

On Defining 'Argument' – Comments on Goodman

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The question as to what an argument is may, at first glance, seem somewhat silly - we all understand the word and to put forward the question may seem similar as asking what a debate is or what a bed is. But when we conceive of the question not as a question concerning the everyday use of the word "argument" but as one concerning the use of the word in the specialized discourses in which it is used mostly as a technical term, the question starts to appear sensible.¹ Arguments are at the center of attention of respectable disciplines like formal and informal logic or communication studies and it seems natural to require that the objects studied within the disciplines are specified as precisely as possible. Though we can hardly require that the meaning of the term "argument" is delimited so sharply that the question as to whether this or that item is an argument will always have an unequivocal answer, we can surely make significant progress towards a useful specification of the objects of the study of the relevant disciplines.

Recently, the question of a proper delineation of the concept of argument was addressed by Jeffrey Goodman in his article entitled *On Defining 'Argument'* published in *Argumentation*. Goodman points out that "there is no concept more central to logic and critical thinking than the concept of an argument" (p.1)² and rejects the view that we can simply rely on our instincts to tell us when we are in the presence of an argument. He says that there are two fairly-well-delineated senses of "argument":

- (i) a *practical* sense entertained within pragma-dialectical approaches which tend to view argument as a specific kind of communicative activity,³ and
- (ii) a *logical* sense which is typical for disciplines like logic that see arguments primarily as non-spatiotemporal objects of a specific sort.

Goodman concentrates strictly on the second sense. He surveys different ways in which the logical concept of argument is specified in the relevant literature, for example in logical

¹ The task of delineating precisely the meaning of the term "debate" may become similarly meaningful when we limit our attention to debates during sittings of a parliament; and similarly if we want to specify the meaning of the term "bed" for the purposes of creating a carpentry catalogue.

² If I, hereinafter, refer only to page numbers I am referring to the article *On Defining 'Argument'* (Goodman 2018).

³ Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) represent a paradigmatic work in which arguments are conceived in this way.

textbooks, and presents his own definition which in his view eliminates the shortcomings of most of the hitherto available definitions. In this polemic paper I am going to argue that Goodman's definition is not satisfactory for several reasons.

Goodman first briefly deals with the issue of the constitutive building blocks and composition of arguments. He follows Walton (1990) in considering an argument (in the logical sense) to be a kind of set of propositions. He remarks that arguments are sometimes regarded not as sets of propositions but rather as sets or collections of sentences, but he rejects such a conception pointing out that, for example, one can consider Anselm's Ontological Argument without considering Latin sentences inscribed by Anselm in his writings. He thus thinks that "it is eminently reasonable to regard arguments in the logical sense as sets or collections of propositions" as, for example, "the abstract semantic contents of the types of sentences once tokened by Anselm to express his Ontological Argument" (p. ???).

Goodman subsequently presents his novel definition of an argument: "Take any graspable set of propositions. Any such set will have the following property: *being entertainable by an agent (or group of agents) who further believes there is a relation of support among all the members of the set, save one, and that other member*. Sets of propositions may never be entertained by anyone who believes there to be such a support relation among their members, but if and only if they *have been so entertained at some time or other*, they are arguments" (p. 8).

Goodman says that his definition avoids the undesirable relativism characteristic of some extant delineations of the concept. For example, according to his definition, "an argument for anyone is an argument-for-everyone" (p. 9). Arguments understood in the way he proposes are "things that depend on us and are our constructs in a way that accords with many of our intuitions, but they are also things to be discovered" (p. 10?). What is important according to Goodman is that arguments are brought into being by *actual* agents. Possible or fictional agents don't have the "power" – an argument comes into existence at the moment when an *actual* agent comes to believe that there exists an objective, mind-independent support relation among certain propositions (no matter whether such a relation objectively exists or not).

This account of argument has a somewhat surprising consequence: arguments come into existence fairly easily but once they exist they can never cease to exist. They are, in other words, eternal. Another feature of the definition which is controversial is that, as soon as arguments begin to exist, "we may be in their presence without being aware of them". Here

Goodman presumably doesn't mean that we can literally be in the presence of sets of propositions.⁴ What he rather means is that we can read a text or hear a sequence of pronouncements without having a clue as to whether we are encountering an argument. We may, in principle, be in position to find out that we are "in the presence" of an argument – if we have a reliable testimony that someone adopted the collection of propositions expressed by the sentences/pronouncements as a convincing argument – but we can virtually never be sure that the sentences/pronouncements do *not* express an argument.

As I have indicated, what is crucial for Goodman is the intuitively compelling idea that arguments are things brought into existence by our activities. His definition, however, opens space for certain doubts. Is believing really an *activity* of an agent? And if it is, is it a kind of activity on which we can build? Believing is often an ephemeral state and it seems quite plausible that we can believe something just for a couple of seconds, or even only for a fraction of a second, and then nearly immediately recognize that we were wrong and give up the belief.⁵

But I want to suggest that Goodman's definition has to face more substantial objections. Let us, however, first mention two minor ones. The first one is that Goodman's definition, as it stands, takes an argument to be a *set* of propositions satisfying certain features. Taking what Goodman says literally: we are led to identify, for example, the following set of propositions {*If the Eiffel tower is made of steel it is made of metal, the Eiffel tower is made of steel, the Eiffel tower is made of metal*} as an argument. My substantiation for this claim is that the set has been entertained by a person who further believes that there is a relation of support among all the members of the set, save one, and that other member – (at least by myself). But is it a valid argument? This question cannot be answered. I, for example, don't believe that there is a relation of support among propositions represented by the last two sentences and the first one. But if arguments are identified simply as sets, we cannot distinguish between the two mentioned arguments (in the common sense). This suggests that identifying an argument simply as a set of propositions is unfortunate.⁶ Of course, this problem can be relatively easily fixed.

⁴ Sets of propositions cannot really be 'around us' in the spatiotemporal sense, and it also seems strange to concede that they are in some sense omnipresent.

⁵ With group beliefs touched upon by Goodman when he mentions groups of agents in his definition things get even less perspicuous.

⁶ Other authors also sometimes identify arguments as sets of propositions. For example, Grennan 1997, p.3. Later on, however, Grennan stresses that an argument is a logical compound, not an

The second minor problem I want to mention cannot be fixed so easily – it is the problem of excessive vagueness and possible relativity of the definition. Recall that Goodman invites us to take "any graspable set of propositions" and says that "any such set will have the following property: *being entertainable by an agent (or group of agents)*". The concept of graspability is, unfortunately, left quite loose. It is obvious that what is graspable for one person needn't be graspable for another. Is Goodman presupposing an absolute or a relative concept of graspability? Both options seem problematic. An absolute graspability seems to require the positing of certain idealized standards or, alternatively, an ideal – maximally capable – agent, while relative graspability opens space for conceding that what is an argument for somebody needn't be an argument for somebody else. Goodman's definition suggests that graspability is straightforwardly connected with entertainability, but this is not helpful as it is unclear how entertainability might be usefully specified.

Admittedly, the problems I have just mentioned are not serious enough to subvert Goodman's definition. The second issue can perhaps be marginalized by pointing out that any definition of the concept of argument will be unavoidably vague to some extent. (I would, nevertheless, suggest that the vagueness of Goodman's definition is somewhat excessive.) But as I have suggested, I want to argue there is a more serious problem with Goodman's proposal.

Let us imagine the following scenario. A philosopher who teaches logic classes writes a textbook for her students. Within the book she presents a number of sample arguments which are intended to serve as test for the students. The students are supposed to symbolize the premises and conclusions and decide whether the argument in question is valid. Let us suppose that the following two items are among the sample arguments:

- A1 If the government of the United States imposes new import taxes on aluminum and steel, the price of cars produced in the U.S.A. will rise. The government of the United States, however, will not impose any new import taxes. Therefore the price of cars produced in the U.S.A. will not rise.

- A2 Some recent military spending by the government of the United States stimulates the aircraft industry. None of the recent military spending has been approved by the

aggregate and that arguments must contain not just a premise and a conclusion but also an argument indicator-word or phrase (p. 7).

Democrats. It is, therefore, clear that not all steps that stimulate the aircraft industry have been approved by the Democrats.

It is easy to see which sentences in the short texts are to be regarded as (representing the) premises and which sentence should count as the conclusion. It is also not difficult to recognize that while the second argument is valid the first one is not. This, however, means that the philosopher cannot be sure that A1 really represents an argument. She, of course, cannot exclude that some person has entertained the propositions expressed by the premises and conclusion of A1 and believed (at least for awhile) that the conclusion "The price of cars produced in the United States will not rise" is supported by the two premises, but it is quite likely that she cannot be sure of that. If she adheres to Goodman's definition of an argument she is bound to feel awkward presenting to her students, under the heading "argument", something that may be not an argument at all. She, of course, may believe that some less bright student will at least for a moment come to believe that the last proposition in A1 is actually supported by the previous ones and in this way he will turn the set of sentences into a genuine argument, but such a tactic, obviously, has a hint of cheating.

I think that it is natural to suppose that as soon as some set/sequence of sentences/propositions is presented as an argument - in a textbook, in a political debate or elsewhere, then it should be granted the status of an argument even if nobody (including the writer/speaker) actually believes (and has believed) that the conclusion is supported by the premises. If we require the believing to be a necessary component of the existence of an argument, we cannot even be sure that Anselm's ontological argument originated with Anselm. Though it is quite unlikely, the possibility cannot be completely excluded that Anselm was intrigued by the interesting path of reasoning that he articulated in his writings, but that he never actually believed that the conclusion was supported by the premises. In such a case what we call *Anselm's argument* was not an argument until the first student of Anselm began to believe that the line of reasoning was a convincing one.

It is quite odd that, given Goodman's definition, many sequences of sentences presented and accepted as "arguments" in logical textbooks or in debates on political and other topics in fact *do not* present arguments. It is also odd that we cannot be sure whether Anselm was considering a real argument or rather something that might perhaps be called a *proto-argument*. These consequences should be, in my view, hard to swallow even for those who generally find Goodman's definition attractive. I thus suggest that argumentation theorists focusing on the broadly logical account of arguments as propositional complexes of

a certain kind should search for a definition which doesn't hinge on notions like entertainability and belief and which is in better accord with the common use of the term "argument".

References

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