

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Should “Argument” Be Defined Without Reference To Use?



In his 2005 Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation keynote address, “*Argument and Its Uses*” (Blair 2005), J. Anthony Blair contends that arguments need not involve any attempt at persuasion, and in fact, that “argument” should be defined without reference to any particular use at all. Roughly speaking, a set of propositions counts as an argument, on his view, “just when all but one of them constitute a reason for the remaining one,” that is, support the remaining proposition to some degree.

I shall argue that Blair is correct in thinking that arguments need not be intended to persuade, but that his definition of “argument” is faulty. Contra Blair, I argue that “argument” cannot be defined independently of use – specifically, the intentional use of reasons to support a conclusion.

1. *Must All Arguments Be Intended to Persuade?*

It is widely agreed that arguments typically or paradigmatically are aimed at persuasion – that is, at convincing readers or listeners to accept a claim. Some theorists have gone further, claiming that all arguments, by definition or conceptual necessity, are intended to persuade. Blair believes this is a mistake and offers seven examples of what he takes to be non-persuasive argumentative discourse. These include:

1. Quasi-persuasion: offering reasons in order to strengthen or weaken adherence to a claim, or to show that a claim is possibly true, rather than to convince someone to adopt or abandon the claim.
2. Inquiry/investigation and deliberation: considering and weighing arguments, not to defend some pre-existing view, but to determine what to believe or what to do.
3. Justification: defending one’s acceptance of a particular claim, without any intention or expectation of persuading others to accept that claim.
4. Collaboration: attempting, through dialogue, to find and build on common ground, rather than to convince one discussant to accept a claim defended by

another.

5. Rationale-giving: explaining the basis for a particular decision or judgment (e.g., the awarding of a prize or a legal decision), with no intent to persuade.

6. Edification/instruction: weighing arguments pro and con, either for one's own edification or as a means of instructing others.

7. Evaluation: using arguments (as a teacher, for example) to provide practice and/or to assess performance in critical analysis.

It is not clear that all of these counterexamples work. Three of the examples – edification/instruction, inquiry/deliberation, and evaluation – appear to trade on an ambiguity in the notion of “using” an argument. To “use” an argument might mean (1) to utilize it for some secondary purpose (e.g., as an example in a logic class or as a means of impressing one's boss) or (2) to assert it for some argumentative purpose (e.g., defending a claim). Clearly, arguments may be utilized for all sorts of purposes (as a translation exercise, to illustrate an author's prose style, to browbeat an opponent, stall for time, etc.), including purposes wholly unrelated to the argumentative nature of the discourse. But when we are asking whether arguments are necessarily aimed at persuasion only the second sense of “use” is relevant. No one would deny that arguments can be utilized as translation exercises or for any number of other non-argumentative and non-persuasive purposes. Thus the pertinent question is not, “Can arguments be utilized for purposes other than persuasion?” but “Can one offer or assert an argument with no intention to persuade?”

Another example offered by Blair depends on an equivocal use of “argument.” As many commentators have noted, in argumentation studies “argument” can mean (roughly) either (a) a claim defended with reasons (i.e., a set of propositions structured to provide evidence or support) or (b) an argumentative discussion aimed at resolving disagreements, creating justified belief, finding common ground, etc. One of Blair's putative counterexamples – collaboration – seems to presuppose (b) while the others presuppose (a). Only (a), I suggest, is relevant to the issue of whether arguments are necessarily aimed at persuasion. It is widely agreed that multi-party argumentative dialogues can be aimed at outcomes such as decision-making, inquiry, or finding shared commitments, rather than persuasion (Walton 1989, pp. 3-9).

What Blair calls “quasi-persuasion” also fails as a counterexample. To attempt to strengthen S's belief in p clearly is a form of persuasion. It is an attempt to

persuade S to accept p with (say) 90% certainty rather than with 60% certainty. Likewise, to argue that p is possibly true (as opposed to actually true) will also normally be an act of persuasion, at least in cases where the arguer's goal is to convince skeptical readers or listeners that p is indeed possibly true.

That leaves only two of Blair's alleged counterexamples standing - justification and rationale-giving. These, however, are enough to do the job. It is certainly possible to defend a belief or offer reasons in support of a decision without any hope, expectation, or intention of persuading anyone to accept one's conclusion(s). Here are three additional examples, none of which fall neatly into any of Blair's categories:

Case 1: The Reluctant Advocate Lawyers often have a professional obligation to defend claims that, personally, they reject and may even find deeply repugnant. A defense attorney who vigorously defends an obviously guilty client knows perfectly well that he won't persuade the jury. Very likely he hopes his arguments won't persuade them. But clearly the attorney is giving an argument. He's offering reasons in defense of a conclusion, and that's sufficient to make it an argument.

Case 2: The Preacher to the Converted As Samuel Johnson usefully reminds us, people need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed. Consider a Christian homilist who exhorts his flock to "love one another," backing up his admonition with Scriptural proof-texts or other reasons. Presumably the homilist isn't trying to persuade; no one in his flock has the slightest doubt that Christians should love one another. His purpose in giving the argument is not to instruct by inducing or strengthening belief but to remind and thereby sway attitudes, motivate actions, solidify dispositions, refresh awareness of the grounds of belief, and so forth.

Case 3: The Unconvinced Debaters Forensic debaters (e.g., on college debating teams) advance many arguments, but their intention typically is not to persuade - at least not directly. Their goal isn't to convince either their opponents or the judges to accept the conclusions they are defending. Often, the debaters don't accept those conclusions themselves. Their goal, rather, is to win the debate by outpointing their opponents. The only "persuasion" they ordinarily hope to achieve is to convince the judges that they have argued more effectively than their opponents. Yet the debaters have not merely "utilized" arguments for the

sake of some secondary purpose, such as winning the debate. They have offered (advanced, proposed) arguments and attempted to defend them as cogently as possible. This is analogous to lawyers defending views that they may or may not personally accept and is similarly an example of non-persuasive argumentation.

2. Blair's Definition of "Argument"

Blair is correct, then, in thinking that arguments need not be intended to persuade. But is he also right in claiming that "argument" can be defined without reference to any kind of use at all?

Blair offers what he calls a "slightly rethought" (Blair 2005, p. 138) definition of argument. The kernel of his definition is contained in the following passage:

I propose that we conceive a set of one [sic] or more propositions to be an argument (understanding "proposition" in the broadest sense) just when all but one of them constitute a reason for the remaining one. And a set of propositions are a reason for an [sic] belief, attitude, or decision, just when the former support the latter to some degree. . . . To take something to be an argument is to take a consideration to supply some amount of support for a proposition. So the identification of a set of propositions as an argument is a judgement, and individual people make judgments. It follows that whether some set of propositions is an argument is a judgement that someone makes (Blair 2005, p. 142).

I take it that Blair is proposing that a set of propositions constitutes an argument when two conditions are met: (1) all but one of the propositions provides some degree of support for the remaining proposition, and (2) some intelligent agent intends or recognizes that relation of support.

The first condition is fairly standard. Blair notes that he speaks of "propositions," rather than "claims," because a "claim," he thinks, implies an assertion aimed at persuasion, and as we've seen he wants to define "argument" independently of the notion of persuasion. It is not clear to me that a "claim" really does imply an attempt at persuasion, but even if we speak of "propositions" rather than "claims," there's nothing strikingly new in Blair's first condition. Many logic texts define "argument" in terms of "propositions" or "statements" rather than "claims." As we shall see, however, it is unusual to include in arguments only propositions that actually, rather than merely putatively, support the conclusion.

It is the second condition that is more interesting. The standard view is that an

argument exists only when there is an arguer, that is, some person (or persons) who “affirms” or “sets forth” a “claim” or “proposition” and defends it with reasons. In other words, there has to be a certain sort of intent – an intent to support a proposition with evidence or reasons. What Blair seems to be suggesting is that no such intent is really needed. All that is necessary is: (a) a group of inferentially related propositions such that one proposition is supported by all the others and (b) some individual who recognizes – or as Blair says “judges” – that such a support relation exists.

I think Blair is here falling prey to a common confusion. Consider two cases:

Case A: A roomful of monkeys are handed strips of paper. Each strip of paper contains a single categorical statement related to fruits – “No apples are pears,” “Some bananas are not plums,” and so forth. A researcher enters the room and notices that one monkey has put in a row three strips of paper that read as follows: “All apples are fruits; No vegetables are fruits; No apples are vegetables.” “Aha!” the researcher exclaims. “The monkey has created an argument – a valid categorical syllogism, in fact!”

Case B: A logic instructor writes the following sentences on the board: “If the moon is made of green cheese, then I’m a monkey’s uncle; the moon is made of green cheese; so I’m a monkey’s uncle.” This is an example, the instructor says, of a “valid deductive argument.”

In both cases, I suggest, there is no actual argument. Why? Because there is no arguer. No one has “offered” or “given” or “made” an argument. No claim has been “set forth” or “affirmed” and “defended with reasons.” There is a difference between (a) recognizing that a certain sequence of propositions is inferentially related and (b) offering an argument. The crucial difference is one of intent. No intent to support or defend, no argument.

This is not to deny that sets of inferentially related propositions exist as abstract objects, and that such sets are properly studied by logicians. My claim is simply that such propositional sets are merely possible arguments rather than actual ones. They become actual arguments only when some intelligent agent offers or affirms them.

Blair’s failure to recognize that arguments require an arguer poses problems for his proposed redefinition of “argument.” I note three difficulties in particular.

First, Blair's definition makes it harder than it is on standard accounts to distinguish arguments from illustrations and explanations. An illustration such as (1) The Cascades has many majestic peaks. For instance, Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier are both over 11,000 feet tall could become an argument on Blair's view, because some individual (either the author or a recipient of the utterance) could easily recognize that the second statement provides some support for the first. The same is true of explanations such as

(2) The streets are wet because it rained.

Because the explananda clearly provides some reason to believe the explanandum, the passage might count as an argument on Blair's analysis, even though no argument was intended.

Illustrations and explanations are not arguments because they have no conclusions. And they have no conclusions because the the relevant argumentative intentions are lacking.

Second, as Blair himself remarks, his definition of argument implies that no arguments can contain irrelevant (or inadvertently countervailing) premises. Thus a standard test of argument analysis and evaluation - Are the premises relevant to the conclusion? - becomes otiose on his account, and formal and informal fallacies of relevance presumably turn out not to be fallacies at all, because they are not even arguments. Even many straightforward examples of invalid arguments, such as denying the antecedent and invalid categorical syllogisms, would often turn out not to be arguments, since the premises, though claimed to support the conclusion, in fact provide no relevant support.

This exclusion of irrelevant premises from arguments has bizarre consequences. Consider a racist detective who reasons as follows:

1. Six eyewitnesses say they saw Sturdley rob the bank.
2. A bank surveillance camera videotaped Sturdley in the act of robbing the bank.
3. The loot was found in Sturdley's apartment, and his fingerprints were found on the bag that contained the loot.
4. Sturdley is a South Pedran, and South Pedrans are nothing but lazy, ignorant slobs.
5. So, Sturdley very likely robbed the bank.

Since (4) (we can stipulate) is based purely on irrational prejudice and provides no relevant support for the conclusion, and it is not the case that all but one of the

preferred statements “constitute a reason for the remaining one,” it follows that this entire passage is not an argument on Blair’s definition. Yet clearly it is.

Determining relevance is often a tricky matter, particularly in cases of invalid reasoning. Consider this argument:

(3). If God exists, there are objective moral values; God does not exist; So, there are no objective moral values.

Do the premises in this invalid argument provide any relevant support for the conclusion? It is not easy to say. Some philosophers claim that objective moral values are metaphysically possible (or epistemically likely) only if God exists. Others deny any connection between God and objective morality. As examples like these suggest, Blair’s definition of “argument” will often make it difficult to determine - even with standard textbook examples of arguments - whether a genuine argument is or is not being offered.

Finally, Blair’s proposed definition runs into problems with arguments that contain mutually supporting propositions. Consider this argument:

(4) Obama is President, so he’s commander-in-chief of the U.S. Armed Forces.

On the standard conception of “argument” this is clearly an argument, and the conclusion (signified by the conclusion indicator “so”) is the second statement.

On Blair’s proposed definition, things are more complicated. That Obama is President implies (given the U.S. Constitution) that he is commander-in-chief. Conversely, however, the fact that Obama is commander-in-chief implies that he is President. (In U.S. law, the two terms are co-extensive.) Suppose a beginning logic student mistakenly thinks that “so” is a premise indicator rather than a conclusion indicator. He recognizes, correctly, that Obama’s being commander-in-chief entails that Obama is President, and “judges” that the passage is an argument in which the first statement is the conclusion and the second statement is the premise. Another student, recognizing that “so” is actually a conclusion indicator, judges that the conclusion is the second statement. Blair’s definition seems to imply that both students are right. An argument exists any time an individual correctly judges that one proposition provides some degree of support for another.

For all these reasons, I think we are better off sticking with standard textbook definition of “argument” (in the informal logic sense) as a set of propositions, one

or more of which are claimed or intended (explicitly or implicitly) to prove or support another proposition. If so, “argument” cannot be defined wholly independently of use. For a passage counts as an argument only if the constitutive propositions are used for a particular purpose: to provide evidence or support for a conclusion. Arguments need not be used to persuade (although this is certainly their most common and important use). But they must be intentionally used to justify or support.

REFERENCES

- Blair, J. Anthony (2005). Argument and Its Uses. *Informal Logic*, 24:2, 137-51.
- Walton Douglas N. (1989). *Informal Logic: A Handbook for Critical Argumentation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.