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## Inferentism vs Reasonism in the Analysis of Arguments

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**ABSTRACT:** Argument Dialectics is a reasonist and holistic theory of argument. It is a reasonist theory because it conceives arguing as presenting something as a reason for something else, and it is holistic because the conclusion is not primarily the conclusion of an isolated argument, but the conclusion of a discourse. To illustrate how reasonism works, and how it differs from the prevailing atomistic inferentism, we will analyse several arguments in both ways.

**KEYWORDS:** argument dialectics, atomism, generalism, holism, inferentism, modifier, particularism, reasonism, warrant

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Argument dialectics (AD) is a reasonist, holistic and particularist theory of argument (Leal & Marraud 2022, Part II). It is a reasonist theory (as opposed to inferentist theory) because it conceives arguing as presenting something as a reason for something else, and not as presenting something as a logical consequence of something else. “A reason is a consideration that favors, or calls for, a certain response” (Dancy 2007, p. 20). Accordingly, that 'A so B' means the consideration B favors the conclusion A, rather than can A be concluded from B or A follows from B.

AD is holistic (as opposed to atomistic) because, if 'A so B' means *A favors B*, the conclusion is not primarily the conclusion of an isolated argument, but the conclusion of a discourse (through weighing or balance of reasons). Only when we try to isolate the effect of a consideration on the orientation of a discourse to arguments, in the traditional logical sense of compounds of premises and conclusion, appear. For the reasonist, A is an argument because, in the context of the discussion, A favors B, whereas for the inferentist the argument is A so B. AD recognizes that a consideration may be relevant to a conclusion because, without being a reason, it affects a reason in various ways, and therefore an argument is conclusive or not depending on contextual factors, and the logical properties of an argument are extrinsic to it.

Finally, it is particularistic as opposed to generalism because it maintains that what makes something a reason for something else need not be a general rule of the kind 'Data such as D entitle one to draw conclusions, or make claims, such as C', but may be a non- general

assertion which, in the context where D is advanced, explains why D is a reason for C. All this may seem odd due to the extreme influence of formal logic and deductivism in philosophy and argumentation theory. This influence has caused most argumentation theorists and philosophers to assume that warrants (i.e., that which explains how something is a reason for something else) must be general.

A particularistic account of warrants is based on the idea that concrete particular judgments are epistemologically prior to abstract principles and that humans simply have the ability to recognize that a certain reason succeeds favoring a claim in a particular situation regardless of knowing any universal generalization or rule of inference. Understanding that a reason favors a claim does not require prior knowledge of some abstract rules of inference, but rather that such rules are abstracted from concrete cases as rules of thumb. This means that there are no “pure laws of form” completely separated from matter (Theron 1997). This particularistic account of warrants has more evidence for it than what is currently acknowledged. It is supported by the new theory of material induction where inductive reasoning is not governed by general rules but by particular facts obtaining within particular domains (Norton, 2003, 2010, 2014). Indeed, the same seems to hold for scientific reasoning in general (i.e., for confirmation, discovery, and explanation) (Brigand 2010). There is a reason to think that this is also true for traditional deductive argumentation, as evidenced by the fact that semantic and logical paradoxes seem to be generated by the assumption that inferences work solely in virtue of the form of an argument (Smith 1986, pp. 173–194; 1988, pp. 124-176). Furthermore, both *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* have arguably been shown not to be universally valid (McGee 1985; Malerkern 2020; Yalcin 2011; Stern & Hartmann 2018). In addition, so called ‘formal inferences’ can be analyzed in terms of material inference but not vice versa. (Brigandt 2010, following Brandom 1994). Plus, material inference captures Wittgenstein's idea that meaning is (at least to some extent) use; we are able users of concepts and syntax without being able to formulate any explicit rules for such use. Finally, there have been recent advancement of “logical particularism”, which is a logic without general logical principles (Wyatt & Payette 2018; 2021). While it is true that the above research — while criticizing and rejecting generalism and formalism — has not departed from inferentism, nor hence from the stress on logical consequence and atomism, it is obvious that the result of this research coheres very well with AD holism and with a particularistic account of warrants.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the nature of warrants, we can assert that the idea of non-general warrants is not an implausible idea.

These principles are displayed in several ways in Argument Diagramming in AD; namely and among others:

- (a) Arguments are no longer chains of inferences, and to the vertical premises-conclusion axis, a horizontal axis representing the relationships between arguments must be added.
- (b) In addition to reasons and conclusions, considerations that, without being reasons in themselves, are conditions for something to be a reason, or that increase or decrease the weight of a reason must be represented.
- (c) To represent second-order reasons, we must allow that an argument can function, as well as a consideration, as a premise or as a conclusion.

To illustrate how reasonism works, and how it differs from the prevailing atomistic inferentism, we will provide analyses of both approaches.

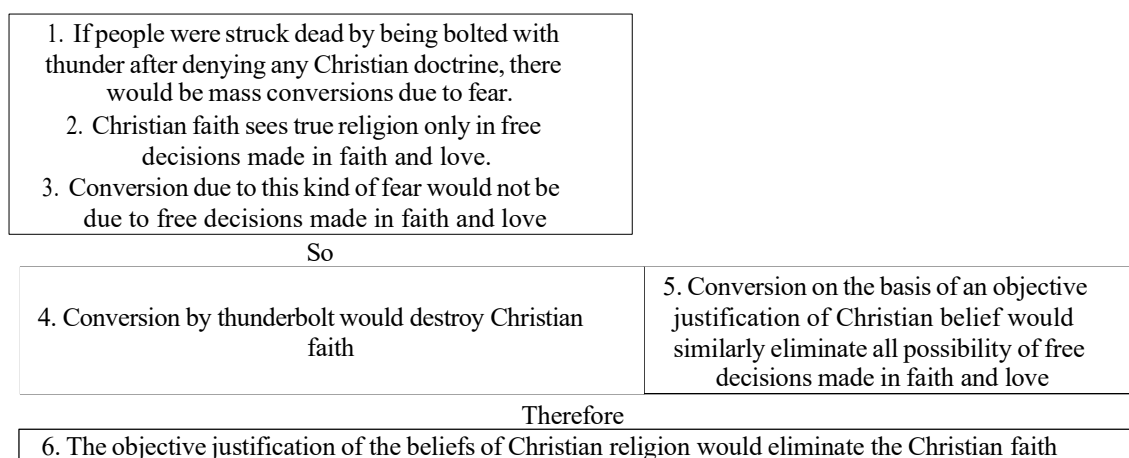
## 2. SERIAL VS SUPPOSITIONAL ARGUMENTS

“An example seems the best way to illustrate the truth of this claim. Alasdair MacIntyre once argued that Christianity does not require any fully objective justification for beliefs about God. MacIntyre defended this conclusion by saying that anyone founding his religious belief on an objective justification proving God’s existence would, in effect, be unfree in his belief in God. He put it this way: ‘(S)uppose religion could be provided with a method of proof. Suppose for example... that the divine omnipotence was so manifest that whenever anyone denied a Christian doctrine he was at once struck dead by a thunderbolt. No doubt the conversion of England would ensue with a rapidity undreamt of by the Anglican bishops. But since the Christian faith sees true religion only in a free decision made in faith and love, the religion would by this vindication be destroyed. For all the possibility of free choice would have been done away. Any objective justification of belief would have the same effect. Less impressive than thunderbolts, it would equally eliminate all possibility of the decision of faith. And with that, faith too would have been eliminated.’” (Trudy Govier 2019, pp. 9-11).

### GOVIER’S INFERENTIST ANALYSIS

“1. If people were struck dead by being bolted with thunder after denying any Christian doctrine, there would be mass conversions due to fear.  
 1. Christian faith sees true religion only in free decisions made in faith and love.  
 3. Conversion due to this kind of fear would not be due to free decisions made in faith and love.  
 So,  
 4. Conversion by thunderbolt would destroy Christian faith.  
 5. Conversion on the basis of an objective justification of Christian belief would similarly eliminate all possibility of free decisions made in faith and love.  
 Therefore,  
 6. The objective justification of the beliefs of Christian religion would eliminate the Christian faith.” (Op cit., p. 10).

Govier thus reconstructs MacIntyre’s argument as a subordinative argument.



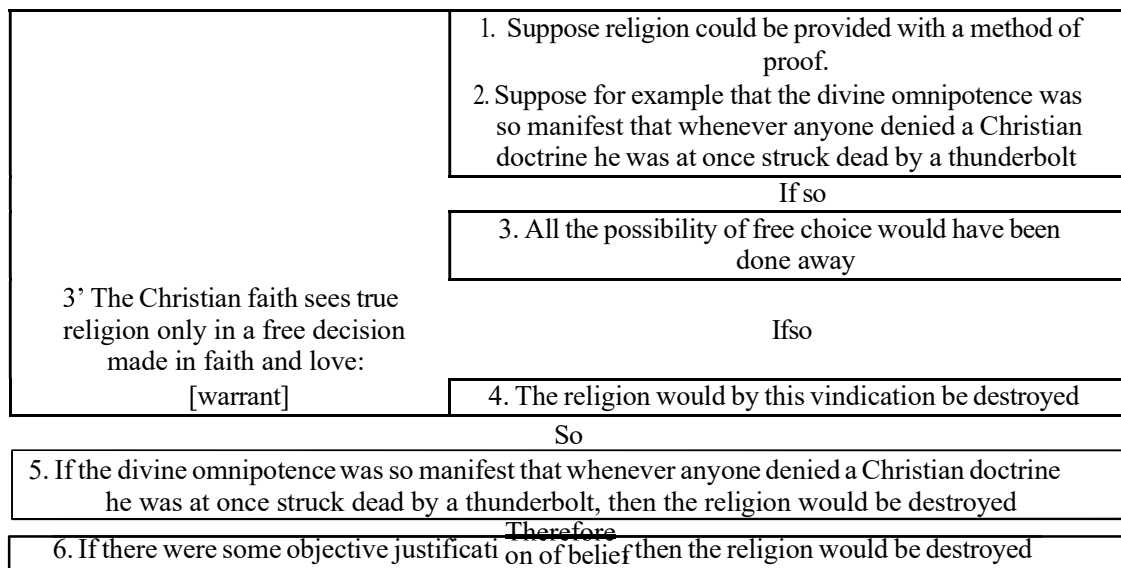
ADREASONIST ANALYSIS

Analysis should be guided by argumentative connectors, punctuation marks and other similar devices (in bold):

**(S)uppose** religion **could** be provided with a method of proof. **Suppose** for example that the divine omnipotence was so manifest that whenever anyone denied a Christian doctrine he was at once struck dead by a thunderbolt. **No doubt** the conversion of England **would** ensue with a rapidity undreamt of by the Anglican bishops. **But since** the Christian faith sees true religion only in a free decision made in faith and love, the religion **would** by this vindication be destroyed. **For all** the possibility of free choice **would** have been done away. **Any** objective justification of belief would have the same effect. Less impressive than thunderbolts, it would equally eliminate all possibility of the decision of faith. **And** with that, faith **too** would have been eliminated.

Diagram

A first possibility is to insert a conditional as an intermediate conclusion of the suppositional argument and premise of the following generalization.



This reconstruction is elegant and reminiscent of the natural deduction rules of conditional introduction and generalization. The catch is that it departs from MacIntyre's literalism. A second possibility is to take as premise the first argument as a whole and as conclusion the second argument as a whole:

2' The Christian faith sees true religion only in a free decision made in faith and love: [warrant]	1. Suppose for example that the divine omnipotence was so manifest that whenever anyone denied a Christian doctrine he was at once struck dead by a thunderbolt
	If so
	2. All the possibility of free choice would have been done away
	Ifso
	3. The religion would by this vindication be destroyed
Therefore	
4' The Christian faith sees true religion only in a free decision made in faith and love: [warrant]	4. Any objective justification of belief would eliminate all possibility of the decision of faith
	Ifso
	5. Any objective justification of belief would eliminate faith too

This is more in line with the letter of what MacIntyre says, but it is also odder.

Remarks

In the context it is not abusive to consider 'free choice' and 'free choice made in faith and love' interchangeable, nor to understand 'religion' as referring to the Christian religion. This would lead to a new paraphrase: without a free decision made in faith and love, there is no Christian religion, very similar in content to the statement 'the Christian faith only sees true religion in a free decision made in faith and love.' 'But' presents as incompatible conclusions 'the conversion of England would ensue with a rapidity undreamt of by the Anglican bishops' and 'The religion would by this Vindication be destroyed'. Govier ignores the verbal assumptions and modes and the occurrence of 'but', and thus that MacIntyre does not claim that religion has been destroyed, but that if religion could have a method of proof, faith would have been eliminated.

In the Reasonist Analysis, 'The Christian faith sees true religion only in a free decision made in faith and love' is not a premise but a warrant: It is not a consideration constituting the reason, but an explanation of that in virtue of which something is a reason. As Toulmin states: "the warrant is, in a sense, incidental and explanatory" (Toulmin 2003, p. 91).

3. SINGLE ARGUMENT VS INTENSIFIER

"Two things are certain. The nuclear weaponry now in place will not disappear. Even if arms control talks were to resume in earnest, the best that could be hoped from them would be a reduction in the pace of growth. And the implacable hostility will not abate, either. Nor should it. Every free society has legitimate sympathy for those elsewhere who would be free. Every totalitarian regime seeks dominion over its neighbors. This conflict is fundamental. The challenge of our times is to pursue it through avenues that do not lead to the total war that will be unwinnable for all. In that quest, even the price of the Summer Games as now constituted is not too much to pay, and there are means at hand to minimize

the loss.” (Govier, Op. cit. 219, 236-237; from William Gold, ‘Games Were Doomed  
 Four Years Ago’, Calgary Herald, May 15, 1984).

GOVIER’S INFERENTIST ANALYSIS

- |  |
|--|
| <p>1. The nuclear weaponry now in place will not disappear.</p> <p>2. Even the most successful arms control talks would only reduce the amount of nuclear weaponry.</p> <p>3. Implacable hostility between the superpowers will not and should not disappear.</p> <p>4. Every free society has legitimate sympathy for those who want to be free.</p> <p>5. Every totalitarian regime seeks domination over its neighbors.</p> <p>6. The conflict between free societies and totalitarian regimes is fundamental.</p> <p>7. The conflict between free societies and totalitarian regimes must be pursued short of total war.</p> <p>8. There are means to minimize the loss of the Summer Olympic Games.</p> |
|--|

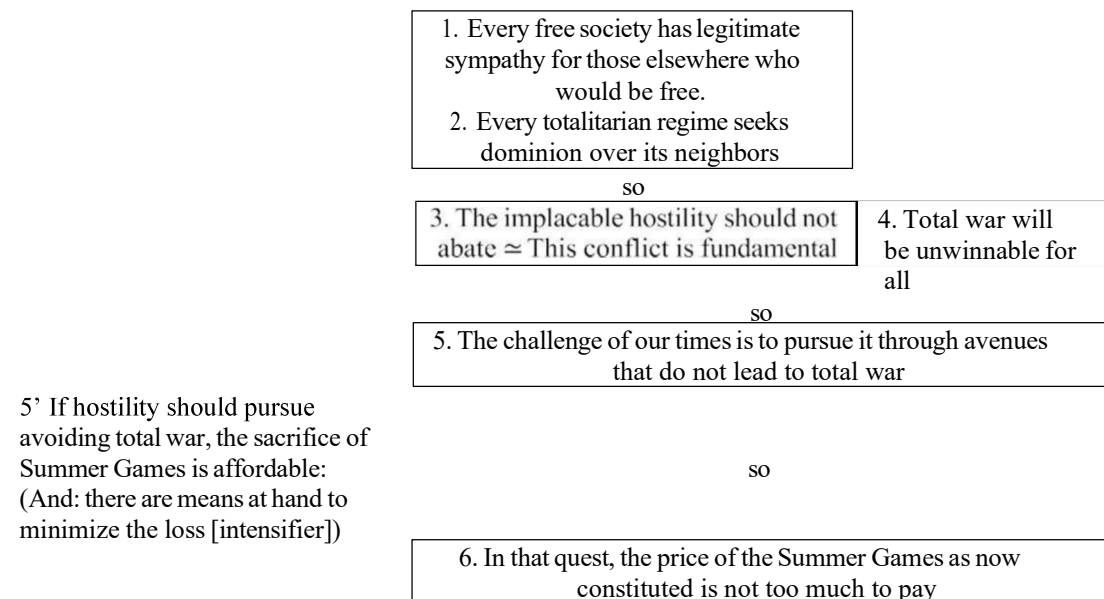
Therefore

- |   |
|---|
| <p>9. The loss of the Summer Olympic Games is not too high a price to pay for the benefit of pursuing the fundamental conflict between superpowers.</p> |
|---|

ADREASONIST ANALYSIS

The first part of the text seems part of a rejoinder to a previous argument, with an opposite slant to the one that follows. Unfortunately, the 1984 *Calgary Herald* is inaccessible to us.

We will therefore analyze only the second part: “Nor should it [the implacable hostility abate]... **In that Quest, even** the price of the Summer Games as now constituted is not too much to pay, **and** there are means at hand to minimize the loss.” Govier turns a contextual factor relevant for evaluating the argument (*There are means to minimize the loss of the Summer Olympic Games*) into a premise, a part of the argument in its own right. From a reasonist point of view, it is a contextual factor that increases the weight of the reason added, as shown in the diagram below.



For the reasonist, an intensifier is an element that increases the strength of the reason in the context in which it occurs. One could object that what we take as a contextual factor outside the argument: *there are means at hand to minimize the loss*, should be interpreted as an argument part of a complementary coordinately compound argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, Snoeck Henkemans 1997), that is, as an additional argument whose function is to block an anticipated objection against the warrant (5'). But that is not a credible interpretation for two reasons. Complementary arguments are supposed to refute anticipated objections against the sufficiency of the argument they complete, and it is difficult to see how "there are means at hand to minimize the loss" would work in that respect. Second, such an interpretation would turn the warrant into another reason for the claim, which makes much less sense with respect to the argumentation as a whole. That there are means to minimize the losses deriving from an action is not *per se* a reason to perform it. Thus, the claim makes more sense as something external to the argument itself that increases its weight.

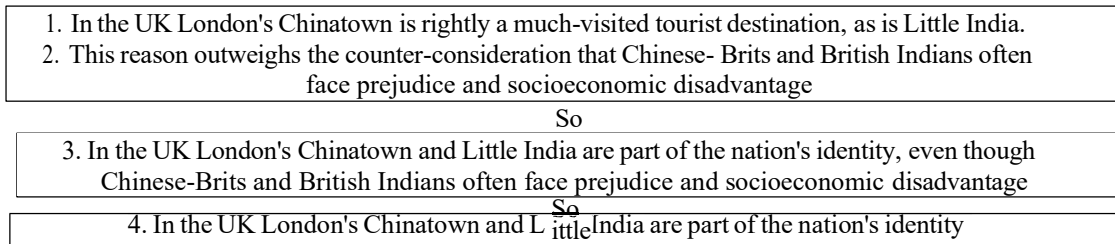
#### 4. BBC-ARGUMENT VS REFUTATION

For an inferentist analysis of weighting (conductive arguments) we turn to Hans Hansen (Hansen 2011). We have analyzed according to his model a real argument from the BBC.

"This offers us a new way of looking at national pride. It doesn't have to mean seeing 'your people' as better than other nations', nor does it mean a centralisation of meaning and power. Instead, it can involve the devolution of traditions and an appreciation of regionality and of the enormous cultural value of new citizens. The European Union is an example of supranational identity that allows citizens to feel they are European and identify with the values of the EU, but without having to give up their national identity. A similar idea can apply within nations as well as between them. In the UK, for instance, London's Chinatown is rightly a much-visited tourist destination, as is Little India – they are part of the nation's identity, even though Chinese Brits and British Indians often face prejudice and socioeconomic disadvantage."  
(Gaia Vince, 'Is the world ready for mass migration due to climate change?'. BBC Future, 11/11/2022. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20221117-how-borders-might-change-to-cope-with-climate-migration>).

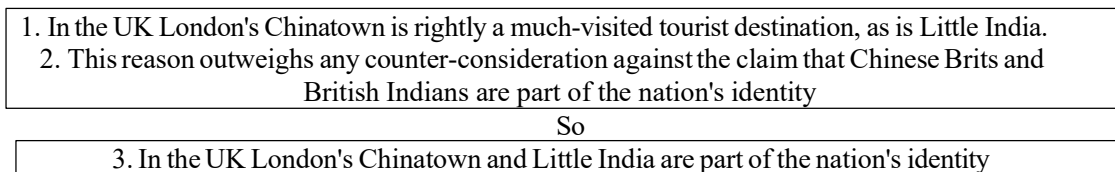
A distinctive feature of Hansen's analysis is that he adds an on-balance premise: "These reasons outweigh the alleged counter-considerations", which is necessary for the conclusion to follow from the premises.

HANSEN-STYLE INFERENTIST ANALYSIS

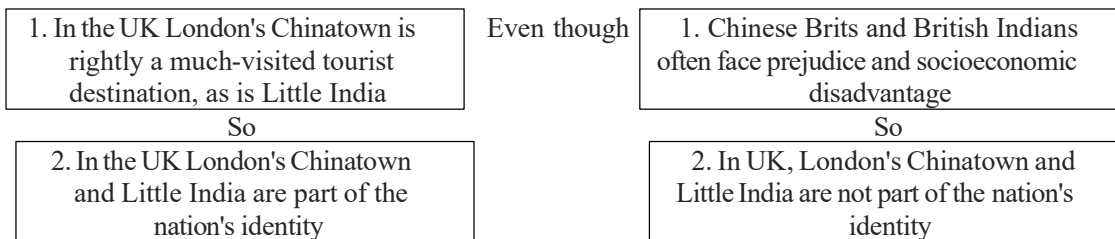


There is a difference between concluding something from the conjunction of several considerations (premise 3 consists of several considerations) and from concluding from considerations despite counter-considerations. Hansen's analysis handles the two cases in much the same way, although concluding something from a consideration despite counter-considerations involves a crucial weighing of reasons.

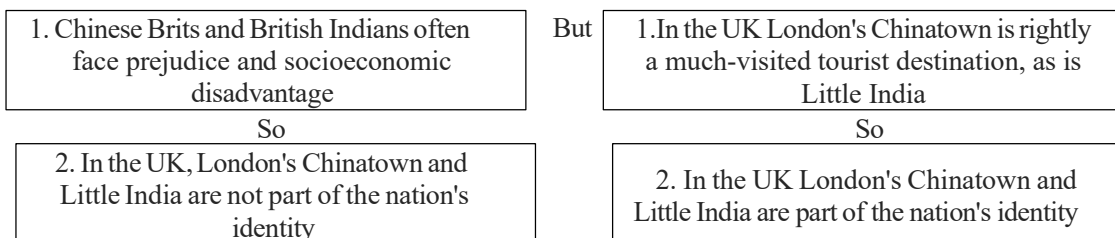
Secondly, it could be argued that the inference presupposes that the considerations adduced to support the conclusion outweigh any counter-considerations that might be adduced, and should be inferentially reconstructed as:



AD REASONIST ANALYSIS



Or, equivalently,



Thus, the inferentist chaining of arguments is transformed into a weighting of *pro tanto* opposed reasons. The conclusion of adduced considerations is that in the UK London's

Chinatown and Little India are part of the nation's identity. From a reasonist perspective, the contribution of each consideration is assessed separately, and segment the discourse into two arguments that are weighed against each other. By contrast, interpreting the discourse from an inferentist perspective yields either that although there are indeed two arguments, they are instead connected by a chain of inference with a single direction, from top to bottom (the first inferentist analysis), or that there is only one argument, which entails that all premises are linked into one single reason (the second inferentist analysis). The reason for this dissimilarity between an inferentist and reasonist analysis, is that for inferentism, there is only one interargumentative relation: ‘chaining’ or ‘concatenation,’ while a reasonist framework with its holistic approach has a variety of inter-argumentative relations which makes the notions of weighing and comparing opposing reasons essential.

### 5. ARGUMENTUM A FORTIORI

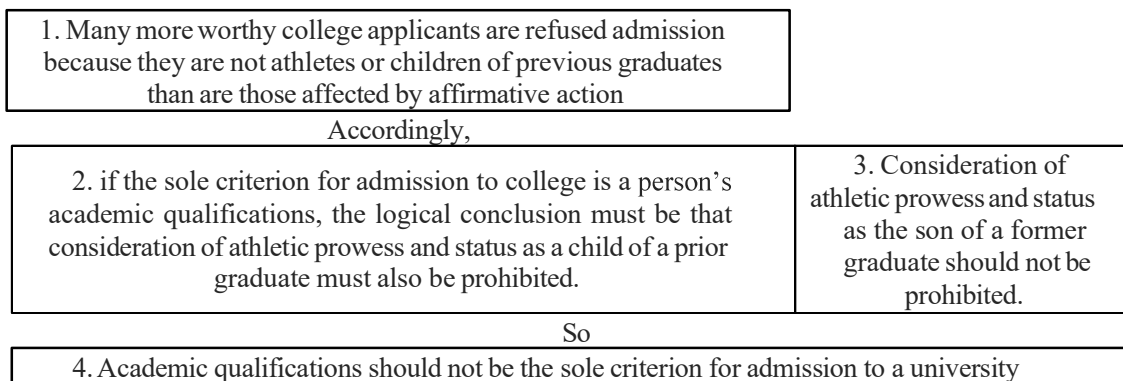
“If admissions must be on only academics, we must reconsider athletics too.

The Oct. 26 front-page article “One man’s battle to ban race in admissions” reported on Edward Blum’s carefully engineered legal cases attempting to have the Supreme Court prohibit consideration of race in college admissions. The article states that Mr. Blum’s major concern is that many worthy applicants are refused admission because they are not Black.

While perhaps trite, Mr. Blum should be careful of what he is asking for because he might get it. Many more worthy college applicants are refused admission because they are not athletes or children of previous graduates than are those affected by affirmative action. Accordingly, if the sole criterion for admission to college is a person’s academic qualifications, the logical conclusion must be that consideration of athletic prowess and status as a child of a prior graduate must also be prohibited.”

Bruce N. Shulman, *Silver Spring*. The Washington Post October 28, 2022 at 3:46 p.m.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/28/race-college-admissions/?commentID=f4298bb6-044a-4447-91a5-5ed7822b28a0>

#### AN INFERENTIST ARGUMENT RECONSTRUCTION



#### AD REASONIST RECONSTRUCTION

Shulman is criticizing an argument by Blum:

- |  |
|--|
| 1. The consideration of race in college admissions results in many worthy applicants being rejected because they are not black |
| 2. Consideration of race in college <sup>so</sup> admissions should be prohibited  |

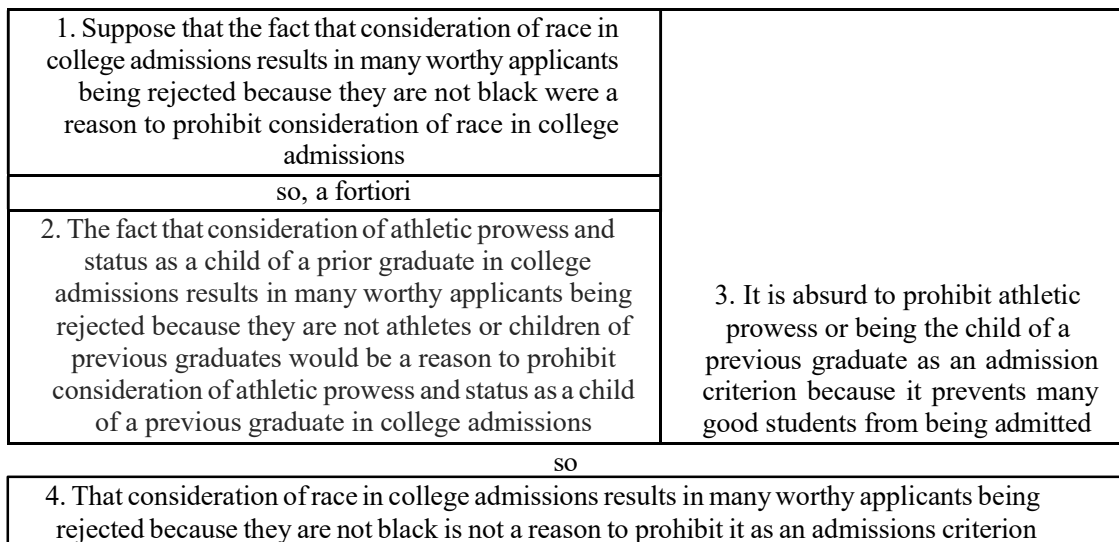
Shulman compares Blum's argument with this one, which he considers similar:

- |   |
|---|
| 1. Many worthy college applicants are refused admission because they are not athletes or children of previous graduates |
| so  |
| 2. Consideration of athletic prowess and status as a child of a prior graduate must also be prohibited                  |

In addition, Shulman enunciates the warrant (or better, the backing of the warrant) of Blum's argument (common to both arguments): the sole criterion for college admission is a person's academic qualifications. And Shulman also mentions an intensifier that applies to the second argument: *many more* worthy college applicants are refused admission.

Shulman claims that accepting the first argument forces one to accept, *a fortiori*, the second, which he, for the sake of argument, assumes to be invalid (where invalid means that the argument fails to be a reason in favor of the conclusion). Thus, Shulman uses many suppositional arguments. Alec Fisher defines suppositional arguments as “arguments [that] reach their conclusion *not* by asserting their starting points, but by *assuming* or *supposing* something ‘for the sake of argument’ as it is often described” (2004, p. 115), and further on he explains that a suppositional argument can be represented as an argument — Suppose P were the case; so C would be the case —, or as a conditional — If P were the case, then C would be the case (*Op.cit.*, p.120).

Representing suppositional arguments as counterfactual conditionals, the following diagram results:



Here the conclusion depends on two premises: one is a statement (‘It is absurd to prohibit athletic prowess or being the child of a previous graduate...’) and the other is a

suppositional argument ('Suppose that the fact that consideration of race in college admissions..., so, *a fortiori*, the fact that consideration of athletic prowess and status as a child of a prior graduate in college admissions....'). The point is that the truth of this statement and the validity of that suppositional argument entitle one to draw the conclusion that 'the fact that consideration of race in college admissions results in many deserving applicants being rejected because they are not black is not a reason to prohibit it as an admissions criterion'.

## 6. SUMMARY

In order to highlight the differences between the inferentist and reasonist approaches to argumentation, we have analyzed several passages from one and the other mode. We used concrete examples that have been analyzed by other authors with an inferentist approach and performed a reasonist analysis as a comparison. For a reasonist approach we chose the AD framework since that framework is the only framework (as far as we know) which has an explicit reasonist approach. Our comparative analysis of inferentism and reasonism shows that that inferentism conceptualizes argumentations as chains of inferences, with a single direction, from top to bottom, with solely one inter-argumentative relation: chaining or concatenation. The reasonist approach differs sharply from this in that it recognizes a variety of inter-argumentative relations, where the concept of weighing and comparing opposing reasons is essential. For the inferentist, a 'conclusion' is always the conclusion of an argument, whereas for the reasonist a 'conclusion' is the result of an overall assessment of the joint consideration of arguments and counterarguments. It should be clear from our comparison that the evaluation of an argumentation will be very different depending on whether the argumentation is analyzed with an inferentist or a reasonist approach. Consequently, theorists should be aware of these different approaches when analyzing and evaluating argumentation.

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