

Alternatives to suspicion and trust as conditions for challenge in argumentative dialogue

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ABSTRACT: A problem for dialogue models of argumentation is to specify a set of conditions under which an opponent's claims, offered in support of a standpoint under dispute, ought to be challenged. This project is related to the issue of providing a set of acceptability conditions for claims made in a dialogue. In this paper, we consider the conditions of suspicion and trust articulated by Jacobs (Alta, 2003), arguing that neither are acceptable as general conditions for challenge. We propose a third condition that attempts to mark a middle ground between suspicion and trust.

KEY WORDS: acceptance, acceptance conditions, argument, argumentation, dialogue, challenge, challenge conditions

INTRODUCTION

A problem for dialogue models of argumentation is to specify a set of conditions under which an opponent's claims, offered in support of a standpoint under dispute, ought to be challenged. Clearly, if every assertion made in an argumentative dialogue is challenged, then argumentative dialogues will never make any headway, and will cease to be effective means by which to resolve differences of opinion. On the other hand, if no assertion made in an argumentative dialogue is ever challenged, then the resolution of the dialogue will be efficiently reached, but it is not at all clear that the position reached will be in the least bit desirable.¹ As a result, some kind of protocol indicating when assertions made in an argumentative dialogue can and should be subject to challenge is required by any dialogue-based theory of argumentation.

In reaching this protocol there are several generally agreed-upon starting points which relate the general problem of articulating a set of regulative conditions for challenge to several other concepts basic to argumentative discussions. In the first place, the criteria for challenging an assertion are related to the criteria for the acceptability of

¹ Certainly, such a position would not be desirable from an epistemic point of view, and it is difficult to see how it could ever contribute to the effective management of a disagreement in any real context.

that assertion. In general, unacceptable claims ought to be challenged, while acceptable claims ought not to be. This leads to the idea that sometimes a claim is acceptable because it is accepted – that is, because the disputant is committed to it. So, in general, claims that are already among a disputant’s commitment set ought not to be challenged.² Further, the idea of challenge is related to the burden of proof. In general, the party in a dispute making an assertion bears the burden of proving that assertion, either to the satisfaction of other parties in the dispute or to some other relevant standard of evidence, if challenged to do so.

TWO CONDITIONS FOR CHALLENGE

The traditional criteria for challenging appear to be very permissive in allowing for challenges, and very partial in allocating the burden of meeting those challenges to proponents in argumentative dialogues. For instance, on many prevailing models, the burden lies always with the assertor, and the respondent is always *in principle* allowed to raise challenge to any standpoint on which there is not already explicit agreement (see, e.g., van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, pp. 135 ff.). In many models, it would even seem to be the job of the proponent to respond to ill-formed or unjustified challenges (e.g., by pointing out any challenges which are not consistent with a respondent’s own commitments). At first glance, policies of this sort appear to be very one-sided, and as such may neither be descriptively accurate nor useful in a normative sense. Contemporary developments in argumentation theory have brought a variety of challenges against this picture.

Recently, Jacobs (2003) has invited theorists to consider two possible conditions for challenge. These are stated in the form of regulations for an opponent (where “O” represents the commitment store of said opponent) and are given as follows:

Suspicion Condition: Doubt³ any proposition which does not already exist in O or does not follow as a logical consequence of [the propositions in] O.

Trust Condition: Doubt any proposition which directly or indirectly contradicts a proposition in O or whose adoption would lead to an internal contradiction in O.

Jacobs observes that the conditions of suspicion and trust are similar to Schutz’s (1973) critical attitude and natural attitude respectively. It is easy to see how these conditions for challenge are related to admissibility conditions for claims in a dialogue. On the trust condition, any claim is admitted to an arguer’s commitment store without challenge so long as it is consistent with her present commitments. On the suspicion condition, a claim is admitted so long as it is a logically entailed by her present commitments. The connection of these two conditions to the burden of proof is also readily apparent. While the suspicion condition generally places the burden of proof on the proponent in

² An alternative is that a disputant may judge that an accepted claim is, on reflection, unacceptable, perhaps because it can no longer be justified, or perhaps because it leads to unacceptable consequences. Depending on the nature of the dialogue, in some cases like this, the claim at issue can be retracted, allowing a subsequent challenge without any threat to consistency.

³ In these conditions, “doubt” is used synonymously with “raise objection to” or “challenge.”

accordance with the traditional picture, the trust condition appears to do just the opposite. As Jacobs (2003) writes, “[t]he trust condition ... places a burden of accountability on any challenger since the challenger must have positive reason to fail to accept the interlocutor’s assertion”.

An argument for trust

In a nutshell, Jacobs’ (2003) paper is an appeal for trust over suspicion. According to Jacobs, the trust condition provides a better concept of a reasonable challenge, “because a challenger must have some positive reason to object”. Because of this, Jacobs argues that the trust condition is more equitable in a number of respects. Epistemically, the suspicion condition prevents the introduction of ‘new’ information into a dialogue, thus significantly limiting the ability of such dialogues contribute to the resolution of real differences of opinion. (The only agreements reached would be ones that were always tacitly present, but not immediately apparent to the disputants.)

Also, while the suspicion condition “places the challenger in what is really a profoundly passive position”, the trust condition requires that both the proponent and respondent are active in supporting all of their dialogue moves. Further, the trust condition creates a situation of epistemic symmetry (since the commitments of both the proponent and respondent are treated as *prima facie* acceptable), while the suspicion condition creates an epistemic asymmetry which favors the respondent’s commitments over the proponent’s. On the trust condition, “[b]arring manifest contradiction, the commitments expressed by the other party are presumptively just as acceptable as are my own commitments”, while on the suspicion condition “commitments expressed by another party [not derivable from a respondent’s own commitments] are presumptively unacceptable” (Jacobs, 2003). Yet, Jacobs and Jackson (1983) have proposed the Reason Rule⁴ according to which the fact that a proponent has a definite opinion on a matter on which the respondent is undecided is *prima facie* reason for the respondent to accept that opinion. Indeed, in violating the Reason Rule, Jacobs argues that the suspicion condition “suspends the Gricean presumption of cooperativity ([which says:] presume speakers are cooperative and have adequate evidence for what they say)” (Jacobs 2003).

The problem with trust

A problem initially apparent with the trust condition is that it would seem to open the doxastic floodgates to any claim on which an agent has not already formed an opinion. Yet, from an epistemic point of view, the real problem is not *that* the doxastic floodgates are opened, so much as *to whom* they are opened. To see this, consider that for many of the propositions about which we, ourselves, are undecided, there are people in the world who hold differing opinions about the truth or acceptability of those propositions. And of

⁴ Jacobs and Jackson state the Reason Rule as follows:

One party’s expressed beliefs and wants are a *prima facie* reason for another party to come to have those beliefs and wants and, thereby, for those beliefs and wants to structure the range of appropriate utterances that party can contribute to the conversation. If a speaker expresses belief X, and the hearer neither believes nor disbelieves X, then the speaker’s expressed belief in X is reason for the hearer to believe X and to make his or her contributions conform to that belief. (1983, p. 57)

those people, many will think that they are justified in holding these divergent views. Given this situation, it can be shown that the condition of trust is not only epistemically unsound, but that it does not actually provide the epistemic symmetry which it first appears to.

Here, then, is a presumptive argument against trust as an adequate condition for challenge in argumentative dialogues. For any agent, *a*, on many if not most matters of fact (simple, contingent propositions), *a* will not have an opinion one way or another. That is, there are a significant number of claims for which *a* will neither be committed to the claim or its opposite. Not only are some of these claims likely to be relevant to some of the argumentative discussions in which *a* will engage. But also, there will be potential interlocutors who will have formed some definite opinion on these propositions one way or another. Let us consider some such specific proposition, *P*, and suppose that agent *b* believes *P*, while agent *c* believes that $\sim P$. According to the principle of trust, when *a* encounters *b* in an argumentative discussion, *a* is obliged to accept *P* without challenge. *P* is now entered into *a*'s commitment set. Yet, when *a* proceeds to argue with *c* at a later stage of the argumentative discussion, or in some future discussion, *a* is now obliged to challenge *c*'s assertion of $\sim P$.

Essentially, then, the condition of trust opens the doxastic door to the first person who comes by who has an opinion on any topic on which an agent has not yet formed an opinion. After that, the condition of trust operates just like the condition of suspicion for each subsequent interlocutor with an opposing opinion on that topic. Yet, a policy which favours the first opinion one is confronted with is not only epistemically unsound, but it is not actually epistemically symmetrical either; indeed, it is arbitrarily asymmetrical.

What is really wrong with suspicion

At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the question of what is really wrong with suspicion as a condition for challenge in argumentative dialogue. It certainly seems to be too high as a universal acceptability standard. In the first place, most of our beliefs are not logical consequences of some other set of beliefs we presently have – let alone ones of which we are certain that they are true. Most of our beliefs, especially our beliefs about contingent propositions, will not be certain. Further, most of our beliefs are not connected to one another by certainty preserving entailment relations. Thus, the standard of suspicion seems to place an acceptability condition on *new* beliefs that is much higher than the acceptability conditions that any of our present beliefs would have to have originally met.⁵ So, it seems that suspicion is an inordinately high standard to ask that all of our new beliefs have these qualities. Indeed, such a requirement seems arbitrary. Yet, typically we feel that we are somehow justified in holding most of our beliefs, even those of which we are not certain. Neither do we feel that we believe the things we do arbitrarily. So, it would seem only right that we require of any new belief that we are entertaining that it meet some appropriate epistemic standard as well.

⁵ In our opinion, there is a difference between belief and commitment. Jacobs treats commitments as “externalized version[s] of beliefs”, and in general we share this view. Belief is harder to analyze, from a dialectical perspective, because it is private to an agent, and is deeply internal and psychological, whereas commitment is public. The suspicion and trust conditions, in our opinion, are especially interesting because they can also be applied to the analysis of belief.

It is not at all clear that this standard will be the same for all beliefs, or in all contexts or situations. Some beliefs may be accepted tentatively, or provisionally as working hypotheses, or loosely held opinions. On the other hand, in other situations where there is a good deal at stake, we will want a much higher standard.

The problem with the policy of suspicion is not that it puts the burden of proof in the wrong place, but that it sets the burden too high.

ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPICION AND TRUST

Clearly, what is required is a more practical standard, and one that reflects the *actual* standards that we already tacitly employ in rationally accepting new claims into our belief-set. The standard of suspicion is too high, but the standard of trust is too low, and certainly too arbitrary.

What can be said about what an acceptable standard might be? No uniform universal rule for all contexts, agents and topics is likely to be found. What is an appropriate standard of acceptability will surely vary from one case to the next as a result of a combination of factors, pragmatic, epistemic and situational.

The suspicion condition expresses quite a strong policy of skepticism. It tells an arguer to doubt any proposition other than one the arguer already accepts. The trust condition expresses quite a weak policy of challenge. It tells an arguer to only doubt those propositions that go against any proposition the arguer already accepts. These are extreme policies, as applied to most everyday cases of argumentation. In some cases, the one policy might be good, while in different cases the other policy might be better. If we are having friendly discussion, and you are doing your best to be cooperative, you might do best to accept the trust policy. If I am being interrogated by the police, concerning a crime I am under suspicion of having committed, I might be prudent to adopt quite a different, and much more conservative policy, on what I accept or doubt.

A middle policy could be expressed in the following condition. It could be called the danger condition.

Danger Condition: Only doubt a proposition if it looks like this proposition could somehow be used to attack your position at some future point in the dialogue.

Suppose, for example, we are having a discussion on some issue, like world peace and how to achieve it. We have sharply opposed views. I think that the best ways to achieve world peace are to advance technology, to promote democratic values, to be wary of mixing politics and religion, and to be to be prepared for war. You think that the best way is to disarm, to work for equality, and to spend money now used for technology and arms helping people in third world countries. You ask me whether I accept the view that physics is an objective discipline. As far as the world peace argument goes, I don't see that even if I agree with this apparently harmless view that physics is an objective discipline, it will somehow be used against me in the world peace argument. So I go along with it. On the other hand, suppose you ask me to accept the proposition that all war is militaristic. I can see that this proposition could easily be used against my view, because the word 'militaristic' means something bad. The danger condition would guide

me not to accept this proposition, and to express doubt about it. The danger condition is a kind of Gricean condition that might apply in a typical kind of case in which where two parties are having a critical discussion on some issue that has been identified at the confrontation stage. It advises an arguer to be careful or prudent. This condition might not apply at all stages of a critical discussion, or in other types of dialogue.

The problem is to try to see how the suspicion condition and the trust condition might apply in other contexts. They do seem to be conditions that sometimes apply. But where could they be useful? The doubt condition is skeptical. It advises an arguer to have high standards for acceptance, or to be very wary of accepting something one does not already accept. It tells such an arguer to go on the attack, and to challenge any proposition put forward by the other side if it does not agree with one's own position. It's pretty hard to find some real type of case where this would be a good Gricean conversational postulate. It could apply in some kind of interview, interrogation, or legal dispute where an arguer is very suspicious that a clever opponent might use something against her, even though she does not see how in advance how it could be done. But this kind of extreme policy would make it difficult, perhaps even impossible to have a critical discussion that could resolve a conflict of opinion by rational argumentation. If one side will never accept any commitment, no matter how harmless it seems, there can be very little basis for arguing against her viewpoint. This is the typical kind of problematic case where one participant just keeps saying, "No commitment". The critical discussion cannot move forward toward resolving the original conflict of opinions in such a case.

The trust condition advises an arguer not to be wary about any proposition that might be used against him later. He should only doubt a proposition if it "directly or indirectly contradicts" a proposition he already accepts as part of his position. In other words, it seems to say, "Don't worry if something looks like it might potentially be used against you later. Only disagree with it if it is against what you accept right now". This is a kind of "don't worry, be happy" principle. It might apply in a dialogue where cooperation and appearing to be very friendly and agreeable is important. For example, it might be good advice in a dialogue where you are trying to reach agreement with a colleague or collaborator, and for the sake of argument, you are willing to go along with something even though you have doubts about it. It might be useful to recall that Walton and Krabbe (1995) distinguished between two kinds of commitment. One is a stronger kind, meaning that if you commit to a proposition, you are prepared to defend it against doubts or objections. It has a burden of proof attached, in other words. There is also a weaker sense in which you commit to a proposition for the sake of argument, even though it doesn't represent your viewpoint on the matter. This kind of weak acceptance is more like hypothesis or assumption, meaning that you accept it to help the discussion move forward, even though you might later retract it if evidence is brought forward that refutes it.

The suspicion condition and the trust condition seem to be represent different forms of skepticism, one of which is more extreme and more hostile than the other. Each might be a good conversational policy in a certain context. The problem we have tried to address is to find the right context that each policy would fit. One place they might fit is in the theory that there are thresholds for belief (Paglieri and Castelfranchi, 2005). According to this theory belief works as follows. There is a certain threshold that an agent has for belief. If an arguer can mount an argument strong enough to overcome this

threshold, it fixes the agent's belief. This is a bit like Peirce's (1877) notion of the fixation of belief. This threshold can vary. If we are listening to a car salesman who is trying to sell us a particular car, and arguing that it is better than the competition, we tend to be highly skeptical. We think he may be right, but reserve judgment until we hear what the competitor might have to say. On the other hand, if we are listening to an expert we think is objective, and giving us good advice, we tend to accept what he says much less critically. In other words, the threshold for belief is much higher in the former case than in the latter.

These considerations suggest a special characteristic that marks how belief works in argumentation is that different conditions, like the suspicion condition and the trust condition, define how the threshold works in different conversational contexts. In other words, sometimes the suspicion condition applies to the agent's belief formation, while in other cases, the trust condition applies. What an arguer tries to do in many cases is to get a climate of acceptance. This is what Aristotle calls *ethos*. If the audience accepts the speaker as a wise person who has a lot of credibility, for example because he is an expert, or is a trustworthy person of good character, the threshold for belief in what that person says will be low. If the person is seen as biased, or having a hidden motive, perhaps financial, or as being a person of bad character, the threshold for belief will be different, and much higher.

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