Commentary on Blair's Is there an informal logic approach to argument?

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In his paper, Prof. Blair revisits the topic of his keynote address at the ISSA Conference 2014. If the interrogative title was then "What is informal logic?" (Blair, 2015), now it is "Is there an informal logic approach to argument?" which he claims to be a different question. It is, I grant, a different way to approach what might be seen as the same question about the distinctiveness of informal logic within the broader field of argumentation theory as a research and discussion community. Because, as he claimed in his 2014 address:

> [i]nformal logic does not aim to account for all the pragmatic and communicative properties of argument. Nor is it a theory of argumentation, understanding by such a theory an account of the dynamics of, and the norms for, various kinds of exchanges of arguments for various purposes (Blair, 2015, p. 39).

Tony Blair acknowledged then that, probably with their immersion in that broader community of discussion, many informal logicians had become aware of, for example, "the need to understand the rhetorical functions of communication in order to recognize and identify arguments" (Blair, 2015, p. 39). In the present paper, he consistently but reversely admits that many argumentation theorists who are sympathetic to informal logic, nevertheless "maintain views about argument and arguing that lie outside what one would call the traditional informal logic perspective".

So I would say that (in both papers) Blair, while trying to defend and delimit the characteristic space of informal logic, does so in a rather modest and cooperative way. In particular, nowhere does he claim that informal logic (or even the logical perspective on argumentation) would be the basis, the keystone or the indispensable foundation of an integrative theory of argumentation. On the contrary, what he distinctly attributed to informal logic in 2014 was the development of "practical guidelines for recognizing, identifying and displaying the reasoning expressed and invited in arguments" (Blair, 2015, p. 39) and now he

stresses that informal logic should be "user-friendly", "pedagogical", "straightforward and readily accessible" (Cf. Tenets 5 and 13).

The reading of both papers leaves me with the impression that Blair would admit, on the one hand, the philosophically intricate nature of argumentation and the necessarily sophisticated and multidimensional character of an ambitious, profound and comprehensive approach to it, while, at the same time, remarking that, *in practical terms*, we all understand each other when we refer to arguments as identifiable, analysable and assessable "objects"; even knowing all the time that when we objectify, isolate or abstract these objects we may be losing track of some of their features (e.g. ontological, cognitive, evolutionary, psychological, sociological, etc.) The features that remain may, nevertheless, constitute a suitable area of research in the form of a "theory of argument" (Johnson, 2000). If informal logic is able to construe a practical, useful and easy discourse on how we encounter and manage (and allegedly *should* manage) in everyday terms ours and others' arguments, it seems this is enough for Blair.

In principle, I find the initial modesty of this approach, above all things, healthy, lucid and clever, but I'll try to show that it is somewhat theoretically instable when one goes into the details. I'll do it by examining and rearranging the different Tenets of Blair's *cluster definition* of informal logic and especially by indicating links between them that I think are somewhat overlooked in his "putting order" and "conclusive" sections. Such links, I claim, restore a *not so modest* version of informal logic that may well contribute to an integrative approach to argumentation.

Blair's modest version of informal logic as a "practical theory of argument" surfaces in Tenets 1 and 3. Tenet 3 is, I would say, theoretically previous to Tenet 1. Only when one admits that argument-1 (using O'Keefe's distinction) is conceptually (or even *practically*) independent of argument-2, could it be plausible to focus on argument-1 (informal logic self-assumed task) disregarding argument-2.

Now even if, in its original form, argument-2 referred to the kind of communicative practice "characterized essentially by expressions of disagreement", the variety of uses of argument mentioned in Tenet 4 (Cf. Blair, 2012 and 2019) could allow us to use the term "argument-2" as referring to argumentative practices in a more general way. That could leave us with a revised and better-ordered version of Tenets 3 and 1 in which pragma-dialectics wouldn't need to be mentioned. Accordingly, Tenet 4 (a not anymore needed corollary) could be dropped as a discussion regarding the either unitary or varied nature of the term "argument-2" clearly remaining beyond the scope of a well-delimited informal logic, even if not beyond some informal logicians'

interests "flying other colours, such us,՚ argumentation theorist՚ " in Blair's own words (2015, p. 39).

Once argument-1 is chosen as the focus of the discipline, Tenet 2 with all its prudential empirical approach becomes central as the initial answer to the title's question. A distinctly informal approach to argument would beg a distinct answer to: what is an argument-1 for informal logicians? Blair tends to think there is enough unity in the array of definitions he gathers and I won't discuss that.

I agree, in any case, with his inclusive spirit regarding theoretical and practical arguments, for and against arguments[1] and of course good and bad (or better and worse) arguments. Blair summarizes Tenet 2 as upholding that arguments are "reasons-allegedly supports-claims" complexes. And he says they would have "three elements", that is, in practice, there would be *three things* to characterize in philosophical terms: the reason, the claim and their illative relation. But a time-honored distinction between properties and relations should make us careful enough to talk instead about (*so far*) "two related elements". I admit this is not really so important in Blair's account and it does not lead him down any infinite regress of relations, but it is more important for the qualifications I'm about to introduce.

In his "putting order" (fifth) section, Blair locates Tenets 1, 2, 3, 4 and 14 (regarding discussions about the inclusion/exclusion of visual argument in view of the given characterizations) under the first "conception of argument" heading, while the second heading, "hermeneutics for argument in everyday use", is left with just Tenet 12 ("deductivism is false or wrong-headed"). My impression is that Tenets 1, 3 and 4 could be gathered (as I have already discussed) under a heading defining the "scope of a theory of argument", while the *hermeneutics* in the sense of identification and comprehension of arguments in everyday discourse would not only be construed thanks to Tenet 2 but needs something as Tenet 16 (arguments being based on warrants) in order to sustain Tenet 12: a negative tenet that's really *developed in detail* in other negative tenets such as Tenets 6, 7, and 8.

I'll make myself clear. I know that not all informal logicians use Toulmin's warrants or Toulmin's model but assuming their theoretical relevance is not, in my view, something just secondary or complementary. Toulmin's warrants should not be considered just an alternative theory of argument's appraisal (as those expressed in Tenets 15, 17, 18 and 19 with which Blair makes it correspond). Toulmin's warrants are something as the "reification" by means of "verbalization", *when and if needed be*, of the relational link between reason and claim,

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[1] Finochiaro's inclusive distinction, mentioned by Blair, is in fact more complicated and will be mentioned regarding Tenets 10, 11 and 17.

the third leg which, just by such a process, may become an expressed element with its own properties. So, if accepted, they are part of what is needed for the very conception of argument even if they are not present or yet verbalized in their first presentation.

Moreover it is their properties as elements, *once verbalized*:

i)   their general but typically not universal character (i.e. their not being universally quantified) and

ii)   the *substantive* as opposed to *formal* nature of the relation they express (so that they always mention a respect, a concept, containing the alleged kind of link between reason and claim that goes beyond formal derivation),

that determine that "deductivism be wrong-headed" (Tenet 12), that "symbolic logic be more or less useless" (Tenet 6), "soundness, as traditionally understood, not the right evaluative term" (Tenet 7) and the "inductive/deductive distinction, out of focus" (Tenet 8).

Only because this is so, we call this kind of enquiry "informal logic". We keep "logic" because we conceive of it as a theory of reasonable reason-giving, but claim that reasons are not (at least not necessarily not centrally) founded on formal relations but on something as "substantive warrants". Argument-1, in general terms, is not a question of what *follows from* what, of what *is implied* by what, but of something being presented/proposed as a reason for something else, and that means *a reason of some kind*, bearing an alleged relation to the something else that may be verbalized (*if needed be*) in the form of a substantive warrant.[2]

There are still two other topics I would like to review: argument appraisal and dialecticity. As Blair says, there have been several informal logic attempts to construe a theory of argument appraisal These could be seen as alternative theories (Blair's option) or as providing complementary tools and concepts. Tenets 15 mentions the well-known ARS or RAS criteria; Tenet 17, argument schemes and critical questions; Tenet 18, counter-examples to inference-types and Tenet 19, theories of fallacy. I think there's hope for a more unified approach if we sum up certain assumptions.

My colleague Hubert Marraud's proposal for an inquiry into kinds of counter-arguments (Marraud 2019) as the standard way to conduct argument appraisal by means of argument's questioning (both for interlocutors and argumentation theorists/analysts) in fact does provide such unity. Once an argument is understood (or interpreted

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[2] In this sense, the question presiding Tenet 9 "Is informal logic, logic or epistemology?" could just be a terminological question depending on the broad or restricted (to *formal*) definition of logic.

along a possible hermeneutic line, that is, its warrant or warrant-kind or argument scheme identified) the battery of relevant questions could be ordered as addressing:

- first, its premise/reason acceptability (and thus revise possible *objections*),
- second, the relevance of the proposed relation or link (revise possible *rebuttals*, including counter-examples in the form of counter-analogies) and,
- third, the extant status of its conclusion (revise possible refutations).

That's an integrative theory contemplating Tenets 15, 17 and 18. Maybe fallacy theory (Tenet 19) could only be incorporated in a revisionist version, as Blair seem to suggest.

But, of course this gets us along a line that places the *dialectical nature* of argument-1 right at the centre of its very conception (instead of being just an option or perspective on it). Fabio Paglieri once said something that I find extremely important in this respect:

> [a]s soon as we see critical questions as validity conditions, the need to conceive abduction[3] as inherently dialogical evaporates: we do not ask questions; we check conditions, so that our evaluation is certainly critical, defeasible, and subject to change over time, but not necessarily dialogical in any self-evident sense (Paglieri 2004, p. 277).

Inversely, as soon as we see critical questions as ways of *questioning* an argument and so as sources of possible counter-arguments, the dialectical nature of argument (and we are still referring to argument-1) becomes crucial.

Blair's Tenet 10 could be thus restated in the sense that not only arguments-1 appear in various (Tenets 3-4) communicative practices (i.e. various kinds of arguments-2) in which (justificatory) reasons "are expected or wanted" (Tenet 2) and so are intrinsically "*responsive* to doubt or question", but are also communicatively *offered for* appraisal in the manner of further questioning or discussion (along the lines of a refurbished Tenet 17).[4]

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[3] This was Paglieri's review of Walton's book *Abductive Reasoning*, but the indication is valid for any argument-type.

[4] Finnochiaro's inclusive definition, distinguishing but encompassing arguments supporting a conclusion with reasons and arguments defending their conclusion against objections opens the door to an architectonic of argument-1 that would incorporate inter-argumentative, counter-argumentative and meta-argumentative structures.

Ultimately, Tenet 11 (argument modelling in dialogue form) could be seen as just a possible practical strategy of analysis or as a way to express a more profound awareness about the intrinsically communicative and interactive nature of argument; especially in what regards "solo argument" as a cognitive by-product along the line of Mercier and Sperber's evolutionary theories (2017).

Blair's conclusion is that "there's no single doctrine to be reported in the end" but there is a (non-exhaustive) group of ideas that made up a "moderately coherent theoretical menu". I've tried to show that at least some of the courses in that menu carry a more profound and structural load than others and could be the source of a *not so modest* version of informal logic.

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