Holism of reasons and its consequences for argumentation theory

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I contend that a suitable theory of argument should be reasons-based instead of inference-based. I first explore the consequences of this shift for the distinctions linked/convergent arguments and coordinate/multiple argumentation. I suggest that the former is a distinction between single reasons and many reasons, while the latter is a distinction between different kinds of reasons composition. Second I show that the holistic concepts of modifiers and conditions provide more fine-grained accounts of these argument structures.

KEYWORDS: argument structure, attenuators, coordinate vs multiple argumentation, disablers, enablers, holism, intensifiers, linked vs convergent arguments, reasons.

1

I will consider three related, though different distinctions, viz.: linked vs convergent arguments, coordinate vs multiple argumentation, and grounds vs modifiers. The first two come from the theory of argumentation while the latter comes from the theory of normative reasons (or theory of reasons, for short). It could be expected that there would be a smooth flow of information between argumentation theory and the theory of reasons, since — ignoring complexities arising from con arguments, not to be considered here— arguing is to present to someone something as a reason for something else. But in fact these fields have developed in mutual ignorance. My general aim is to connect these disciplinary perspectives for mutual benefit.

The main consequence of building up the theory of argument on the notion of reasons is that argument becomes a weighted notion since reasons are paradigmatic weighted notion. If a good argument is indeed the one that presents a good reason for its conclusion and reasons have

weight or strength, so too do arguments. Thus before concluding anything one has to compare the relative strength of the various relevant arguments. So weighing lies at the heart of any reasons based theory of argument.

The linked/convergent distinction marks the difference between different ways in which a group of premises lends support for the conclusion, the coordinate/multiple distinction has to do with various ways of combining a number of arguments with the same conclusion into a single argumentation, and finally the grounds vs modifiers distinction refers to different roles a premise can play in the constitution of a reason. To clarify these distinctions one has to explicate the related concepts of premise, argument and reason. My starting point will be the above definition of arguing:

- arguing is presenting to someone something as a reason for something else.

As a product of the act of arguing an argument will then have two minimal constituents, the "something" and the "something else" in the definition. For manifestly presenting something as a reason for something else we use conventional devices such as the disposition of statements in the text, punctuation marks, pauses and intonation schemes, argumentative connectives and operators, and explicit meta-argumentative vocabulary. We thus arrive at the canonical representation of an argument in logic: A1,…,An so C with the variables ranging over statements. Statements put forward to offer reasons are called "premises", while the statement for which they are offered is the claim or conclusion.

On the other hand, reason is a normative concept. The standard definition of a (pro) reason is a consideration that favors a position, taking a "position" to be an attitude towards a proposition, an action or policy recommendation, or an evaluation (Blair 2012:148). Of course the mere fact of presenting something as a reason for something else does not ensure that it actually is. Likewise inserting the connective "therefore" before the last term in a sequence of statements doesn't make the former probatively relevant for the latter, but expresses the speaker's commitment that they are. Francesco Sizzi in his *Dianoia Astronomica* (1611), offered the following argument:

> There are seven windows in the head, two nostrils, two ears, two eyes and a mouth; so in the heavens there are two favorable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury alone undecided and indifferent. From which we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven.

Even if the number of windows in the head and the alleged features of the Sun, Earth, Moon and the outer planets is not actually a reason to believe that the number of planets is necessarily seven, there is no doubt that Sizzi was offering an argument, and consequently that these statements were premises.

Bad arguments are still arguments. I am not claiming that an argument is made of a set of premises that jointly give a reason for the conclusion. Rather using an argument amounts to creating a prima facie reason. A prima facie reason is something that appears to be a reason, but may actually not be a reason at all. What makes A appear as a reason in *A so C* is that the word "so" carries an assumption of inferential relevance. After all, relevance is not a property of statements but rather a presupposition of utterances (Sperber & Wilson 1995). Prima facie reasons should not be confused with pro tanto reasons: a pro tanto reason is a consideration that counts in favor of some position, and thus has genuine weight, but nonetheless may be outweighed by other considerations. In brief, premises are always relevant, in the sense of expressing a prima facie reason for the conclusion. However argument's cogency requires that the premises offer a pro tanto for the conclusion.

2

There is no 1-1 correspondence between the premises of an argument, understood as separate statements, and the reasons the argument offers for its conclusion. Sizzi's argument, for instance, has two premises but it is intended to convey a single reason. A single reason can be conveyed by one or more statements, and one reason arguments can be either one premise or many premises. How should reasons be individuated? Blair's answer is that "A single reason is the smallest amount of information that by itself lends some measure of credence to a position." (2012:148). Although Blair definition leaves room for complex or compound reasons, he does not mention them anymore. Otherwise most current definitions of "argument" acknowledge that there are many reasons arguments; e.g., "By 'argument,' we mean a claim, together with one or more sets of reasons offered by someone to support that claim" (Johnson & Blair 1994:10). Accordingly we distinguish single premise arguments and many premises arguments, on one side, and arguments offering a single reason and arguments offering two or more reasons, on the other.

This raises the question of how to distinguish single reason many premises arguments from many reasons arguments. Argumentative connectives like "moreover" or "besides" provide a

linguistic test, since they are used to combine different reasons (not just different premises).[1]

> (1) This cake contains chocolate and Mary is allergic to chocolate, so she should refrain from tasting it.

In a normal context, this a single reason two premises argument; this is why the following paraphrase sounds weird:

> (2) This cake contains chocolate, besides Mary is allergic to chocolate, so she should refrain from tasting it*

By contrast "besides" can be soundly inserted into a many reasons argument like

> (3) This coat costs more than I intended to spend and it is not exactly what I was looking for; so, I will not buy it

Yielding

> (4) This coat costs more than I intended to spend, besides it is not exactly what I was looking for; so, I will not buy it

If "besides" can be taken to combine two statements into a single one (as do sentential connectives "and", "or", etc.), it could be thought that argument (4) is many reasons but single premise. The alternative is to see argumentative connectives as "besides", "moreover", "but", etc. as introducing a relation between arguments, or better said between linguistic units insofar as, in the given context, they identify or refer to arguments. Along these lines (4) should be interpreted as

> (4a) (This coat costs more than I intended to spend, so I will not buy it) besides (This coat is not exactly what I was looking for, so I will not buy it)

Instead of being interpreted as

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[1] Hitchcock points out that "There is also an interpretive difficulty in determining whether an additional supporting reason introduced by a bridging term like 'besides' or 'moreover' or 'further' is a new argument or merely an independently relevant part of a single argument" (2017:24). My answer is that "besides" and the like introduce a new argument or a modifier, whose insertion in the given argument produces a modified reason (see § 4 below).

> (4b) (This coat costs more than I intended to spend, besides this coat is not exactly what I was looking for), so I will not buy it.

In (4a) the statements "This coat costs more than I intended to spend" and "This coat is not exactly what I was looking for" are the premises of two different, though cooriented arguments, while in (4b) they are the premises of a single argument. (4b) represents the dominant reading in informal logic, while (4a) represents the dominant reading in pragma-dialectics and French linguistics.

3

The different readings of (4) help us to understand the differences between the linked/convergent distinction and the coordinative/multiple distinction. Both (1) and (4b) are two premises arguments; however the premises lend support to the conclusion in different ways. In (1) the two premises link to each other to produce a single and simple reason, while in (4b) they do so to produce a compound reason. Hence, in (1) premises are linked while in (4b) they converge. Summing up, from the point of view of informal logic both linked and convergent arguments are many premises arguments expressing a unique reason, the difference being whether this reason is simple or compound. On this picture the complexity of an argument is determined by the complexity of the reason offered to consideration. This is consistent with most standard accounts of the linked vs convergent distinction:

> When there are several premises in an argument, those premises support the conclusion together and will have to be considered together when we come to appraise the argument. In the linked pattern of support, the premises are interdependent in the way they support the conclusion; if we did not consider them together, they could provide no support at all. In the convergent pattern of support, on the other hand, one premise alone could provide some support to the conclusion, but the various premises, together, are intended to cumulate so as to offer more support (Govier 2010:54-55).

These cases should be distinguished from cases in which several reasons for the same position are offered —a situation that many informal logicians identify with multiple argumentation. When many reasons are presented for choice, intending that the chosen reason be the sole reason for accepting the conclusion, it can be alleged that no compound reason is produced, and thus that the premises don't support

the conclusion together. Freeman makes this point saying that "The multiple-coordinatively compound distinction is dialectical, whereas the linked convergent distinction is logical." (Freeman 2011:109). For Freeman the unit of logical analysis is the individual argument, while the unit of dialectical analysis is the entire argumentation made up of several arguments. In the same line, Hitchcock holds that "From the pragma-dialectical perspective, the linked-convergent distinction is a distinction within the class of coordinatively compound argumentation. (2017:24).

When reasons are identified with single reasons, as I guess pragma-dialecticians do, the difference between (1) and (4) is that the former conveys a single reason while the second conveys several reasons. The coordinative vs multiple distinction concerns the way several different reasons can be combined:

> The distinction between coordinative and multiple argumentation is therefore not that coordinative argumentation describes the relations between premises within one single argument and that multiple argumentation consists of a combination of single arguments, but that the relations between the single arguments that constitute these two types of complex argument are different. (Snoeck-Henkemans 2000:460). Here the underlying criterion of complexity is the number of reasons conveyed by an argument. In the simplest cases, in multiple argumentation several alternative reasons are offered for the same conclusion, while in coordinative argumentation these several reasons constitute a joint defense of the conclusion. Therefore it can be said that a multiple argumentation offers a disjunction of reasons, as in

> (5) Either (This coat costs more than I intended to spend, so I will not buy it) or (This coat is not exactly what I was looking for, so I will not buy it)

and a coordinative argumentation offers a conjunction of reasons, as in

> (6) (This coat costs more than I intended to spend, so I will not buy it) and (This coat is not exactly what I was looking for, so I will not buy it)

(5) and (6) express different commitments. The relevant differences can be explained counterfactually. Using (5) the speaker says that she would buy the coat it were either cheaper or more akin to her preconceived idea. By contrast, using (6) she says that she would only buy it were both cheaper and similar to her preconceived idea.

Normative reasons can be defined as considerations that count in favor or against some commitment. In the theory of reasons holism is the claim that contexts differ in terms of whether a certain consideration constitutes a reason at all, as well as in terms of the weight and (possibly even) polarity of the reason. Therefore, any reason –and hence any argument- has to be evaluated in the context of all relevant reasons that apply in a given situation.

To explain how reasons can vary across contexts, Bader (2016), drawing upon the work of Dancy (2004), introduces a distinction in the "necessitation base (that which explains and necessitates the reason) between the source or the ground of a reason, the conditions of the reasons and the modifiers of the reason. Bader gives two non-equivalent definitions of the source or ground of a reason: "that in virtue of which something is a reason –the source of the reason" (2016:282), "the source or ground of a reason is to be identified with the consideration that constitutes the reason" (*Op.cit.* 6). In the Toulmin model the source or ground in the first sense is similar to the warrant, while in the second it corresponds to the data. Henceforth I will reserve the term "ground of a reason" to designate the consideration that constitutes the reason, using "warrant of a reason" to designate that which makes something a reason for something else.

The conditions of the reason are that on condition of which something is a reason. There are two kinds of conditions: enablers and disablers. If the conditions are satisfied (which can consist in the presence of enablers or the absence of disablers), then the ground does constitute a reason. Otherwise, if the relevant enablers are absent or disablers are present, then it will fail to do so.

Finally modifiers of the reason are considerations that affects the weight of a reason. There are also two kind of modifiers: intensifiers and attenuators. Intensifiers are facts that make the weight of some reason greater without themselves being reasons, while attenuators are facts that make the weight of some reason weaker without themselves being reasons.

An example, built from one in Dancy (2004: 38) will give us some taste of all these concepts.

1. I promised to do it.
2. My promise was not given under duress.
3. I am able to do it.
4. Doing it would not be too costly for me.
5. So: I will do it.
6. Since: We ought to keep our promises.

1 is the ground for claim 5. If, given the argument *1 so 5* someone asks "How do you get there?", a possible answer would be 6. Hence 6 is the warrant explaining why 1 is relevant to 5. Neither 2 nor 3 are by themselves reasons for doing the action. 2 is an enabling condition consisting in the absence of a disabler, and 3 is an enabling condition consisting in the presence of an enabler, and hence of a different type as 2. Nor is the mere fact that doing it would not be too costly for me a reason for doing that action. Even if it were costly for me doing what I promised, I would still have a reason for doing that, a reason given by my promise to do so. But 4 does make a rational difference, all the same. What it does is to intensify the reason given me by 1. Instead of two reasons, according to Bader, what we have here is one ground or source 1 and one intensifier 4.

It can be objected that the addition of warrants is at odds with particularism, a thesis that often goes hand in hand with holism in the theory of reasons. Particularism is the thesis, espoused, among others, by Dancy, that moral reasoning can dispense with moral principles at all. Normally, particularists are holists and generalists are atomists. In any case, appeal to warrants is compatible with weak holism inasmuch as warrants are not constituents of an argument on equal terms with premises and conclusion, but another way answering the question "How do you get there?", not the only one. Crisp (2007) distinguishes two forms of holism, weak and strong. Both forms agree that a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another. But strong holism draws the conclusion from this holistic tenet that there can be no general principles stating the reason-giving status of any such feature, while weak holism allows that there will be such a principle for any invariably reason-giving feature and that there may be such features.

5

Bader's holistic framework, duly adapted to the theory of argument, allows for the discovery, description and evaluation of new argument structures, besides the ones identified in Snoeck-Henkemans (2000).

When modification occurs, there are two distinct reasons. On the one hand, there is the unmodified reason and, on the other, the modified reason (Bader 2016:15). Thus, if the identity of an argument depends on the conveyed reason, in our previous example two different arguments should be distinguished; the unmodified argument:

(7) I promised to do it; so, I will do it.

And the modified argument:

(8) I promised to do it. Doing it would not be too costly for me; so I will do it.

Since intensifiers "are facts that make the weight of some reason greater without themselves being reasons" (Lord & Maguire 2016:11), some might think that (8) is stronger than (7). That would be a mistake. If we take holism seriously arguments are to be evaluated in context. In a situation in which doing the promised thing is not too costly for me, both arguments have the same force or strength; otherwise, the second argument would have an unacceptable premise, in which case strength comparison would be pointless. We have to distinguish carefully intensifiers1, i.e. facts that strengthen a reason, from identifiers2, premises expressing intensifiers1. It is the fact that doing the promised would not be too costly for me what makes greater the weight of (7), not the addition of the identifier2 "Doing it would not be too costly for me".

The need of distinguishing intensifiers1 from identifiers2 is even clearer when we consider attenuators. Here is another example from Dancy (2004: 42):

1. She is in trouble and needs help.
2. It is all her own fault, and she got in this situation through trying to spite someone else.
3. But still: I will help her.

Here 1 is the ground, 3 the claim and 2 is an attenuator. Correspondingly we have two distinct arguments:

(9) She is in trouble and needs help; so, I will help her

(10) She is in trouble and needs help. It is all her own fault, and she got in this situation through trying to spite someone else; but still, I will help her

The idea that inclusion of an attenuator in (10) would make this argument weaker than (9) clashes with the intuition that in a given situation the stronger argument is the one that should guide our decision. I assume that, in a situation in which it is a fact that it she got in this situation through trying to spite someone else, the guiding argument will be (10), supposedly the weaker argument.

Grounds, conditions and modifiers can be identified with different kinds of premises. For Dancy they correspond to "three sorts of role that a relevant consideration can play", "which just shows that there is more than one way of being relevant—more than one form of relevance, as one might say." (2004: 42). If Dancy is right, and there are

different kinds of premises and accordingly different senses of relevance, tests for making the linked vs convergent distinction, and notably Walton's five tests (Walton 1996: 119–120, 127) must be drastically revised.

6

Although the very notion of modifier belongs to the theory of reasons, we can find some inklings of it in argumentation theory, notably in Pinto and Blair's notion of complementary premises and Vorobej's notion of supplementation.

Walton (1996:133–134) tells us that Pinto and Blair, in an unpublished work cited by Snoeck-Henkemans (1992), distinguish a third kind of argument, besides linked and convergent arguments. Pinto and Blair define a complementary argument as one in which "Some premises complete others". To illustrate what Pinto and Blair mean by "some premises completing others", Walton (*Op.cit.*, 134) cites the following argument:

> 1. I promised my girlfriend I'd take her to see the latest Woody Allen movie tonight.
> 2. She'll be really disappointed if I don't go to that movie with her.
> 3. I don't have any excuse for not doing so.
> 4. So: I guess I should take her to see that movie tonight.

Pinto and Blair reason that this is not a linked argument for in a linked argument no single premise by itself supports the conclusion, as 1 does. It is not a convergent argument for neither 2 nor 3 directly support the conclusion, but in a convergent argument each premise alone lends some support to the conclusion, that gets stronger and stronger with each additional premise. Thus, they conclude, this is a different argument pattern: a complementary argument. Notice that in the terminology of the theory of reasons, 1 is the ground or source of the reason, 2 is an intensifier and 3 is an enabler. In Blair and Pinto's words, as reported by Walton, premises 2 and 3 "complete" premise 1, increasing the amount of support. Thus modifiers and conditions are complementary premises, and a complementary argument seems to be arguments in which some modifier (or some condition) occurs.

Vorobej (1995:292) gives the following definition of supplementation for two premises arguments,:

> A premise P supplements a premise Q iff
> 1. P is not relevant to C,
> 2. Q is relevant to C, and

3. {P,Q} offers an additional reason R in support of C, which Q alone does not provide.

Therefore the supplementation relation is a kind of asymmetric linkage. A two premises argument with a supplementary premise is neither linked nor convergent. To be convergent, every premise should be directly relevant to C, but P is not. To be linked, no proper subset of {P,Q} should be relevant to C, but {Q} is. Thus we are facing another pattern of argument. Vorobej example is:

1. All the ducks that I've seen on the pond are yellow.
2. I've seen all the ducks on the pond.
3. So: All the ducks on the pond are yellow.

Given that 2 is a supplementary premise, this is in Vorobej terminology a "hybrid argument" (1995:293). Here 1 is the ground while the supplementary premise 2 turns out to be a modifier. In general, since modifiers by themselves are not reasons, they are supplementary premises, and thus any argument offering a modified reason will count as a hybrid argument.

7

I have said little about conditions. However conditions can also be detected in argumentation theory. Disabling conditions are closely related to Toulmin's conditions of exception or rebuttal, as the following passage makes it clear.

> The special force of the qualifier used in this second type of case (presumably) is directly connected with the idea of rebuttals. It registers the fact that the inference is warranted-that the claim is directly supported by the grounds-only in the absence of some particular exceptional condition, which would undercut (i.e., withdraw the authority of the warrant for) the inference. (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik 1984:96).

Let us consider an example similar to the one in Toulmin, Rieke & Janik 1984: 96-98.

1. This patient has a streptococcal infection.
2. So: this patient needs penicillin treatment.
3. Since penicillin may be safely and effectively prescribed for streptococcal infections.
4. But this patient is allergic to penicillin.

1 is the ground or source of the reason, 2 is the claim, 3 is the warrant making the ground 1 relevant to the claim 2, and 4 is a disabler or condition of rebuttal, as explicitly pointed in Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984). On the holist account, when the patient is allergic to penicillin, the fact that she has a streptococcal infection is no longer a reason for penicillin prescription. A Toulminian explanation is that since it is the warrant what makes the datum or ground a reason for the claim, if some particular exceptional condition withdraws the authority of the warrant, no reason remains.

Bader emphasizes that a disabler is not equivalent to an extreme attenuator. When an attenuator is applied, he argues, the unmodified reason remains, and it is only the modified reason that is "reduced to zero", whereas in the case of disablers there is no reason at all (Bader 2016:37).

Although it is more difficult to find an analogous to enabling conditions on the Toulmin model, Toulmin, Rieke & Janik describe the process through which disabling conditions give way to enabling conditions:

> … if the situation develops to a point at which no standing presumption can be securely established in the first place, there will be nothing left to rebut. Instead, we shall then have to work with two alternative parallel arguments and apply one or the other of them in any particular case, depending upon which of the alternative conditions holds good: "On the one hand, if the patient is not allergic to it, penicillin may be safely and effectively prescribed for upper respiratory infections. On the other hand, in cases of penicillin sensitivity, some other broad-spectrum antibiotic should be prescribed, such as tetracycline."
> That is, where the "exceptions" are not truly exceptional, we cannot present the conclusions of our arguments as being "presumably" sound, subject only to a possible rebuttal. Instead we do better to restate our warrants, explicitly, as holding good only on condition that certain specific conditions are satisfied. (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik 1984: 99).

Thus when exceptions become frequent, the above argument must be reformulated as follows, incorporating an enabling condition 4:

1. This patient has a streptococcal infection.
2. So: this patient needs penicillin treatment.
3. Since penicillin may be safely and effectively prescribed for streptococcal infections.
4. Given that this patient is not allergic to penicillin.

I have attempted to show the mutual relevance of the theory of reasons for the theory of argumentation. On one side, the theory of argumentation provides an explanation of what is to be a prima facie reasons: prima facie reasons are considerations presented as reasons in argument. I would like to suggest further that pro tanto reasons result from prima facie reasons through a process of critical discussion. Thus reasons are not something given in some a priori logical space, but something built up in the course of argumentative exchanges, of the game of giving and asking for reasons.

On the other side, the theory of reasons may provide the theory of argumentation with a fine-grained classification of premises and forms of relevance. Although this contribution of the theory of reasons can improve our understanding of argument structures, the concepts of intensifier, attenuator, enabler and disabler are not completely alien to argumentation theory, since they have been somehow anticipated by authors like Pinto, Blair, Vorobej or Toulmin. When argumentation theory is based in a holistic notion of reasons, argument becomes a weighted concept. The main lesson for argumentation theorists to be drawn from holism in the theory of reasons is that argument evaluation, even logical evaluation, is always context dependent.

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