the second; and the second is a potential target-claim for an argument—an argument that consists of just the pair of (Sam's asserted) propositions.

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