NAESS'S DICHOTOMY OF TENABILITY AND RELEVANCE

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In his Communication and Argument Arne Naess discusses how to

evaluate reasons advanced to support (and objections advanced to

detract from) a given point of view.[1] According to Naess there

are two distinct issues to be settled with respect to each

separate reason: the issue of its tenability and the issue of its

relevance. The distinction itself is, I think, both tenable and

relevant. However its application is not as straightforward as

one might at first suppose. I shall in turn discuss some

difficulties and possibilities of applying the distinction in

contexts of:

1. evaluation

2. the production and recognition of higher order reasons
   and objections

3. formal discussion

These contexts are all closely related. So it will be convenient

to use the same terms — tenability and relevance — in each

connection. Henceforth, I shall refer to the distinction between

the two issues as Naess's Dichotomy.

1. Evaluation

Naess's own presentation of the dichotomy occurs in a context

of evaluating the strength of reasons (arguments)[2] listed in a

so-called pro-aut-contra survey, i.e., a survey "... comprising

the most important arguments which, according to the surveyer, or

to some person or group, have been or may very likely be adduced

for or against an assertion." (1966: 102). The assertion to which

1

the adduced reasons pertain is to be formulated in a so-called "issue-expression", symbolized as Fo. In order to determine "... our own position in respect of some Fo, we must judge each argument, pro and contra separately and then weigh them against one another." (1966: 108) At this point Naess introduces the dichotomy:

> We must pay attention to two things when weighing up an argument. First, we must ask ourselves how sure we can be that the argument is a tenable assertion regarded in itself. Secondly we must ask ourselves how strongly the argument will speak for or against Fo. Or, to put it another way, how great is its proof-potential, or, simply, how relevant is it? (1966: 108, 109).

This is a really smooth procedure. Given any issue-expression, or initial thesis (as I shall say), T, and any reason R stated in support of T, to assess R at its true worth one should ask oneself just these two questions:

    (1) How tenable is R in itself? (Tenability Question: TQ)

    (2) How strongly does R speak for T? (Relevance Question: RQ)

Similarly, given any objection O to T, to assess O one should ask:

TQ: (1)[+] How tenable is O in itself?

RQ: (2)[+] How strongly does O speak against T?

For the moment, I shall concentrate upon the assessment of reasons in support of T, but analogous remarks hold for the assessment of objections.

2

A first problem occurs when one realizes that the second
question includes the first. The tenability of R itself
constitutes part of its proof-potential. Some tenability is a
necessary condition for R to be relevant at all. I take it that
this kind of relevance simply is not meant by Naess or his
followers. The Relevance Question must be meant to read:

RQ: (2)"Aside from its tenability, how strongly does R speak for

         T?

From now on I shall take the words "relevance", "relevant", etc.,
to refer to all aspects of R´s proof-potential for T with the
exception of R´s tenability. Thus we may revert to the earlier
and simpler formulation (2) of RQ, as a shorthand for (2)".

   Second, the present formulation of TQ and RQ seems to imply
that there are some absolute criteria of tenability and
relevance. But whether or not such criteria exist is irrelevant,
and the questions can easily be freed of this absolutistic
strain:

TQ: (1)* To what degree do I accept R?

RQ: (2)* Granted that R, how ready am I to accept T?

Again, the force of a reason can be evaluated with respect to
other persons or groups of persons than the evaluator himself:

TQ: (1)^P To what degree is R acceptable for party P?

RQ: (2)^P If P granted R (for the sake of argument), how readily
         would it accept T?

Clearly, the answers to the questions will differ for different
P. For the sake of simplicity, I shall suppress the "parameter P"
and revert to the first formulation of the questions, it being

3

understood that they are not to be taken in any absolutistic sense.

Third, what is essentially the same argument can be formulated in different ways, so as to leave a different part of the argument unexpressed each time. Compare:

(3)   John will agree, for if Mary does he will too and Mary is bound to agree. (J, for M→J and M)

$(3)^+$ John will agree, for if Mary does he will too (J, for M→J)

$(3)^{++}$ John will agree, for Mary is bound to agree (J, for M)

$(3)^+$ and $(3)^{++}$ are both formulations of an argument that is more fully expressed in (3). The content of the Tenability Question and the Relevance Question is clearly contingent upon the way the argument is formulated. The TQ for $(3)^+$ is the question whether it is tenable that if Mary agrees John will too, but this is the RQ for $(3)^{++}$. Similarly, the TQ for $(3)^{++}$, viz., whether it is tenable that Mary is bound to agree, is closely related to the RQ for $(3)^+$. The RQ for $(3)^+$ is the question whether, granted that if Mary will agree John will too, it would be acceptable that John agrees, (whether (M→J)→J is tenable), and the answer is of course positive as soon as we know that Mary is bound to agree.

Naess's dichotomy can be, and is to be, applied to an argument before, by some process of interpretation, the unexpressed premises are made explicit. For instance, in an argument like (3) the RQ is of little interest: it is the question whether ((M→J)∧M)→J is tenable and this is answered positively by formal logic. However the point is not that the RQ is answered

4

by (any branch of) formal logic but that it is an extremely easy question. Not all formal logical questions are that easy and an argument may be logically valid without being trivial. In such a case the RQ would still constitute an interesting question (though answerable by formal logic). However, if to an argument "$R_1,\ldots,R_n$, therefore T" we add as a premise the so-called "logical minimum" $(R_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge R_n) \rightarrow T$ we are always wind up with a trivial RQ (viz., whether $((R_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge R_n) \wedge ((R_1 \wedge \ldots \wedge R_n) \rightarrow T)) \rightarrow T$ is tenable). The insertion of a stronger premise will not change this situation: all premises supplied by a reasonable interpretation of the given argument are such as to imply in an obvious way the logical minimum.

In the process of evaluating an argument it is not so much one's task to formulate the TQ and RQ as to formulate more specific questions. under these two headings. It is time to study some examples.

Example 1   T: This coffee will taste sweet.

R: Someone put sugar into it.

TQ (specifications): Wo did? Are there any witnesses? Was it really sugar?

RQ (specifications): Is sugar always a sweetener? Are there any circumstances that could prevent the effect from occurring?

Example 2   T: Someone put sugar into that coffee.

R: Mary enjoyed it.

TQ: Did she really? Could she have been pretending?

RQ: Does she like only sweet coffee? Was there no other sweetener around?

You may recognize Example 1 as an argument from cause to effect, and Example 2 as an argument from effect to cause. So a theorician acquainted with these modes of argument (or, argumentation schemata) will be able to profit from the lists of evaluative questions pertaining to them.[3] Compared to such lists, the dichotomy is of course a rather crude instrument. Yet, I think, the potentials of Naess's dichotomy are considerable:

(1) It may serve as a first classification of evaluative questions, a classification that can always be refined, by further theorizing, in the case of particular argumentation forms.

(2) It is an easy procedure. It can be applied without much instruction about argumentation or about the recognition of modes of argument.

(3) It is applicable irrespective of the particular mode of argument at issue.

(4) It is applicable also to arguments that are not (easily) subsumed under any of the more common modes.

(5) It is applicable without having to find the unexpressed premises first.

To illustrate these points, consider the task of evaluating the reasons R_1 through R_3 in the following argument.[4]

6

Example 3   T: Marzolla's claim that Etruscan is, or is akin to, Sanskrit is nonsensical.

R_1: It is highly improbable that any people in antiquity could have migrated from India to Italy.

R_2: The number of words Marzolla claims to have translated (340 or more) is suspect.

R_3: If it were true, the fact would have been discovered long before.

Quite some effort is needed to state the hidden premises and to subsume these arguments under current modes or schemata. It is much easier to evaluate each of the three reasons on account of its tenability and relevance, e.g.:

TQ_1: How about other migrations in antiquity?

RQ_1: Is there no other way to explain the similarity in language?

TQ_2: Are there comparable achievements with respect to other ancient languages?

RQ_2: Even if Marzolla's achievement is "suspect", could there not be other, less suspect, evidence for his claim?

TQ_3: What number of sanskritists studied Etruscan texts?

RQ_3: Could it not have been discovered long ago, but forgotten afterwards?

The RQ and the TQ are not always of equal interest. We already met with a futile RQ in the case of a fully explicit argument: "M, M→J. Therefore J". Also RQ_3 above seems rather futile. In

7

other cases it is the tenability question that suffers from futility. More often, interesting issues crop up under both headings.

Quite another problem is set by arguments in which no premise is stated explicitly. This is especially likely to occur in a survey of pros and cons as proposed by Naess:

Example 4:   T: This coffee will taste sweet.

               R: Sugar.

Before the dichotomy can be applied, we must interpret R either as: "someone put sugar into it", or as "sugar makes coffee sweet", or in some other way. (This is not to say that any such interpretation was "what the spreaker had in mind".) Consider another example.

Example 5:   T: The government should cut down its spending.

               R: (In view of) the present level of investments.

Possible interpretations of R may be

               R_1:The present level of investments is deplorably low.
               R_2: The present level of investments is bound to rise if the government would only cut down its spending.

Even if the context allows us to decide that the given argument is to be interpreted as "R_1, R_2 therefore T", there is no way to tell whether R stand for R_1 or for R_2 or perhaps yet for something else. So there is no way to tell whether R_1 or R_2 is

more explicit and therefore the dichotomy remains indefinite in this case. That is not to say that it is inapplicable, but that the way it is to be applied depends on some more or less arbitrary decision on the part of the evaluator. This is a drawback. One might think that the trouble arises from the fact that R does not express a proposition, but that is not the case, as the following example may make clear:

Example 6:   T: The government should cut down its spending.

              R: The present level of investments will rise.

Let us suppose that this argument can be interpreted in the same way as the preceding one. Then R itself is presumably <u>not</u> one of the reasons advanced in support of T. (If investments will rise anyhow, why should the government bother?) The actual reasons are R_1 and R_2 (we supposed) and once more it is up to the evaluator to decide upon which of these "actual reasons" the status of "explicitly stated premise" is to be conferred. [5]

    To sum up: if an argument is presented in shorthand, or indirectly, we must, in order to apply the dichotomy, first interpret the argument to the extent that we can confer the status of "explicitly stated premise" on one or more premises, presumably the one or the ones most clearly alluded to. In some cases no premise is more clearly alluded to than any other (though the argument itself be stated clearly enough!); then the dichotomy can be applied only after a more or less arbitrary decision on the part of the evaluator.

    Naess gives separate sets of rules for handling (1) arguments with a descriptive thesis and (2) those with a normative thesis

(issue-expression). If T expresses a proposed course of action or a normative thesis and if R states an alleged consequence of this action or of the realization of the norm, Naess tells us that in order to judge the tenability of R we should ask ourselves: how probable is it that R will obtain, when T is realized. To judge the relevance we should ask: how desirable, good, advantageous would it be to have it that R. (1975: 145, 146; 1978: 111) This latter question is not the RQ itself, though closely related to it. Fortunately, the general RQ is formulated in the English translation (for the case of action proposals): "If I acknowledge that such-and-such will be the most probable consequences of my action, shall I then choose the action?" (1966: 110) The question Naess put into the 11th edition and which appears in Naess (1975, 1978) is doubtless an important specification of the RQ. Yet, there are other specifications, for instance: what other consequences does T have? are there any better means to obtain the desired result? These other questions are sure to turn up in any serious evaluation of an argument of this (so-called pragmatic) type (cf Example 5). Those acquainted with the theory of modes of argumentation and evaluative questions will know them by heart.[6] My point, however, is that Naess's dichotomy is a useful tool in itself, especially for those not acquainted with more elaborate considerations. Consequently, it is of paramount importance that the mind of the evaluator is not fixed on one of the specifications beforehand, and thus made to overlook other aspects (of RQ). In this respect the older English edition is to be preferred to the 11th edition. (I must admit to having been confused by the 11th edition for quite a long time.)

10

To end this section I note that in the whole process of evaluating a given piece of argumentation, the dichotomy is applicable on the level of single argumentative steps only. There are other, more global, aspects of evaluation that are outside the scope of this paper (such as the consistency of various strains in a multiple argument).

2. Second order reasons and objections

2.1. Production

For each reason R adduced in support of T, the (specifications of the) TQ may be used to think of some second order reasons (objections) to support (rebut) R and hence, indirectly, T. Similarly, the RQ leads to second order reasons and objections pertaining to R T. Thus there are, according to Naess's dichotomy, two classes of second order reasons backing up a given first order reason R: those that are concerned with the tenability of R, and those that are concerned with its relevance. Naess (1975, 1978) uses labels like "tenability-argument" and "relevance argument". In the following example I shall write RX for a reason adduced in support of X and OX for an objection to X.

Example 1: (continued)

R_1R: Mary put sugar into the coffee.

R_2R: Mary saw someone putting sugar into the coffee.

OR: The bowl of sugar was replaced by a bowl of salt.

$O(R \rightarrow T)$: There is gasoline in the coffee.

11

Example 2: (continued)

> RR: Mary appeared to enjoy it, and she would
> never make us believe she did, if she didn't.
>
> R(R→T): Mary abhors unsweetened coffee.
>
> O(R→T): There is a box of saccharine on the table.

The task of evaluating a given argument and the task of producing higher order reasons and objections that pertain to it are two sides of the same coin: the higher order reasons and objections are possible answers to critical or evaluative questions. Again, a refined classification of evaluative questions leads to a more refined system. However, for the same reasons as those advanced in section 1, the dichotomy remains a useful tool in the production of second order reasons and objections.

2.2 Recognition

Can we use Naess's dichotomy to classify given second order objections and reasons, i.e., split them up in those pertaining to the tenability and those pertaining to the relevance of some first order reason (or objection)? When it is "given" that the objections and reasons are second order ones, we can usually apply the dichotomy, but when this is not given, we have to find out. This is not very troublesome in the case of (second order) objections: they are readily recognized as such. It is however often impossible in the case of reasons, and here the dichotomy is of little help. To be more precise, each statement that is potentially a second order reason of relevance, i.e., a reason backing up the relevance of some first order reason (or objection) can equally be considered to function as a first order
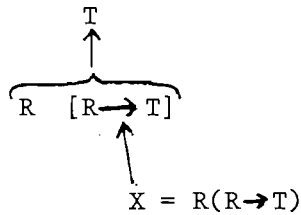
12

reason (objection) itself.

Example 7:   This coffee will taste sweet (T), for someone put

sugar into it (R) and there is no gasoline in the

coffee (X).

First analysis
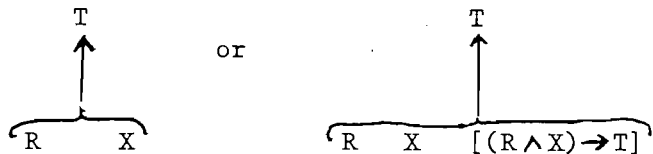
X is a second order
reason (of relevance)

$$T$$
$$\uparrow \leftarrow$$
$$R \quad\quad \rvert$$
$$X = R(R \rightarrow T)$$
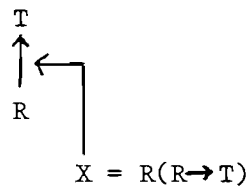
or, introducing an innocuous unexpressed premise
(here put inside brackets):

$$T$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\overbrace{R \quad [R \rightarrow T]}$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$X = R(R \rightarrow T)$$

Second analysis

X is a first order
reason

$$T$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\overbrace{R \quad\quad X} \quad\quad or \quad\quad$$

$$T$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\overbrace{R \quad X \quad [(R \wedge X) \rightarrow T]}$$

We conclude that there are many ways to analyse even a simple

argument as in Example 7. The choice among them may be governed

by reasons of simplicity, convenience, etc. It is up to the

evaluator to decide which (if any) unexpressed premises to put in

,and whether to confer the status of second order reason of

relevance upon any statement.

3. Formal discussion

A formal discussion is a debate, between two parties, according to the rules of some system of formal dialectics. [7] One party, the Proponent (P), has a thesis to defend, the other party, the Opponent(O), has a critical role: it opposes P´s thesis and has presumably made some concessions, but it has no thesis to defend. It is not O´s task to defend the concessions it made - at least not in the same strong sense as when we say that P has an obligation to defend its thesis - yet O is answerable for its concessions: P may ask questions on account of them and thus force O into more concessions. All these moves are to be thought of as executed according to rigorous (formal) rules of some dialectic system. After having extracted a sufficient number of concessions from O, P will, in most cases, proceed to defend its thesis (T) by means of some other statement: a protective defense-statement (pT). The discussion then continues with pT as its thesis. A complete discussion consists of many such "local" discussions each with its own local thesis. Clearly pT is to be regarded as a first order supporting reason for T. Can we now apply Naess´s dichotomy in formal dialectics to the effect that we may distinguish two possible reactions for O? That is, are there two types of critical reaction, one pertaining to pT itself (tenability) and the other to the proof-potential of pT relative to T (relevance)?

The answer is: no. In current systems of formal dialectics O can only attack pT itself (that move is even forced upon O). So O

can question the tenability of the defense but there is no admissible move in the dialogue so that O can express doubt as to the question of its relevance. This should not be taken as a flaw of these systems: the relevance is taken care of by the rules of the system, i.e., if P's move were not relevant it would not be a move at all according to the system. The rules that prescribe the form of pT, given T, are of a syntactic character. For instance if $T = T_1 \lor T_2$ then pT must be either T_1, or T_2. In that way irrelevant moves are excluded, whereas untenable moves are not.

In formal discussions nothing syntactically new can ever appear, each statement made in the discussion being of a form that can be predicted from the statements in the initial conflict (subformula property). Let us amend this feature − and thus make dialectic systems more "realistic" − that is, let us change the rules and allow the Proponent to come up with any statement R in support of T. (Some other rules must be amended to prevent P from abusing this right and protracting the discussion.) In these amended systems Naess's dichotomy applies, or the rules should be such as to make it apply: O should be given the opportunity to chose between two possible courses of action (not necessarily exclusive): either to criticize R in its own right (tenability criticism) or to criticize R as a reason for T (relevance criticism). Whoever thinks that this is a reasonable condition to put on dialectic systems, agrees to the following norm:

FD   N1   Whenever the Proponent protectively defends its thesis T by means of a statement R (not equal to pT), the Opponent should be allowed the options of attacking R (tenability criticism) and of criticizing the relevance

of R to T.

To implement the last option, I propose the following rule:

FD   N2   Whenever the Opponent criticizes the relevance of R to

T, it concedes R; P should then proceed with the

defense of T. (Unless R occurs in the context of an

"attack" on a concession, in which case other rules

apply.)   ·

According to this rule, if O questions the relevance of R to T,

it brings about a dialogue situation equal to the one that would

have obtained if R T had been the thesis. In terms of dialogue

tableaux one may picture the two possibilities thus:

O		P	
aT		T [dT] ⋮ R	
option 1 (tenability) aR	option 2 (relevance) R	[dR]	(P proceeds with the defense of T)

Another way to view these steps is that P asks O whether it is

willing to concede R. If O is willing to do so the discussion

centers upon the <u>relevance</u> of R to the thesis T. If O is not

willing to do so, O must attack R and P is to defend it.

With suitable adaptations of the other rules of formal

dialectics, systems incorporating FD N1 and FD N2 are perfectly

viable. Elsewhere I noted that from the point of strategy the new

rights make <u>no difference for</u> P: if P had a winning strategy in

16

the new system it has one in the corresponding old system too.[8]

A final remark: there is one type of move by P where O can already exert both types of criticism in the old system. I mean the statement U by P in the context of a formal attack on a concession U V. U is, again, to be considered as a reason in support of T. O can react in two ways either by attacking U (<u>tenability criticism</u>) or by conceding V (<u>relevance criticism</u>).

Notes

1. Ch. V of Naess (1966), a translation of some edition of the Norwegian textbook <u>En del elementaere logiske emner</u>. I have also made use of the German (1975) and Dutch (1978) translation of the 11th Norwegian edition, 1975/76.

2. In Naess (1966) the word "argument" is used to cover both reasons and objections. I shall, however, not adopt this use of the term. Rather, I shall use this term for a piece of reasoning that contains at least one thesis and at least one reason or objection pertaining to it.

3. For these and many other modes of argument cf. Schellens (1985), where evaluative questioning is treated in detail.

4. The argument is extracted from an article, in a Dutch newspaper, by R.S.P. Beekes, professor of Indo-european languages (1986).

5. The same situation occurs in Naess's example 2 (1966: 111).

6. Cf. Schellens (1985).

7. For a short introduction to formal dialectics, see Krabbe (1985a), section 21. For a thorough account see Barth and Krabbe (1982).

17

8.   Krabbe (1985b).

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