

Commentary on G. C. Goddu's "Justifying Questions?"

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1. INTRODUCTION

I agree with G. C. Goddu that our disagreement about whether there are arguments for questions is not a mere verbal dispute. We are both talking about the abstract premiss-conclusion structures that we express with strings of such forms as '<premiss>, so <conclusion>' or '<claim>, because <reason>'. The concept is the same, but those who take the constituents of such structures to be propositions have one conception of it and those who take them to be types of illocutionary acts have another conception of it.

Goddu explores whether a propositional account of arguments can account for texts and discourses which appear to express an argument for a question. He considers three ways of doing so.

2. OPTION 1

Option 1 is to deny that apparent arguments for questions are arguments. Goddu proposes three necessary conditions for being an argument.

First, it should be possible to conditionalize it—that is, to convert it into a conditional statement whose antecedent is a conjunction of the suspected premisses and whose consequent is the suspected conclusion. The result of conditionalization should be syntactically correct and make sense. This test seems reasonable. As Goddu concedes, apparent arguments for questions pass it.

Second, the removal of an illative from an argument must change its communicative force. This test strikes me as problematic. All arguments that lack illatives fail the test, since adding an illative to make explicit that they are arguments does not change the communicative force of the expression. Hence, if such an argument had an illative, its removal would not change its communicative force. In Goddu's examples, removal of the linking word 'so' seems not to change the communicative force. But that is easily explained by supposing that the examples are arguments even without an illative; the initial statement is

in each case an obvious justification for the immediately following directive or expressive.

Third, an argument must be reversible, in the sense that it must make sense to switch the order of mention of a premiss and conclusion and change a linking illative from a conclusion indicator to a premiss indicator (or vice versa, as appropriate). What seems odd about the reversals of Goddu's examples, to my ear, is the insertion of a premiss indicator. Reversal of the order makes perfect sense:

(1) Close the door! Keeping it open will let the bugs in.

(2) Hooray! You got the job.

(3) What kind of drunk are you? There are four kinds of drunks.

Thus, while it should make sense to reverse the order of premiss and conclusion, it is not clear that this reversal produces gibberish when the supposed conclusion is a non-representative illocutionary act. Although inserting a premiss indicator like 'because' in the reversed expression sounds odd, such an insertion makes sense if there is an intervening request for a justification:

(4) Close the door! Why? Because keeping it open will let the bugs in.

(5) Hooray! Why so joyful? Because you got the job.

(6) What kind of drunk are you? Why do you ask? Because there are four kinds of drunks.

Goddu takes the reversibility test to be equivalent to the test that it must make sense to ask about a possible conclusion of an argument: What is your argument for that? Clearly it is odd to ask this question about requests, exclamations and questions. But one can ask their authors for a justification, in various forms: Why? Why do you ask? What makes you say that? What is your reason for asking? To sum up, although it must be possible to give or request a justification for the conclusion of an argument when the conclusion is uttered first, non-representative illocutionary acts seem to pass this test, albeit with some restrictions on the way in which the justification or the request can be intelligibly expressed.

Thus there is not much support for Goddu's option 1 of denying the status of arguments to what on their face are arguments for asking a question.

3. OPTION 2

Goddu's option 2 is to accept that there are arguments with interrogative conclusions but interpret the conclusions as propositions. An acceptable interpretation, he assumes, must both (1) make the given reason at least sometimes an actual reason for the proposition and (2) allow the author of the argument to articulate the proposition. Of five candidates that he considers, four fail condition (1) and the fifth fails condition (2). I agree with Goddu's two conditions, and in fact have other objections to the five proposals.

Thus I agree with Goddu that it is not plausible to construe an argument with an interrogative sentence in the conclusion slot as an argument for a proposition that is the meaning of that sentence.

4. OPTION 3

Option 3 is to construe what appears to be an argument for a question as an argument for a proposition that is related to the question but not equivalent to it—for example, for the proposition that it is appropriate to ask the question.

We do sometimes mean something different from what we say, as when we ask at the dinner table, "Can you pass the salt?". Hence an interrogative sentence in an argument's conclusion slot might mean something other than what it says. As Goddu notes, I have acknowledged (Hitchcock, 2019, pp. 36-37) that a defender of a propositional account of arguments can reconstruct what appear to be arguments for questions as really arguments for something else. I cited as an example of this strategy Christof Lumer's treatment of prudential justifications of actions (Lumer, 2014). According to Lumer, the conclusion of a good prudential justification of an action is that the action is the best option for the person who is to perform it. Similarly, one could take a good justification for asking a question to have as its conclusion the proposition that the question is appropriate. One could then use an argument scheme with this propositional conclusion as a template for reconstructing what appear to be arguments for questions.

Goddu assumes that an argument that a question is appropriate could be taken to justify asking the question only by construing it as including a parallel or subsequent argument for asking the question. He objects that people do not justify actions, so in particular they do not justify the action of asking a question. He offers two kinds of support for his position that people do not justify actions.

The first is that the hypothesis that people do not justify actions would explain why reasons never necessitate actions. But such an

explanation is unnecessary, since it is self-explanatory that reasons never necessitate actions. Reasons don't necessitate actions logically, since performing an action is not the sort of thing that can be logically necessitated. Nor do they necessitate actions causally, since one can accept both a reason and its logical necessitation of an "ought" conclusion without doing the action that ought to be done.

Goddu's second argument that we do not justify actions imagines a computer program set up to determine on the basis of specified goals what is the best option and then to perform that action. If we challenge the program, he says, we will challenge aspects of the program prior to implementing the result, such as the way it generates options. We will not challenge the step from the determination of the best option to its implementation. Hence, he argues, what we justify is not the action but the proposition that the action is the best option. But this last conclusion does not follow. Goddu seems to assume that to justify something is to give a good argument for it. However, we speak not only of justifying conclusions but also of justifying actions, feelings, etc. (see <https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/justify>; accessed 2019 06 01). If one justifies the conclusion that some action is the best option, then one has ipso facto justified its performance—not in the sense that there is a parallel or subsequent implicit argument whose conclusion is performance of the action, but in the sense that the argument justifying the conclusion that the action is the best option is a justification for performing the action.

5. CODA

At the end of his paper, Goddu raises a general puzzle for a conception of arguments as consisting of illocutionary act types. The act of asserting a premiss like 'Socrates is human', he writes, does not justify the act of asserting a conclusion like 'Socrates is mortal'. If it makes sense to speak of justifying actions, the sorts of things that would justify the act of asserting 'Socrates is mortal' are one's belief that Socrates is mortal, one's desire to share this belief with others, and so forth. In general, then, the supporting reasons that people offer when they advance arguments would not justify the act that is the argument's conclusion; almost all arguments would be bad arguments.

Suppose I say, echoing a recent claim by Harvard geologist Jerry Mitrova (Grossman, 2018), that a catastrophic immediate collapse of the Greenland ice sheet would lower the sea level in Newfoundland. You ask me to justify my act of asserting this surprising proposition. I am unlikely to reply that I believe it and wanted to share my belief with you. Rather, I would repeat Mitrova's reasons: that melting of an ice sheet relieves gravitational pressure on the crust below and removes

gravitational attraction of the surrounding ocean; that these effects lower sea level within a radius of 2,000 kilometres; and that Newfoundland is less than 2,000 kilometres away from Greenland.

The example is, I think, typical. It indicates that a speech-act account of the constituents of arguments does not have counter-intuitive implications for what count as reasons.

6. SUMMARY

My disagreement with Goddu about whether the components of arguments are propositions or illocutionary act-types is not merely verbal. Apparent arguments with interrogative sentences in the conclusion slot are really arguments. These sentences cannot reasonably be interpreted as expressing a proposition. One can reconstruct apparent arguments for asking a question as arguments for a proposition about the question, such as the proposition that the question is appropriate. One way to justify such a reconstruction is to set out an argument scheme for a good argument justifying such a proposition, instances of which would ipso facto justify asking the question. One could then use this argument scheme as a tool for analysis of apparent arguments for questions. There is nothing odd about speaking of justifying actions, including the act of asking a question. Further, a speech-act conception of the constituents of arguments is consistent with standard views about the reasons that justify conclusions of arguments. If someone makes a claim and another person responds, "Why do you say that?", the natural response is to give supporting reasons rather than to say, "Well, I believe it, and I wanted to share that belief with you."

Note: This published commentary is less than a third the length of the commentary to which Goddu replies in the appendix to his published paper. Nevertheless, it seems to preserve the points to which he is replying.

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