

Are Enthymemes Arguments?

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Although there is disagreement as to how 'enthymeme' is to be defined, there is a consensus that all enthymemes are invalid arguments.¹ Some commentators are sympathetic to the view that invalidity is also a sufficient condition. However, most deny this in order to avoid counting raw non sequiturs as enthymemes. Since the following argument is invalid but not a raw non sequitur, it is the sort of argument most theorists would wish to count as an enthymeme.

- (A) 1. All arguments missing a premise are enthymemes.
 2. This argument is an enthymeme.

Since the premise and conclusion share extralogical constants, it qualifies under relatedness based definitions of 'enthymeme'. Since everyone agrees that the missing premise is 'Argument (A) is missing a premise', definitions that require that the missing premise be salient are also satisfied. Indeed, it is not difficult to find an argument much like (A) that qualifies as an enthymeme even as the term is defined traditionally, that is, as an incompletely stated *syllogism*:

- (B) 1. All arguments missing a premise are enthymemes.
 2. All of the arguments written in room 204 of Smith Hall between 10:25 AM and 10:30 AM on January 27, 1986 are enthymemes.

A valid AAA-1 can be obtained by adding the premise 'All of the arguments written in room 204 of Smith Hall between 10:25 AM and 10:30 AM on January 27, 1986 are arguments missing a premise'. Although (B) is not directly self-referential, the fact that it was the only argument written within the specified interval ensures that it is contingently self-referential.

Since self-reference is associated with numerous philosophical difficulties, the reasons offered above for regarding (A) and (B) as enthymemes are not com-

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pletely decisive. Indeed, the self-referential element does provide the basis for two objections to the claim that they are enthymemes.

The first objection proceeds from the assumption that adding a premise to an enthymeme is a matter of changing the enthymeme into an enlarged argument. The problem is that the enlarged arguments are no more enthymemes than is the following argument:

- (C) 1. All arguments missing a premise are enthymemes.
 2. Argument (C) is missing a premise.
 3. Argument (C) is an enthymeme.

Since arguments (A) and (B) cannot be enlarged in a way that is compatible with the claim that they are enthymemes, the objector concludes that they are not enthymemes.

The second objection is a reductio exploiting the assumption that all enthymemes are invalid. Let us suppose that (A) is indeed an enthymeme. It then follows that it is invalid. But if it is invalid, it is possible for the conclusion to be false. That is, (A) is an enthymeme only if it is possible that (A) is not an enthymeme. However, all enthymemes are necessarily enthymemes. Hence (A) is an enthymeme only if it is not an enthymeme. Therefore, (A) is not an enthymeme.

This objection seems effective against those who hold a purely logical definition of 'enthymeme'. For example, those who identify enthymemes with invalid arguments would have to agree that all enthymemes are necessarily enthymemes. However, those who believe that there is an extralogical requirement for enthymemes might maintain that the enthymeme in question is only an enthymeme contingently. For example, an epistemological requirement of salience is only satisfied by nonnecessary psychological facts.

Although this reply might do for (A) and (B), the objector can formulate another enthymeme that allows the reductio to proceed without the assumption that all enthymemes are necessarily enthymemes. After agreeing to suppose that there are extralogical requirements for being an enthymeme in addition to the logical ones, he has us consider the following argument:

- (D) 1. All arguments that satisfy both the logical and the extralogical requirements are enthymemes.
 2. This argument satisfies the extralogical requirements.
 3. This argument is an enthymeme.

We can show that (D) is an enthymeme by first noting that it is missing the premise 'Argument (D) satisfies the logical requirements for being an enthymeme'. Second, we note that (D) satisfies any extralogical requirements as well as (A) and (B) satisfy them. So since we wish to count (A) and (B) as enthymemes, (D) must also be counted as an enthymeme. As in the prior reductio, we observe that (D) is an enthymeme only if it is invalid. But (D) is invalid only if it is possible for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. So it would be possible for (D) to satisfy the extralogical requirements for being an enthymeme and yet not be an enthymeme. But then its failure would have to be traced to a violation of a logical requirement. Since the logical properties of (D) are necessary features, any possible violation of a logical requirement is an actual

one. Thus (D) can only be an enthymeme if it is not actually an enthymeme. Therefore, (D) is not an enthymeme.

The problems discussed above arise from a confusion between signs and their referents. Rather than being arguments, enthymemes are expressions of arguments. Since they are not arguments, enthymemes are neither valid nor invalid, just as doors are neither valid nor invalid. Of course, this is not to deny that enthymemes *signify* valid or invalid arguments. Nor is this an objection to calling them invalid by extension. Such talk should be tolerated in the same way as talk of true sentences.

Since expressions of propositions can be ambiguous, it is not surprising to find that expressions of arguments can be ambiguous. The ambiguity of a sentence can frequently be eliminated by substituting a longer one that is less dependent on contextual clues. But since efficient communication requires a compromise between clarity and brevity, "incomplete" sentences predominate. The same goes for the expression of arguments. But since arguments are made up of a groups of propositions, a new dimension of abbreviation is opened. For in addition to signifying a particular proposition in an abbreviated fashion, we can entirely omit the expression of a proposition in the expectation that the propositions we do express will combine with contextual clues to lead the audience to the correct argument. Considered individually, the sentences constituting the enthymeme signify individual propositions. Considered collectively, they signify an entire argument. So I define 'enthymeme' as 'an argument expression that is ambiguous because of its failure to express one of the components of the argument it signifies'.

Some may object to my claim that enthymemes are ambiguous expressions on the grounds that the audience can be completely clear as to which argument is being signified. The same grounds can be offered for denying that the following are ambiguous sentences:

- (a) The man got down from his duck.
- (b) Mary believed Bill was fine although he had a fork in his ear.
- (c) We had the missionaries for dinner.

Only in extraordinary contexts will there be any doubt as to what these sentences mean. So those who require that an ambiguous sentence be one which is unclear in normal contexts will not wish to call (a)–(c) ambiguous. However, I shall side with those who claim that this only shows that normal contexts disambiguate antecedently ambiguous sentences. So although I agree that many enthymemes fail to create unclarity as to which argument is signified, I will persist in calling them ambiguous by virtue of their context dependency.

Recall that the first difficulty with enthymemes like (A) is that they cannot be shown to be enthymemes by means of the enlargement process. For given that all enthymemes are invalid arguments, the conclusion of the enlarged argument would be false. My definition releases us from the obligation to view the enlargement as the same argument as the original. For under my definition, neither the original nor the enlargement are arguments. They are distinct expressions of the same argument. The conclusion 'This argument is an enthymeme' does not entail 'This argument is identical to an enthymeme'. Instead, it means 'The argument expressed by (A) is signified by an argument expression that is

ambiguous because it fails to express one of the argument's components'. Since (A) does ambiguously signify the argument, the conclusion is true. The point of enlarging (A) to include a sentence expressing the missing premise is to disambiguate. The enlargement is just another argument expression signifying the same argument as (A); it is not the argument so it is not the thing signified by (A). The enlargement stands to (A) as 'If Hitler had not existed, then atomic weapons would not exist' stands to 'No Hitler, no A-bomb'. The fact that an argument can be co-signified by an enthymeme and a nonenthymeme reveals an ambiguity in the claim 'This argument is an enthymeme'. For it does not specify whether the argument is expressed *solely* by enthymemes. If the conclusion of (A) is read as 'The argument expressed by (A) is (at all times) expressed only by enthymemes', it is falsified by the enlargement. But since the more charitable reading is the weaker claim that argument (A) is expressed by an enthymeme (or only by enthymemes at a certain time and place), we regard the conclusion as true.

The second difficulty emanates from the assumption that all enthymemes are invalid arguments. Denying that enthymemes are arguments requires the rejection of this assumption. For only arguments are valid or invalid. So the *reductio* rests on the false conditional 'If (A) is an enthymeme, then it is an invalid argument'.

Those satisfied with this treatment of the puzzles may be tempted to search for a grain of truth in the claim that all enthymemes are invalid arguments. For example, some might be inclined to say that enthymemes ambiguously signify an invalid argument and a valid argument. However, there is no guarantee that the intended argument is valid or that the unintended argument is invalid. Recall the slogan advanced by supporters of Abraham Beame's candidacy for mayor of New York City in 1974: "If you don't know the buck, you don't know the job—and Abe knows the buck". Once we add the missing conclusion 'Abe knows the job', we have an explicit example of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Next suppose that someone with a fondness for statistical trivia argues as follows:

- (E) 1. Catholic brothers have a slight tendency to be born on the same day of the week.
 2. There are eight Sullivan brothers.
 3. At least two of the Sullivan brothers were born on the same day of the week.

Even without the missing premise 'The Sullivan brothers are Catholic', the argument is valid. The most plausible interpretation is that the arguer overlooked the fact that the pigeon-hole principle guarantees that if there are more people than days of the week, two people must share a day. Postulating this error provides the best explanation of why the arguer bothered to assert the first premise. Thus a premise can be "missing" for reasons irrelevant to the strength of the argument.

Enthymematicity is a pragmatic affair. The judgment that a group of statements is an enthymeme is part of an attempt to explain the speaker's behavior. The close association between enthymematicity and invalidity arises from the fact that good explanations maximize the rationality of agents. All other things equal,

valid reasoning is more rational than invalid reasoning. So when the surface reading would yield an invalid argument we are prompted to read between the lines. Thus it is quite common for the attribution of an enthymeme to involve a transition from an invalid to a valid argument. Nevertheless, the fact that rationality maximization competes with other explanatory desiderata should lead us to expect exceptions.

NOTE

1. All the logic textbook writers hold this view. Also included in the consensus are all authors of articles on the topic, for example, see [1]–[3].

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