

Conductive Arguments: Why is This Still a Thing?

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Abstract: Conductive argumentation, as a separate category of reasoning, has experienced a revival. In 2010, the University of Windsor's Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric dedicated a two-day symposium to the topic and later published the proceedings. In this article, I argue against the existence of conductive arguments as a usefully distinct type of argument. Some of what are deemed conductive arguments are simply inductive arguments and some are best construed as subsets of the constituents of what is commonly called a position paper.

Résumé: L'argumentation conductrice, en tant que catégorie distincte de raisonnement, a connu un renouveau. En 2010, le Centre de recherche en raisonnement, en argumentation et en rhétorique de l'Université de Windsor a consacré un symposium de deux jours à ce sujet et a ensuite publié les actes. Dans cet article je conteste l'utilité d'identifier des arguments conducteurs comme un type d'argument distinct. Certains des arguments considérés comme conducteurs sont simplement des arguments inductifs et certains sont mieux interprétés comme des sous-ensembles des parties composantes de ce qu'on appelle communément un document de position.

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Conductive argumentation, as a separate category of reasoning, has experienced a revival. In 2010, the University of Windsor's Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric dedicated a two-day symposium to the topic and later published the proceedings. In this article, I argue against the existence of conductive arguments as a usefully distinct type of argument. Some of what are deemed conductive arguments are simply inductive arguments, and some are best construed as subsets of the constituents of what is commonly called a position paper.

After decades of debate, the nature of conductive arguments has become progressively less clear, as I will attempt to demonstrate. It all started with Carl Wellman's book, *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* (1971). Wellman thought that one argues for ethical theories or principles in much the same way as one argues for scientific theories, viz., inductively. He defines induction as "the sort of reasoning by which a hypothesis is confirmed or disconfirmed by establishing the truth or falsity of its implications" (p. 32). He admits that this is just a stipulative definition—it is "as I use the term...[with] no intention of legislating against other uses of the term" (p. 33). Ethical theories and principles are analogously confirmed or disconfirmed on the basis of the implied results of "thought experiments" (p. 45). He calls this "nonempirical induction" (p. 46).

When one is arguing for ethical conclusions regarding what ought or ought not to be done in *particular* situations, Wellman admits that we sometimes subsume our particular case in question under an assumed ethical principle and infer our conclusion deductively (p. 52). But quite often we seem to use another unique form of argument or reasoning which he thinks is neither deductive nor inductive, but rather "conductive": "Conduction can best be defined as that sort of reasoning in which 1) a conclusion about some individual case 2) is drawn nonconclusively 3) from one or more premises about the same case 4) without any appeal to other cases" (p. 52). Conductive arguments differ from deductive arguments because the truth of their premises does not guarantee the truth of their conclusions (p. 53); and they differ from inductive, explanatory, and analogical arguments because their premises concern no subject matter other than what is discussed in their conclusions.

Wellman provides two examples to help us understand what he means by "conduction": "you ought not to have spoken so harshly because your words hurt her deeply" and "Martin Luther King is a fine man because, in spite of occasional arrogance, he is an unselfish and courageous worker for his fellowman" (p. 52). The "link" between the premise and conclusion here is not by way of empirical data or some analogous case, but rather is *a priori*: "Reflection upon the given information about the case at hand justifies one in reaching some further conclusion about that same case" (p. 53).

Conductive arguments can also pertain to subject matters other than ethics. In such arguments, the premises cite some, but not all, necessary or typical features (or what Wellman calls "criteria") for the subject discussed in the conclusion. "The fact that one or more of the criteria are satisfied in a particular instance is a reason for applying the term, but the inference is

nonconclusive and does not appeal to the fact that the criteria have been found empirically associated with the term in other cases” (p. 54). To help us understand what he means, Wellman again supplies some examples:

Bees have a language because they can communicate information about the location of flowers to one another. Hunting is a game because it is fun and involves a competition between the hunter and his prey. Although John can play only one instrument, and that not very well, he is still musical because he has a remarkable memory for music he has heard and composes upon occasion. In such examples factual conclusions about some individual case are drawn from information about that case. (p. 54)

Wellman describes three “patterns” of conductive arguments. The “first pattern” consists of giving a single reason for the conclusion; for example, “you ought to help him for he has been very kind to you” or “that was a good play because the characters were well drawn” (p. 55). The “second pattern” is like the first only with multiple premises, “each of which may be independently relevant” in support of a single conclusion (p. 56). For example, “you ought to take your son to the movie because you promised to do so, it is a good movie, and you have nothing better to do this afternoon” (p. 56). The “third pattern” is like the second but with the addition of “negative considerations,” viz., reasons supporting the *falsity* of the conclusion. (At one point [p. 90], Wellman calls such acknowledged reasons against the conclusion “negative premises,” but this can only lead to confusion about the nature of a premise, so I will not hold him to this.) For example, “although your lawn needs cutting, you ought to take your son to the movies because the picture is ideal for children and will be gone tomorrow” (p. 57). One decides whether the conclusion is adequately supported by “weighing the pros and the cons” (p. 57).

On the topic of evaluating conductive arguments, Wellman is quite pessimistic (pp. 61-82), admitting that there is no logic (p. 69) or rules (p. 74) or criteria (p. 79) for assessing them, other than the minimal requirement of consistency (p. 76). “By and large there is no way to judge the validity of these basic ethical arguments but by thinking them through and feeling their logical force” (p. 79). Wellman offers an analogy to help understand what it’s like to assess the validity of conductive arguments, which depend not on their logical form but purely on the *a priori* relations with respect to their subject matter (p. 69): We make judgments concerning the “heft” of the premises to judge if they cumulatively provide adequate support for the conclusion,

and we make *comparative* and cumulative judgments concerning the “heft” of the premises and counterconsiderations in pro-con cases. One cannot check one’s judgment of the weight of considerations for and against the conclusion by means of some more accurate scale; “if one is not sure whether one has thought through the argument correctly there is nothing to do but think it through again” (p. 81), even though such a check is “notoriously unreliable” (p. 82). At most, Wellman suggests that one apply a rather Popperian account of justification to all patterns of conductive arguments: subject them to unlimited criticism from those who think in the “normal way” (pp. 128-43), to see if they withstand it.

So this is what conductive arguments are for Wellman. Is he right? Sort of, according to his numerous constructive critics.

For example, Trudy Govier agrees with Wellman that conductive arguments are distinct in kind from inductive arguments, but not for Wellman’s reasons. She (ironically) points out that “People are entitled to stipulate definitions sometimes, but the problem here is that with such an unorthodox concept of ‘induction’ [as Wellman’s] the claim that there is a distinct type of nondeductive reasoning [viz., conduction] can appear to be no more than a result of an unorthodox classificatory system” (1987a, p. 67). Wellman uses a very narrow definition of induction, which Govier rightly rejects by pointing out that the hypothesis that all of her students are computer science majors is proven incorrect by the fact that her student Joe is not (p. 67). This empirical disconfirmation of the hypothesis via *modus tollens* would have to be called inductive by Wellman, when it is obviously deductive. Induction, according to Govier, should also include causal reasoning, reasoning to the best explanation, reasoning to generalizations based on past experience, reasoning to future cases based on those generalizations (p. 67), and reasoning to nonexperienced cases based on the experience of relevantly similar cases (inductive analogies) (1999, p. 159). So, inductive arguments are not only nonconclusive; they are arguments “that are empirical and are based on the rough assumption that experienced regularities provide a guide to nonexperienced regularities” (1999, p. 159).

Govier says she “endorses” Wellman’s account of conductive arguments: their premises must be convergent, i.e., independent of each other with respect to their relevance, or support of the conclusion; their premises’ cumulative relevance is nonconclusive and *a priori*, i.e., conceptual or criterial (1987a, p. 70), based not on one’s experience but on one’s understanding of the subject matter of the argument; and their premises are often accompanied by counterconsiderations against the truth of

the conclusion, in which case the argument will involve pro-con reasoning to the conclusion. But Govier appears to make two changes to Wellman's definition: First, their premises *must*, not "may," be convergent; and with this, Govier excludes Wellman's "first pattern" of conductive arguments. Second, Govier wishes to abandon the requirement of confining the argument's subject matter to a particular case. She gives the following example to show why: "Blacks are equal to whites because they are as healthy as whites, they are biologically very similar to whites, they are as intelligent as whites, and they share basic needs with whites" (1987a, p. 69). It's not clear, however, that there was a problem here for Govier to remedy. If we look at Wellman's own examples again (1971, p. 54), we see that one is about bees as a *type* of language user and another is about hunting as a *type* of game—not about a token bee or token hunter. Wellman doesn't seem to care whether the "particular case" that the premise and conclusion must share as subject matter is either singular or general.

There are real problems here for both Wellman and Govier, however, as they try to maintain their distinctions between conductive arguments and inductive arguments. Govier calls Wellman's definition of induction "idiosyncratic" (1987a, p. 67). But it is no more so than his definition of conduction. Wellman has simply given a *stipulative* definition in *both* cases—he was just more honest about it in the case of induction (1971, pp. 32-3). Because Wellman is simply stipulating a kind of argument as conductive, he can make it as unnatural a kind of argument as he pleases. So it would be well within his right to reply to Govier that he means *token* case by "particular case" and that if Govier wants to broaden conductive arguments to cover *types* too, she has that same right, but should please call them, e.g., "schmonductive" arguments so as to avoid confusion. He could tell me much the same thing, if I am wrong about his indifference as to whether the "particular case" is a token or a type (albeit, he should fix his examples then too).

To see the resultant questionable nature of conductive arguments as a type distinct from inductive arguments (as Govier defines them), let's begin with Govier's most basic example of a conductive argument (1999, p. 156): "she would be a good manager, because she has considerable experience, she is very good at dealing with people, and she knows the business well." Note that the premises concern three empirical claims about the applicant and assume that nature remains regular enough such that the characteristics they cite carry forward so as to likely make her a good manager in the future. This seems to be a good candidate as an *inductive* argument instead. What if we *add* the

premise that her past employers have recommended her as manager or that past employees hired from her college have generally become good managers? Would *this* make it inductive (cf. 1987a, p. 70) or still conductive, or is it time to stipulate a *new* hybrid, e.g., “inconductive”? What if we instead add the premise that her twin sister was previously hired as a successful manager? Would this be a separate inductive analogy or another hybrid, e.g., “anaconductive”? What if we instead add the counterconsideration that past employees hired from her college have generally not worked out well as managers? Do the counterconsiderations have to obey the single-subject-matter requirement like the premises do, or is it time to stipulate yet another hybrid argument form?

The categories of induction and conduction continue to blur, when Govier says:

Accounts of theory acceptance in science do not make only one property relevant to the acceptability of such theories: they require *empirical confirmation*, simplicity, explanatory value, predictive power, consistency with existing theory, and fruitfulness for further research. Given this, an argument to the effect that some one theory is the best, all things considered, and ought, therefore, to be accepted, will be in essence a conductive one. (1999, p. 177; my emphasis)

(So much too for Wellman’s and Govier’s restriction on the premises of conductive arguments to being merely *a priori* considerations regarding the subject matter of the conclusion.)

For similar reasons, Govier later moves abductive arguments, viz., appealing to empirical data for causal hypotheses in inferences to the best explanation, from induction (1999, p. 159) to conduction (2010, pp. 298-302; 2011a, p. 264). And why stop there? Even the simplest case of enumerative induction involves considerations such as the generalization’s plausibility, explanatory power, overall coherence, and simplicity over alternative statistical hypotheses involving nonrepresentative samples or irregularities of nature. Moreover, if we drew a random sample (with replacement) of 1,000 marbles out of a jar and got .9 red, we would predict that the next marble we draw out of the jar will be red. This seems like a candidate for a run-of-the-mill inductive argument. However, the fact that .1 of our sample is non-red is *negatively* relevant, i.e., a *counterconsideration*, against the prediction that we’ll next draw a red marble, so we would predict that we’ll draw a red marble “even though” we got .1 non-red marbles in our sample. This seems to have the strange implication that this paradigmatic inductive argument is

actually a “pattern three” balance-of-considerations conductive argument. So the argument categories of inductive (as Govier defines it) and abductive and conductive (as Govier defines it) have completely blended.

Another advocate of conductive arguments is David Hitchcock, who changes their definition so as to focus them even more narrowly than Wellman did, on the shared subject matter of their premises, counterconsiderations (if any), and conclusions:

What distinguishes conductive reasoning and argument from arguments from sign and arguments from complex properties to their simple constituents is that the conclusion of conductive reasoning or argument attributes a supervenient status to the subject of interest, on the basis of factors that the reasoner takes to count for or against its having that status. The reasoner takes the status to be constituted by a complex of types of considerations, and to be incapable of varying independently of them. (2015, pp. 205-6)

Because being unmarried is a “definitional component” (p. 206) of being a bachelor, whereas lacking a wedding ring is not, bachelorhood supervenes on being unmarried; but being unmarried does not supervene on bachelorhood, nor does bachelorhood supervene on the lack of a wedding ring. So, “Bob is unmarried; therefore, Bob is a bachelor” qualifies as conductive, whereas “Bob is a bachelor; therefore, Bob is unmarried” does not, nor does “Bob lacks a wedding ring; therefore, Bob is a bachelor.”

When Hitchcock stipulates that all conductive arguments be, what he calls, “appeals to criteria” involving only supervenience relations, differences arise between him and Wellman and Govier. Take, for example, the following argument invented by Hitchcock:

Susan is a few days late with her period. Her period usually comes at regular intervals. Susan has experienced slight spotting, but much less bleeding than she usually gets with her period. She has also experienced slight cramps, but again much less than the cramps that she usually gets with her period. She has also noticed a milky discharge from her vagina. She had intercourse within the last two weeks. So, although her breasts have not become tingly and her areola has not darkened, probably Sue is pregnant. (2015, p. 203)

While Govier might be inclined to call this conductive, Hitchcock is not, since Susan's pregnancy does not supervene on any of the indicators cited in the premises, and the argument requires more than just thinking "in a more *a priori* fashion about what counts for or against the supervenient status in question" in the conclusion (p. 207).

Hitchcock's redefinition has other implications too: "Bob is a male; therefore, Bob is a bachelor" would qualify as a conductive argument, but so would "Bob is an adult male who is unmarried; therefore, Bob is a bachelor," which is deductively valid. Hitchcock, however, bites the bullet and explicitly gives up the requirement that conductive arguments must be nonconclusive (p. 206). Other cases become unclear as to whether they will count as conductive or not: e.g., while hydrogen is an essential component of water, and something's having hydrogen is at least relevant to its being water, it is not clear that water *supervenies* on hydrogen. Another case comes from Wellman: "you ought to do it because you promised" (1971, p. 55). Does the obligation supervene on the promise (it's not constitutive of the promise, as is the statement expressing the promise), or is the obligation created (caused) by the promise, in which case this is explanatory reasoning and Wellman should not have used it as an example of a conductive argument in the first place?

Frank Zenker (2011) offers yet another definition of conductive arguments, as nonconclusive arguments with multiple and convergent (independent) premises, and counterconsiderations consisting of reasons against either the conclusion *or the premises* of the argument. (Zenker invites confusion by also calling these counterconsiderations "premises.")

Govier would likely object: "Counter-considerations are claims negatively relevant (or taken to be negatively relevant) to the acceptability of the conclusion and acknowledged by the arguer to have that status. As such, counter-considerations are part of the arguer's case. Objections to an argument, on the other hand, are not integral parts of the arguer's case" (2011b, p. 2). Zenker *could* simply reply, "Hey, whose stipulative definition is this anyway?!" But he could also point out that the *loss* of a reason for thinking one's conclusion is *true* can be as damaging to one's case as being *given* a reason for thinking one's conclusion is *false*. This, however, does not smooth over the counter-intuitiveness of calling *either* instance *a part of one's argument*.

Zenker claims to have found a unique way of differentiating conductive arguments from inductive arguments: While they are both nonconclusive (because they contain more informational content in their conclusions than in their premises), with conductive arguments, the addition or deletion of premises or coun-

terconsiderations need *not* change one's cumulative weight assigned to the resultant set of premises in support of the conclusion, because the weight or importance one assigns to those remaining premises may remain unaffected or may be adjusted accordingly, whereas one *must* make such changes with respect to the resultant set of premises in inductive arguments. (At least I *think* this is what Zenker is claiming.) Zenker may appear to be correct, due to the fact that inductive arguments have linked premises and conductive arguments have convergent premises, as stipulated by Zenker. But, judging from Zenker's own example of an inductive argument (2011, p. 78), I can't see his as a helpful means of distinguishing inductive arguments:

- (P1) Peter was born in Sweden.
- (P2) 90% of Swedes are Protestants.
- (P3) Peter's parents emigrated from China 15 years ago.
- (C) Peter is Protestant.

How much weight I assign (P3), when added, may differ from Zenker. He assigns it quite a bit and claims that it "ceases to render (C) the inductive consequence of (P1) and (P2)" (p. 78); whereas I might assign it less weight and still think (C) is supported, construing the family as having likely blended into the Swedish culture after 15 years.

Zenker's example of a conductive argument (p. 80) illustrates how far he has strayed from Wellman's original definition:

- (CC1) Aircraft travel leaves a large environmental footprint.
- (CC2) Aircraft travel is physically exhausting.
- (CC3) Aircraft travel is comparatively expensive.
- (CC4) Airports do not always route baggage correctly.

- (PR1) Aircraft travel is comparatively fast.
- (PR2) I am overworked and likely able to sleep on the plane.
- (PR3) My department reimburses travel expenses.
- (PR4) Environmental footprint-differences can be compensated by purchase.

- (OBP) (PR1-PR4) outweigh/are on balance more important than (CC1-CC4).
- (C) It is OK to travel to the conference by aircraft (rather than by train).

For Zenker, there are only “pattern three” conductive arguments, and the premises [PR] they contain can take on an entirely different function than Wellman assigned them—they can support the conclusion *or* they can defeat counterconsiderations [CC]. But this seems to be a misguided extension of what a *premise* is. Since (PR2-PR4) simply defeat (CC1-CC3), they don’t support travel by air any more than travel by train, so it is odd to call them premises for (C). They should all just be stripped from the argument, leaving only (PR1) and (CC4), or else this invites an explosion of similar PRs countering CCs; for example, “planes crash, but so do trains,” “I might catch a cold on the plane, but I might too on a train,” *ad nauseam*.

And then there is the problem generated by premise (OBP), which Zenker calls the “on-balance premise” (p. 80). This is a problem, however, that Zenker inherited from Hans Hansen, who does not narrow his definition of conductive arguments to consist of only Wellman’s “pattern three” type, but merely focuses his discussions on them. The following is Hansen’s schematic for such “balance-of-considerations,” or “BC-arguments,” as he calls them (2011, p. 39):

P1. Independent reason for conclusion *K*
Pn. Independent reason for *K*
OBP. The reasons in *P1-Pn* taken together *outweigh* the independent counter-considerations to *K*, *CC1-CCn* taken together
C. *K* even though *CC1-CCn*

According to Hansen:

We are led to a conclusion by considering each of the independent supporting reasons and their amassed force, and by the judgment that taken together those reasons outweigh the counter-considerations taken together. If we make that judgment part of the reasoning, then the BC-arguments we are considering could have this structure.... The presence of the on-balance premise is needed to allow the reasoning to go forward to the even-though conclusion.... (pp. 38-41)

And with this, Hansen makes two significant changes to Wellman’s “pattern three” arguments and, by implication, to conductive arguments in general: The first is the addition of the “on-balance premise,” and the second is the relinquishing of the requirement that all conductive arguments be convergent. Hansen has now made his BC-arguments into “linked” arguments, to the approval of both Zenker (2011) and Govier (2011a; 2011b).

While Govier reluctantly admits that adding an on-balance premise to balance-of-considerations arguments makes them linked, she maintains that they are not linked by means of “bare conjunction” (2011a, p. 274). Her model for representing these arguments,

displays a stage incorporating the on-balance premise (OBP), the typically implicit claim that supporting considerations outweigh counterconsiderations. We can see from this model that (1) there are reasons to accept K , and *although* (2) there are reasons not to accept K , *nevertheless* (3) the supporting considerations outweigh the counterconsiderations, so (4) [it is reasonable to accept] K ...the linkage here is expressed not through the word ‘and’ but by using the words ‘although’ and ‘nevertheless’ so as to indicate that more than bare conjunction is intended here. (p. 274)

But this does not make the argument any less linked: ‘although’ and ‘nevertheless’ are still conjunctions, like ‘and,’ they simply have an additional contrastive connotation, like ‘but.’ This is evidenced by interchanging them in Govier’s own model: e.g., “(1) there are reasons to accept K , *nevertheless* (2) there are reasons not to accept K , *although* (3) the supporting considerations outweigh the counterconsiderations, so (4) [it is reasonable to accept] K .” Or “*although* (2) there are reasons not to accept K , *nevertheless* (1) there are reasons to accept K , *and* (3) the supporting considerations outweigh the counterconsiderations, so (4) [it is reasonable to accept] K .” Interchanging these “nonbare” conjunctions or replacing them both with ‘and’ doesn’t make a difference—‘reason to accept’ and ‘reason not to accept’ are doing all the work.

I find two issues with Hansen’s definition, both of which concern his “on-balance premise” [OBP]. That premise can be true and yet provide little or no reason to “go forward” to the conclusion. For example, if $PI-Pn$ make K .2 probable and $CCI-CCn$ make *not-K* .1 probable, then one still ought not to draw the conclusion K . Withstanding counterconsiderations, $PI-Pn$ must be put forward as making K at least probably true.

But a more fundamental problem with making Hansen’s OBP *a part of the argument* can be demonstrated using Lewis Carroll’s “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles” (1895). Here is an excerpt from that story, starting with the Tortoise’s request that Achilles write down the following two premises and conclusion from Euclid.

(A) Things that are equal to the same are equal to each other.

(B) The two sides of this Triangle are things that are equal to the same.

(Z) The two sides of this Triangle are equal to each other.

“Readers of Euclid [says the Tortoise] will grant, I suppose, that Z follows from A and B, so that any one who accepts A and B as true, *must* accept Z as true?”

“Undoubtedly! The youngest child in a High School—as soon as High Schools are invented, which will not be till some two thousand years later—will grant *that*.”

“And if some reader has *not* yet accepted A and B as true, he might still accept the *sequence* as a *valid* one, I suppose?”

“No doubt such a reader might exist. He might say ‘I accept as true the Hypothetical Proposition that, *if* A and B be true, Z must be true; but, I *don't* accept A and B as true.’ Such a reader would do wisely in abandoning Euclid, and taking to football.”

“And might there not *also* be some reader who would say ‘I accept A and B as true, but I *don't* accept the Hypothetical’?”

“Certainly there might. *He*, also, had better take to football.”

“And *neither* of these readers,” the Tortoise continued, “is *as yet* under any logical necessity to accept Z as true?”

“Quite so,” Achilles assented.

“Well, now, I want you to consider *me* as a reader of the *second* kind, and to force me, logically, to accept Z as true.” [...]

“I’m to force you to accept Z, am I?” Achilles said musingly. “And your present position is that you accept A and B, but you don’t accept the Hypothetical—“

“Let’s call it C,” said the Tortoise.

“—but you *don't* accept

(C) If A and B are true, Z must be true.”

“That is my present position,” said the Tortoise.

“Then I must ask you to accept C.”

“I’ll do so,” said the Tortoise, “as soon as you’ve entered it in that notebook of yours.” [Achilles adds C, to get the following.]

(A) Things that are equal to the same are equal to each other.

(B) The two sides of this Triangle are things that are equal to the same.

(C) If A and B are true, Z must be true.

(Z) The two sides of this Triangle are equal to each other.”

“You should call it *D*, not *Z*,” said Achilles. “It comes *next* to the other three. If you accept A and B and C, you *must* accept *Z*.”
 “And why *must* I?”

And off we go on an infinite regress!

I think Carroll’s point here is that some naturally abstracted degree of logical competence with rules of inference, such as *modus ponens*, is necessary *before* we start *formalizing* them and the concept of validity. If someone does not grasp the validity of *modus ponens* and is not already disposed to make inferences in accord with it, no *premise* stating that rule of inference will help them. The Tortoise made it *look* as if the original argument had a missing premise C. But C adds nothing to the argument for someone who already understands *modus ponens*. For *them*, A and B are already logically sufficient reasons for concluding *Z*. Adding C would most likely just confuse them. And, for someone who *doesn’t* understand *modus ponens*, C adds nothing they *recognize as a reason* for accepting the conclusion.

So Achilles was right when he agreed that the logically competent reader of Euclid “will grant...that *Z* follows logically from A and B.” And the Tortoise was wrong, or at least equivocating, when she suggested that someone who does *not* accept C is *not* “*as yet* under any logical necessity to accept *Z* as true.” Yes, they *are*, given their acceptance of A and B; they just don’t *realize* that they are. But requiring the *argument* to express the inference rule for the argument *user* who does *not* realize that they under a logical necessity to accept *Z* is futile. And requiring the *argument* to express the inference rule for the argument *user* who *does* realize that they are under that logical necessity is, luckily, unnecessary.

I’m afraid this same problem plagues Hansen (and now Zenker and Govier), as he insists on having OBP be a *premise* in one’s BC-argument, as opposed to being merely the *judgment* of the *user* of the argument. The Tortoise could be just as “obtuse” with Hansen as she was with Achilles and ask, “Why should one conclude that *K* (*even though...*), when *P1-Pn* and *OBP* are true?” Well, because *if P1-Pn* and *OBP* are true, then, *on balance*, one *should* conclude that *K* (*even though...*)? Call this *OBP+1*. And off we go on the regress.

But for someone as “obtuse” as this, *OBP+1* will *not* help one bit—not any more than *OBP* did. And the logically competent person doesn’t need *OBP*. *OBP* is not acting as a separate *reason* for their inference to *K*; it is rather a description of the

rationality of their inference to K in light of their reasons ($PI-Pn$ and $CCI-CCn$) for and against K .

Spoiler alert: Giving up the position that a BC-argument is a *single* argument removes this urge to posit the OBP as an implicit *premise* to “link” all the explicit premises and counterconsiderations together. And maintaining the position that a *convergent* conductive argument is a *single* argument equally generates an urge to add a similarly unnecessary premise stating that the cumulative weight of the explicit premises adequately supports the conclusion, which would send one on the same kind of regress.

In response to my first presentation of this criticism (Possin 2010), Hansen (2011) claims that his on-balance premises do not begin a regress because they are not “inference rules”—“they are particular propositions intimately tied to the circumstances of a unique argument rather than general propositions as inference rules are” (p. 42). Govier concurs (2011, pp. 271-2). As I point out in (Possin 2012), however, they fail to notice that the premise that began the regress plaguing Achilles was just such “a particular proposition intimately tied to the circumstances of a unique argument” regarding “The two sides of *this* Triangle” (my emphasis).

An anonymous reviewer proposed an excellent characterization of Hansen’s on-balance premise—it is a *meta*-premise. It makes a *relevance* claim about its fellow premises, that they outweigh the counterconsiderations. This relevance claim, however, is as much in line for assessment (as to its acceptability) as its fellow premises are and as much as another *meta*-premise would be that makes an *acceptability* claim about those premises, i.e., that they are true or acceptable.

The rational position to adopt on any issue is basically the one that is at least probably true based on its having the strongest reasons in its favor and the fewest or weakest criticisms plaguing it. Hunting for and adopting such a position is basically what it is to be rational in one’s beliefs, values, and actions. Whereas adopting a position because *a premise tells you that it’s rational to do so* would *not* be rational—that would rather be blind acceptance of a premise and its conclusion, which would be the antithesis of critical thinking.

So we don’t, and can’t, *formally* represent all the aspects of the rules and practices of our inferences *while* they are in progress. That’s why they have the status of critical-thinking *skills*.

Derek Allen (2011), inspired by Freeman (2010), tries to avoid the regress problem plaguing the on-balance premise by replacing it with a “warrant” in the spirit of Toulmin’s (1969)

model for arguments. Jin concurs (2011, p. 27). The warrant in a conductive argument would be an implicit “inference license” to draw the conclusion in light of the premises and “even though” the counterconsiderations.

A warrant for a pro and con argument will say, in effect, that [1] it is legitimate to infer, *ceteris paribus*, the conclusion, C, despite the counterconsiderations—that is, to infer C rather than not-C. If this warrant claim is correct, then it must be the case that [2] the pros outweigh the cons, where this means that [3] other things being equal, it is more reasonable to accept C than not-C, given the pros and cons. Hence the warrant for a pro and con argument will entail that the pros outweigh the cons. Thus, an OB claim (that is, a claim asserting that the pros in a balance of considerations argument outweigh the cons) is a consequence of the argument’s warrant. Consequently:...a pro and con argument needn’t be understood as having an OB premise. (p. 4)

It appears, however, that [1], [2], and [3] are *equivalent* and that [1], concerning a warrant, does not have priority; rather [3] does—the warrant is correct *because* it’s the most rational inference to make. Furthermore, such a warrant would not work as a satisfactory answer to someone [S] who says, “To put it in Toulmin’s terminology, I fully understand these reasons and counterconsiderations as ‘what I have to go on,’ but ‘how do these premises and counterconsiderations get me to the conclusion?’” (cf. Toulmin 1969, p. 99). The warrant Allen suggests in essence tells S, “Well, they do, *ceteris paribus*,...legitimately.” It just begs the question—not much of an improvement over being launched into a regress. And if S is satisfied with that answer and draws the conclusion C *because* of it, then S is just blindly following orders—the antithesis of the rational acceptance of a conclusion.

I think Toulmin had a sense of this. That is why he did *not* appeal to a warrant to do the job of getting someone to draw the obviously rational conclusion in the following case of a linguistically understood argument:

Suppose we tell a man that Petersen is a Swede, and that the proportion of Roman Catholic Swedes is either zero or very low; ‘so’, we conclude, ‘Petersen is certainly—or almost certainly—not a Roman Catholic’. He fails to follow us: what then are we to say about him?...[W]e must say,...that he is blind to, i.e. fails to see the force of, the argument. Indeed what else can we say? This is not an explanation: it is a bare statement of the fact. He just does

not follow the step, and the ability to follow such arguments is, surely, one of the *basic* rational competences. (p. 134)

Toulmin introduced “warrants” as general bridges between premises (“data”) and conclusions (pp. 98-100). He said that they were implicit but could be made explicit. And he insisted that they were *not premises*. In *this* he seems mistaken: his reasons for refusing warrants the status of premises are weak (although now is not the time to discuss this), and warrants function quite well as premises—Toulmin even prefaces them with the classic premise indicator ‘since’ (p. 99). Toulmin says the “backing” for (or reasons to believe) a warrant is “field-dependent” (p. 104). And so it seems: Take, for example, the argument, “X is a cat, and all cats are mammals; therefore, X is a mammal.” The “backing,” or subargument, for “all cats are mammals” is from the field of Linnaean Taxonomy. But this is not unlike providing a subargument for the “data,” “X is a cat”; it’s just that the latter subargument might not be requested as often or come from such a field specialist. But say that S wants to know why they should conclude that X is a mammal when they fully accept that X is a cat and that all cats are mammals? To tell S that “All cases in which X is a cat and all cats are mammals are cases in which it is legitimate to infer that X is a mammal,” as a warrant, will not help. S could very well ask, “Why is *that*?” or point out that *that* just begs the question. Note that the “backing” S is requesting at this point is *not* field-dependent, which is evidence that *it’s not a warrant that they just received*. Our “obtuse” subject S is not in need of another “warrant”—they already have the only “warrant” they need, with “all cats are mammals.” They simply have “a defect of reason” (p. 134). “Indeed, what else can we say?” (p. 134).

My anonymous reviewer also suggested a possibly *legitimate* form of an on-balance premise (in contrast to Hansen’s), using Parfit’s *Earthquake* case as an example: “two people, *White* and *Grey*, are trapped in slowly collapsing wreckage. I am a rescuer, who could prevent this wreckage from either killing *White* or destroying *Grey*’s leg” (2011, p. 185). According to my reviewer,

This is a balance-of-considerations argument, and it can be expressed as follows: “I ought to save *White*’s life, even though if I save *White*’s life *Grey* will lose her leg, because *White*’s loss in dying would be greater than *Grey*’s loss in losing her leg.” The premise of this argument is an on-balance premise; the idea it expresses could

also be expressed by saying that White's loss in dying would greatly outweigh Grey's loss in losing her leg.

Rather than making a claim about the other premises, this premise "compares in magnitude two loses."

While it's reasonable to describe this as a balance-of-considerations argument, it strays from what proponents have been calling *conductive*: it is a *purely* linked argument, and what *appears* to be an on-balance *premise* is actually a deductively derived *subconclusion* in an inductive subsumption argument (cf. Wellman 1971, p. 52) looking roughly as follows (with implicit premises in brackets).

Saving White would cause Grey's loss of her leg.
 Saving Grey would cause White's loss of life.
[Both White and Grey greatly value life over limb.]
 Saving White causes less loss than saving Grey.
[Prima facie, one ought to cause the lesser loss.]
 One ought to save White.

The following argument also seems to be an instance:

60% of the marbles in the jar are red.
 30% of the marbles in the jar are white.
10% of the marbles in the jar are blue.
 The proportion of red marbles in the jar is greater than the non-red.
[From an epistemic point of view, predict the event most probable.]
 I will randomly draw a red marble from the jar.

Furthermore, on-balance premises, in this comparative form, are not reliable indicators of balance-of-considerations arguments: e.g., the proportion of red marbles is greater than the white, and the proportion of white marbles is greater than the blue; therefore, the proportion of red marbles is greater than the blue. So I am skeptical about their taxonomic helpfulness.

Jan Albert van Laar (2014) prefers to do without the on-balance premise in balance-of-considerations arguments: "I would propose to identify the following proposition, part of the proponent's argument, as fulfilling the job of such on balance commitments, yet at the cost of losing the weighing metaphor, and its suggestion of a continuum of strengths: 'It is not the case that if your counterconsideration C is true (acceptable), my thesis T...is false (indefensible)'" (p. 270). But this replacement, as "part of the...argument," appears to be another *meta*-premise, this time making an *irrelevance* claim about a *counterconsidera-*

tion; to little avail, however, since it too is redundant to the argument, analogous to politicians who do their own television ads and say at the end, "...and I approve this message," to which Laar would have them add, "and I disapprove of my opponent's."

So much, then, for on-balance premises, what might be called "on-balance warrants," or some other functional equivalent, offered as an essential part of balance-of-considerations conductive arguments.

After surveying the various definitions of conduction from Wellman, Govier, Hitchcock, Zenker, and Hansen, I find that they tend to have one feature in common: that the *basic* premises of a conductive argument are not linked—they are either *singular* or *convergent*.

This condition, however, is unsustainable: those premises *are* ultimately linked...to other *implicit* premises. Wellman thought otherwise:

In deciding whether or not an argument of [the first] pattern is valid it is necessary to determine whether or not the premise is relevant to the conclusion drawn from it. At this point it is tempting to construe conduction on the model of deduction and assume that there is a tacit premise which links the reason given with the conclusion drawn. For example, "he has been very kind to you" is a reason for asserting "you ought to help him" only if one takes for granted "everyone ought always to help anyone who has been very kind to him." This deductive model is misleading for it obscures the fact that the argument is inconclusive.... (1971, pp. 55-6)

Wellman, however, was wrong in believing that he can avoid the likes of such tacit premises, because he mistakenly thought they had to be *universal* claims that rendered all their arguments *deductive*. Govier (ironically) illustrates both of my points (2010):

The premises [of a conductive argument] state *reasons* put forward as separately relevant to the conclusion, and reasons have an element of **generality**....Implicitly, the premises make claims about a broader range of issues than the particular issue dealt with in the premises and conclusion....In effect, the argument [that uses the premise "Responsible adult people should be able to choose whether to live or die" as a reason to conclude that "Voluntary euthanasia, in which a terminally ill patient consciously chooses to die, should be made legal"] assumes:...Other things being equal, if a practice consists of *chosen* actions, it should be legalized....[Such] broad

assumptions underlie the original argument. By spelling them out, we can see what sorts of general principles the original argument depends on....The need for a *ceteris paribus* clause makes it clear that the reasons are *not* regarded as sufficient or conclusive reasons. (pp. 361-2)

(Trying to salvage the convergence requirement by claiming that these implicit premises are “warrants,” and not premises, won’t work—just as calling a dog’s tail a leg won’t make it so, *denying* that a dog’s tail is a tail won’t make it *less* so.) This would make convergent conductive arguments *convergent linked* arguments, and it would make balance-of-considerations conductive arguments *linked convergent linked* arguments, for Govier, et al. Yikes.

After critically reviewing all these definitions, where does this leave us with respect to the nature of conductive arguments? I’m reminded of the tune “Anything You Can Do,” from *Annie Get Your Gun*:

“Any stipulative definition you can do, I can do better.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes, I can;... Yes, I can; Yes, I can; YES, I CAN!”

The question that has been patiently waiting in the wings, as I have been detailing these competing stipulative definitions, their differences and their oddities, is this: What does it matter?! How does this battle of stipulative definitions advance anyone’s critical-thinking skills about cogent argumentation and the rational formation of beliefs, values, and action plans? Answer: It *doesn’t*.

The conductive argument, as a third kingdom of arguments, is a myth—like witches. Do witches exist? Well, yes; repeat, *no*. If we are asking whether they exist in some interesting sense, such as women who cavort with the Devil or practice supernatural magic or have paranormal powers to conjure spells and curses, then no. If we are asking if there are women who have joined a coven that practices various rituals, then sure. But *that’s* not interesting. van Laar (2014, p. 270) agrees: “There seems to be no good reason for assigning special importance in a theory of argumentation to a complex argument in which the proponent acknowledges the counterconsideration to be acceptable as well as negatively relevant to his thesis, yet not sufficient to defeat the argument.”

As far as I can see, there are simply two argument kingdoms—deductive and inductive. And what are typically being *called* conductive arguments are inductive, by virtue of their being nonconclusive. Nothing useful has been added to the taxonomy of arguments by proposing the existence of conductive arguments as a third kingdom.

Govier, however, would say just the opposite: By defining inductive arguments as merely nonconclusive, “Too many different types of arguments will fall into the class, the result being that saying an argument is in the broad sense *inductive* tells us essentially nothing about it” (1999, p. 159). I believe, however, that a distinction that is minimalist and true is better than one that is more specific but false. And, to the contrary, the inductive-deductive dichotomy is based on a distinction that *does* tell us something *essential* regarding a difference with respect to one of the standards of cogency of arguments, viz., about the degree to which the set of premises of an argument is required to adequately support its conclusion in order to be cogent. With deductive arguments, the cogency requirement is that the truth of the premises logically guarantees the truth of the conclusion; whereas with inductive arguments, the requirement is that the truth of the premises makes the conclusion at least probably true. This is *not* to say that every deductive argument successfully *meets* that standard or that every instance of, for example, affirming the consequent is inductive. It is just to say that the *standard* of cogency for deductive support is validity. Thus, it isn’t the distinction between deductive and inductive arguments that’s problematic. What remains problematic (and even impossible) at times is determining whether a *particular* argument is *intended* to be deductive or inductive, i.e., intended to be subject to one standard as opposed to the other. Just as while the distinction between even and odd numbers is unproblematic, it can still remain problematic (and even impossible) to determine whether a particular number of objects, e.g., the grains of sand in a particular truckload, are even or odd.

Govier fears that calling such diverse arguments as inductive analogies, induction by enumeration, abduction, appeals to authority, and appeals to testimony all ‘inductive,’ by virtue of their being nonconclusive, will make them “disappear by definitional shifts” (2011a, pp. 263-4). But that fear is as groundless as thinking that calling a dog an ‘animal’ makes it disappear as a canine or no longer worthy of study as a canine. Moreover, why would such argument types “disappear” when classified as inductive but not when classified as conductive, as Govier has done with abduction?

[Another] reason for not adopting the extremely broad definition of “induction” as “nonconclusive” is that when we provide ourselves with an exhaustive partition between deductive and inductive, that “great divide” makes us insensitive to the presence of nonconclusive yet nonempirical arguments. We come thereby to think of all reasoning as being deductive...or inductive (understood as empirical, in the mode of empirical science). In so doing, we have frozen our categories into a kind of careless neopositivism. (1999, 159-60)

Govier has been making this charge since (1987b). But it is based on an equivocation: She first says that defining inductive arguments “in the broadest sense,” as merely nonconclusive, covers too many types of arguments, making us insensitive to many of them. And this somehow makes us careless positivists, who define induction too *narrowly* as...well, pretty much the way Govier defines it: as nonconclusive, involving empirical propositions, a regularity of nature assumption, and an inference “either that unexamined cases will resemble examined ones or that evidence makes an explanatory hypothesis probable” (2010, pp. 255-6).

In (1987b), Govier claims that the inductive-deductive distinction is due “to the sheer force of unanalyzed tradition” (p. 47), which Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951) should have dispelled—there are so many indeterminate “borderline cases,” that the distinction is “inscrutable” (p. 47). But, if this were true, it would be an even stronger reason for dispelling the inductive-deductive-*conductive* distinction. Luckily, “borderline cases” are no reason to reject distinctions: Vague concepts, by definition, lack necessary and sufficient conditions and thereby have indeterminate cases. For example, it would be silly to think there is a magic number of hairs marking the difference between bald and non-bald. But that doesn’t mean one can’t tell the difference between the two in clear-cut cases (pardon the pun). (Based on her willingness to provide her own [albeit too narrow] “definition” of induction [above], it appears that Govier has now freed herself from “the sheer force of unanalyzed tradition” *resulting* from “Two Dogmas,” although she still waffles on whether *a priori* analogies are deductive [2010, p. 351] or not [p. 284].)

Govier claims that “the very same philosophers who presume that all arguments are inductive or deductive make frequent use of conductive arguments in their own writing” (1999, p. 160). But this just begs the question that conductive arguments exist as a separate type—analogue to a Creationist claiming that all the fossil evidence for evolution and against

Creationism was put in place by God at Creation and so instead confirms Creationism.

Govier also accuses those adopting the inductive-deductive dichotomy of “spurious simplicity” in how one classifies arguments (1999, p. 160). But this just begs the question regarding the need to make our taxonomy of arguments more complex by adding the classification “conductive.” And why think the inductive-deductive distinction is more spurious than, e.g., the plant-animal distinction?

In (2010), Govier says that there are three reasons for not “breaking down conductive arguments into smaller ones”:

First, the diverse considerations in conductive arguments are characteristically put forward together....The implication is that their collective bearing on the conclusion should be taken into account when we are deciding whether to accept the conclusion. (p. 353)

This makes whether or not a set of independent reasons for a conclusion constitutes a single conductive argument purely a matter of intention (Freeman concurs [2010, p. 139]). But when I put three eggs into my batter, I don’t end up with a one-big-egg batter if I intend it. If two people, each with their own unique reason for conclusion C, shared and adopted each other’s reason, do they now share a single conductive argument or do they simply share the original two arguments for C? I see nothing gained by positing the existence of a new convergent argument to account for this case. Nothing is gained by insisting that they have *one* argument, and no longer two, for C. *Now* who’s guilty of making arguments “disappear”? As Gilbert Ryle would remind us, when you put a right glove together with a left glove, you don’t get some new third entity called a “pair” of gloves at the expense of the other two.

The second reason is that were we to break such a conductive argument into separate arguments, we would later have to consider the various premises together when we arrived at the point of deciding how well the premises support the conclusion....Whether we say...that there is one argument or four arguments, it remains true that four reasons have been put forward to support the conclusion; when we come to make a decision about the support given for this conclusion, we will have to consider how well these four reasons (together though not linked) support the conclusion. (pp. 353-4)

This is true—*whether we say that there are four arguments or one*, to paraphrase Govier. And Govier echoes Wellman in admitting as much, as she addresses what’s involved in assessing the cogency of balance-of-considerations conductive arguments (2010):

To speak of “outweighing” here is obviously to use figurative language. We cannot literally measure, or quantify, the strength or merits of the various premises against counterconsiderations. The “weighing” or “balancing” of various considerations is admittedly hard to understand or explain in nonmetaphorical terms, but it is something we do all the time. (p. 356)

We evaluate A, the acceptability of premises, as we would in any other argument. We evaluate the R condition [of cogency] using our normal understanding of relevance, but considering each premise separately. The main difference arises when we consider the G [groundedness] condition. What we have to determine is the cumulative strength of the reasons stated in the premises; we have to reflect on how well those claims support the conclusion....[T]here are usually counterconsiderations, factors that are negatively relevant to the conclusion....[W]e need to consider them when evaluating the argument....Ultimately, our evaluation of the G condition will be determined by our judgment as to whether the premises cumulate to provide enough [support] for the conclusion to outweigh negatively relevant factors. (p. 359)

Obviously, there is no formula or rule that we can apply to determine whether reasons for the conclusion outweigh reasons against it. (p. 360)

There is no simple recipe for arriving at a definite answer....Decisions must emerge from our judgment about the strength of the reasons put forward, assessed in the light of counterconsiderations. To reflect on pros and cons requires good judgment, which you have to supply for yourself. (p. 365)

So, being committed to the existence of conductive arguments as a distinct type doesn’t help a bit come time to assess cogency.

A third reason for marking conductive arguments as a distinct type is that a number of credible authors on normative reasoning and critical thinking (including Michael

Scriven, James Freeman, Kurt Baier, and Stephen Thomas) have acknowledged their existence. (p. 354)

While that is admittedly an impressive group, a random pick of four texts from *my* shelf indicates that Kahane, Hurley, Kelly, and Salmon think that the inductive-deductive distinction suffices.

Govier is certainly right about one thing though: “If all nondeductive arguments are inductive, and conductive arguments are nondeductive, then what have been called conductive arguments will turn out to be inductive. There will be no need to introduce a third category” (1999, p. 159).

Insisting that balance-of-considerations conductive arguments are *singular* arguments is even more counterintuitive than insisting that merely convergent arguments are: How many *arguments* did Mill give in *On Liberty*? *One*, with the conclusion that the Harm Principle is the most justified method of restricting people’s liberty. That is the absurd implication of rounding up all the elements in what is best described as a robust *position paper* and calling them considerations and counterconsiderations in a *single* conductive argument. So it is understandable that even Govier strays from her own account of balance-of-considerations conductive arguments when she discusses her own example of one (1999, p. 160-1; 2010, p. 354): In a newspaper column, Thomas Hurka (1991) argues that it is not wrong to lie to kids to get them to believe in Santa Claus. Hurka gives a couple arguments for this position, but mostly he reconstructs *and criticizes* arguments for it. He also reconstructs some counterconsiderations against his conclusion, but he then *criticizes them*. Govier, however, misdescribes excerpts from Hurka’s lovely little article, claiming that he draws *two* conclusions. If this *were* a conductive argument, however, 1) it could have only *one* conclusion, and 2) it could contain no such thing as a *criticism* of a counterconsideration (according to *her* definition) and certainly no such thing as a *criticism of an argument for one’s own conclusion*.

It might surprise the reader that I agree in spirit with Moore and Parker (2010, p. 45) that “Indeed, a case can be made for balance of considerations reasoning as *the* most important kind of reasoning we do.” It is primary to our decision-making and practical reasoning. And what are called balance-of-considerations conductive arguments are best thought of as anemic subsets of position papers—subsets that omit many of the important elements of a robust position paper, i.e., many of the important considerations often involved in thinking critically about whether or not we have ample reason to adopt a belief,

value, or action plan. (So if conductive arguments can be said to exist as a type, they exist in this uninteresting sense. And, to remove a nit before anyone picks it, position papers need not be written down.) We have already seen the expansion of the elements of balance-of-considerations arguments (or “pro and con arguments” or “appeals to considerations”): e.g., Zenker (2011) adds counterconsiderations against *premises* and *criticisms of counterconsiderations*; and van Laar (2014, p. 266) adds the latter, to create what he calls “complex arguments.” I am simply continuing that expansion, in light of what, potentially, critical thinking can call for.

Listed below are the basic elements of a position paper, with corresponding heuristic questions that can help one identify those elements and help think an issue through so as to discover and adopt a reasonable position on it:

The Basic Elements of a Position Paper—Repeat and Extend as Needed

1. **Introductory statement** as to the relevance of the issue. Why should anyone care about this issue?
2. **Statement of position.** What is my position on this issue?
3. **Argument for position.** What is my main/next reason for thinking my position is correct?
4. **Reconstruction of criticisms of that argument.** Are there any criticisms of my argument? If so, what are they?
5. **Criticisms of criticisms of that argument.** Are there any criticisms of these criticisms? If so, what are they? If not, find a better argument!
6. **Reconstruction of criticisms of position.** Are there any reasons for thinking my position is false? If so, what are they?
7. **Criticisms of criticisms of position.** Are there any criticisms of these criticisms? If so, what are they? If not, find a better position, if the criticisms of my position are more cogent than the arguments for my position!
8. **Reconstruction of alternative position.** What is my most/next most worthy or popular opponent on this issue?
9. **Reconstruction of argument for alternative position.** What is the best reason for thinking this alternative position is correct?
10. **Criticism of argument for alternative position.** Why doesn't that argument successfully support the alternative position?

11. **Criticism of alternative position.** What reasons are there for thinking the alternative position is false?
12. **Closing paragraph.**

Once we begin looking at so-called balance-of-considerations conductive arguments as anemic position papers, it becomes ever more odd to call their counterconsiderations, i.e., criticisms of one's position (6) and arguments for alternative positions (9), *parts of the argument for one's position* (3). And, while intellectual honesty might demand that one acknowledge those counterconsiderations, if they're relevant, it becomes ever more unusual to *mention* them without also *criticizing* them (7) and (10)—unless one is using mere “strategic maneuvering,” e.g., to make those counterconsiderations “appear to be trivial” by intimating, by their *mere* mention, that they are easily refuted or unworthy of further comment (even if that's *not* true) (Xie 2016), or to express sympathy for the *advocate* of the counterconsiderations, for the purpose of winning them over, as with “I know how much you want to go to the game, but you already promised to help Bob move, so you really ought to.”

Some or all of these basic elements are crucial to finding the most rational position, viz., the one with strongest reasons supporting it, despite the criticisms plaguing it, in comparison with alternative positions on the issue. (For a more complete discussion, see [Possin 2002].) To illustrate how to apply this checklist, to do what I call the “anatomy of a position paper,” I have included the complete version of Hurka's article in the Appendix and have supplied my best effort at identifying its parts. I've used this “anatomy” exercise in my critical-thinking course for 15 years, to the delight of especially the students about to take their Holiday break. Please try your hand at it, and note how analyzing Hurka's piece in terms of the confining conditions of a conductive argument does *not* do it justice and would instead be an appropriate candidate for Govier's charge of “spurious simplicity” (1999, p. 160).

I too have no magic “formula or rule” or “criteria” for determining how to research an issue and *rationally* select from among various positions on it, given the strengths and weaknesses of the known arguments in their support and the known criticisms against those positions. According to Govier, “it is something we do all the time” (2010, p. 356). I'm not nearly as optimistic as Govier is here, but I would admit it is something we do *some* of the time, and I'm certain that it is something we *should* do much better and more often. It is basically what's involved in *critically* and *justifiably* forming our beliefs, values, and action plans.

Being able to do the anatomy of a position paper is a step in the right direction of enhancing such cognitive skills. And being mindful of the conditions for the cogency of arguments is certainly another. How do you do that? Again, there is no magic method. Developing “good judgment,” as Govier calls it—or developing critical-thinking skills, as I would characterize it—takes explicit instruction regarding 1) the conditions for cogent arguments, 2) the reliable ways to meet those conditions, and 3) the all-too-popular ways to flunk them (i.e., formal and informal fallacies). This can be done by studying a *substantive* critical-thinking text, e.g., one less like (Paul and Elder 2011) and more like (Govier 2010)—*sans* Chapter 12. And then practice, practice, and more practice on exercises, to apply and hone those critical-thinking skills...*for a lifetime*.

So, contrary to what Govier might say, I’m not trying to “escape from the problems of conduction” (2011, p. 263). I’m just showing that they are in fact general problems of critical thinking and that belief in “conduction” is of no assistance in addressing them.

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Appendix:

Is it Wrong to Lie about Santa Claus? Thomas Hurka

1. I don't have kids, but I used to be one, and like all kids I was lied to. I was lied to about the tooth fairy; I was lied to about the Easter Bunny; and I was lied to about Santa Claus. I was told Santa exists when, in fact, he doesn't.
2. My parents tried to bring me up properly. They gave me a moral education, including the lesson that lying is wrong. But every Christmas they told me tales about reindeer and sleighs.
3. I don't resent this; I recall with pleasure the excitement it gave my early Christmases. And I don't think parents in general are wrong to tell their kids tales about Santa. The problem is to explain why.
4. We might try saying that talk of Santa isn't really a lie. Kids have tremendous powers of imagination, and what parents do at Christmas is just play along. But this won't do. The impetus for belief in Santa doesn't come from kids, it comes from parents. A tag on a present saying "To Geoffrey from Santa" makes a statement about where the present comes from. The statement isn't true; it's made to create a false belief; and that makes it a lie.
5. Or we might talk about the "deeper truth" in myths, the more profound lessons Santa can teach. But this is a cheat, for two reasons. It fudges the fact that, on the mundane issue of where presents come from, parents know what they're saying is false. (Real myth makers believe their myths.) And it finds a deeper truth where there doesn't seem to be one. In the Santa story, presents come from a stranger who gives gifts to everyone. In reality, presents come from parents who love their kids as individuals and give gifts to express this love. Isn't the reality more worth knowing than the myth?

6. What about Santa as moral educator, rewarding good kids but not bad ones? The fact is, it doesn't happen: all kids get presents. And the image of Santa, all jolly and ho-ho-ho, is inconsistent with a role as moral judge.
7. I think we have to admit that talk of Santa is a lie and can sometimes do harm. Some kids are bitterly disappointed when their illusion is shattered, and some are morally confused. ("Mom and Dad say not to lie, then do it themselves.") Fortunately, this doesn't happen often. Usually the Santa lie, befitting Christmas, is a white one.
8. For starters, the lie is only temporary. You tell kids about Santa now, but you'll straighten them out later. The deception isn't forever.
9. And the deception is a mild one. You don't take a falsehood and call it truth; you take a fiction and call it truth—a small distortion. This means the loss of illusion is gentler. When kids are older they don't lose Santa entirely, they just think of him in a different way.
10. Finally, the deception is good for kids. Believing in Santa adds magic and excitement to Christmas; the anticipation is keener, the delight sharper. Parental love is fine and even profound, but a gift from the North Pole is far more exotic.
11. These reasons wouldn't justify lying to an adult. Adults have a right not to be lied to, even if the lie would benefit them. Maybe there are distressing facts about what their spouse is up to or how their father made his money. It would hurt them to know, but they've a right not to be deceived.
12. Kids don't have this right. (They have some rights of adults, but not all.) Parents needn't tell them hurtful facts, and if kids ask awkward questions, parents can lie. ("Did Mom and Dad fight last night? It was a little disagreement, all patched up now.")
13. A parent's main duty is do what's good for kids, and giving them fun is part of that duty. This isn't a profound or spiritual argument. The main reason why lies about Santa are white is that they make Christmas fun. And this reason could one day be outweighed by contrary reasons. If more kids got morally confused—we'd have to change our ways. For now, fortunately, this isn't necessary.
14. So yes, Virginia, you can tell your kids there's a Santa Claus because the story didn't hurt you, and it probably won't hurt them.

Anatomy of "Is it Wrong to Lie about Santa Claus?"

1. Intro
2. Intro

3. Position
4. Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Argument for Position
5. Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Argument for Position
6. Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Argument for Position
7. Criticism of Position
 - Criticism of Criticism of Position
8. Criticism of Criticism of Position
9. Criticism of Criticism of Position
10. Argument for Position
11. Criticism of Criticism of Position
12. Criticism of Criticism of Position [continued]
13. Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Argument for Position
 - Criticism of Criticism of Argument for Position
14. Closing