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Examples, Illustrations, Inductions, Anecdotes, Analogies, Precedents, Narratives, and Personal Testimonies: Are They Essentially Different?

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ABSTRACT: This essay addresses the question of whether these argument schemes—example, illustration, induction, anecdote, analogy, precedent, narrative, and personal testimony—are distinct from one another. Each of them is essentially based on a single case (although the cases can be multiplied, perhaps converging into an informal induction). “Example” is the prototypical scheme. The critical questions for “example” apply to the other argument schemes as well.

KEYWORDS: analogy, anecdote, example, illustration, induction, narrative, personal testimony, precedent.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public health and information campaigns often make use of personal testimonies (sometimes authentic and sometimes conveyed by actors). These might offer an example of the benefits of better health practices and so are designed to guide the public to healthier and more accurate understandings of drinking, cigarette smoking, safe sex practices, and other such issues. The basis for thinking that the messages contain information that is in fact healthier and more accurate than uninformed opinion is scientific, but often the science is missing from the public campaigns. Material from the technical sphere is suppressed and easier information is supplied to people to use in making decisions in the personal sphere. Instead of scientific reports or summaries, recipients are sometimes given something that we variously term an example, a story, or a self-disclosure.

Here I take up the question of whether a number of argument schemes—example, illustration, induction, anecdote, analogy, precedent, narrative, and personal testimony—are genuinely distinct from one another. In one sense there is no suspense about whether these schemes can all be reduced to a common form. We can take any group of argument types and notice, say, that they all have a conclusion and one or more premises, and announce a successful reduction. The question is whether the reduction is a useful one—whether it advances our thinking, our research, or our teaching. I will give reasons to suppose that the reduction I offer is clarifying and useful.

A considerable amount of progress on my project has already been made by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, pp. 94–102). Their proposed classification of argument schemes already combines example and analogy, and I take their work as a key contribution. My plan is to examine these various kinds of argument to see in what ways they are similar and different.

2. DISTINGUISHABLE ARGUMENT SCHEMES

In this section I identify and analyze a number of different argument schemes. I consider these all to be distinguishable. This does not mean that the distinctions are necessarily important. It only means that the argument schemes have different labels, and that analysts can tell when to apply one label and not another. I restrict myself to those argument schemes that are of immediate interest. I have chosen these particular argument schemes precisely because I believe that I can make a case for their essential similarity.

2.1 Example

The first scheme to consider is example, and I will eventually suggest that all the others be reduced to this one. We can begin the analysis with the Walton, Reed, and Macagno (2008, p. 314) skeleton of the scheme. They specify a single premise and a conclusion:

Premise: In this particular case, the individual \( a \) has property \( F \) and also property \( G \).
Conclusion: Therefore, generally if \( x \) has property \( F \), then it also has property \( G \).

This scheme permits us to reason directly from the instance \( a \) to the instance or category \( x \). The conclusion’s phrasing, “generally if \( x \),” is usefully ambiguous since it might be construed to be a general statement to the effect that anything having \( F \) will have \( G \), or it might be restricted to the particular instance \( x \).

I want to work with the same concrete material for as long as I can, so let me introduce it here:

Munich and Taliban. In hopes of preventing a wider war, in September 1938 British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain negotiated an agreement with Germany’s Adolph Hitler. Called the Munich Agreement, this treaty confirmed the legitimacy of Germany’s annexation of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland. In return, Hitler agreed that he would not engage in any further territorial aggression. The outcome of the agreement, however, was not only that Germany kept the Sudetenland; Germany also continued its policies of expansion. This is just what will happen if the United States tries to appease the Taliban.

We can fit this into the Walton et al. (2008) scheme in this way:

In this particular case, the Munich agreement had certain properties (diplomacy, an aggressive diplomatic partner, a paper promise, appeasement) and also had the property of failure; Therefore, since any agreement with the Taliban would have those same properties it will also have the property of failure.

Here, an example has been used to draw a specific conclusion, one about the particular case of the Taliban rather than about all cases that resemble Munich. The question of whether an argument from example results in a general or specific conclusion has been awkward from the first (cf. Benoit, 1980). Aristotle described examples as rhetorical inductions, suggesting the appropriateness of a general conclusion (1356b). However, he also explained, “When two statements are of the same order, but one is more familiar than the other, the former is an example” (1357b). The second remark legitimizes a specific conclusion. I am willing to entertain either sort of conclusion.
2.2 Illustration

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, pp. 350–362) insisted on clear distinctions between example and illustration. They saw argument from example as being intended to establish a generalization, rather as an induction would (p. 350). They begin their discussion by treating a legal precedent as an example and showing how the decision in an earlier case (the example) supplies a rule for the present case and all similar ones.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would describe the Munich material as argument “from the particular to the particular” (1969, p. 352). They insist that the passage from one particular to another is mediated by an implicit rule: “It is by their relation to a given rule that phenomena become interchangeable” (p. 353). That rule would seem to be a general conclusion drawn from the example in the premise. So the Belgians might prefer this reconstruction of the Munich material (I have italicized the implicit rule):

In this particular case, the Munich agreement had certain properties (diplomacy, an aggressive diplomatic partner, a paper promise, appeasement) and also had the property of failure;
Any instance having those certain properties will also have the property of failure;
Therefore, since any agreement with the Taliban would have those same properties it will also have the property of failure.

This summary of the Belgians’ understanding of the relationship between example and rule allows us to appreciate their distinction between example and illustration:

Whereas an example is designed to establish a rule, the role of illustration is to strengthen adherence to a known and accepted rule, by providing particular instances which clarify the general statement, show the import of this statement by calling attention to its various possible applications, and increase its presence to the consciousness. (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 357)

Walton et al. (2008, p. 315) accept this distinction and offer a schematic representation of argument from illustration:

Premise 1: Usually, if x has property F (belongs to class F), x has property G.
Premise 2: In this case, k has property F and property G.
Conclusion: The rule is valid.

Premise 1 expresses the rule (expressed in terms of x, which here seems to like the X in algebra so that it means any instance rather than a particular one), premise 2 supplies the illustration (the specific instance k), and the conclusion re-asserts the rule.

I have some hesitation about all this. For one thing, I am not sure that illustrating is a kind of proving, and so I am reluctant to allow that the last thing in the scheme should actually be called “concluding.” On my reading of the New Rhetoric, illustration seems to be essentially a rhetorical device that amplifies the rule. An illustration can make a rule more attractive, more memorable, more comprehensible, or more present, but I do not see how these rhetorical functions amount to proving (as contrasted to persuading).

Let us examine the two schematic skeletons a little more closely. Setting aside the differences in how the argument elements are labeled, some clear similarities appear. The single premise in example is the same as the second premise in illustration: both identify the specific instance as having two properties. The conclusion to example is essentially the same as
the first premise in *illustration*: both express the generalization that any other case that has the first set of properties will also have the second set. So there are two differences in the schemes: the materials are in a different order, and *illustration* contains the conclusion that the rule is valid. We have seen that some believe that ‘the rule is valid’ is actually an implicit premise in arguing from one instance to another. If so, this means that the only difference between the two schemes is order. In argument from example, if we include the implicit premise we have:

The first case has certain properties F and also another property G;
Any case that has properties F will have property G;
So a second case, having properties F, will have property G.

In argument from illustration, we have:

Any case that has properties F will have property G;
The first (only) case has properties F and G;
So, any case that has properties F will have property G.

Several things are apparent. Only the argument from example has the capacity to move from one instance to saying a new thing about a second one (when multiple instances are used as illustrations, they just amplify one another, more or less). Second, the conclusion of the illustration schema is simply a restatement of the first premise. Third, the first two premises of the example schema are the last two of the illustration schema. If the second premise of the example schema is understood as being distinct from the first premise—that is, the general statement is externally established by some other proof—then the two sequences (example P1-P2 and *illustration* P2-C) are substantively different. This is possible. However, if we join Aristotle and Perelman in supposing that an example can used to prove (however weakly) a generalization, then the two sequences are identical.

So the only reliable differences are these. First, argument from example can move from one specific case to another and argument from illustration does not. But this is only because the example argument has additional content; if we wanted to add another premise about a second specific case to the illustration scheme, we would have the same thing. Second, argument from illustration has a certain rhetorical emphasis built into it, with the triumphant restatement of one of its premises. This is not a probative difference.

The essential distinction between example and illustration, then, has to do with rhetorical efficacy or strategic maneuvering (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999; see van Eemeren, 2010) not with proving. When we look for probative movement, we see the same relations in either sequence. Consequently I regard these as the same sort of argument.

2.3 Induction

Induction is a multiplication of examples. The conclusion of an induction is always a generalization and is never a statement about a particular case. This is by definition. Inductions can of course supply premises that lead to conclusions about particulars, but those will be arguments in which the induction is subordinate to some other argument scheme. To display an induction, the Munich-Taliban material would need to have several other examples of failed appeasements added to it, and the conclusion would have to be restated to refer to a general case rather than to the Taliban.

Structurally, an induction can be understood in two different ways.
First, it can be seen as a conductive (or convergent) argument (Henkemans, 2000; Wellman, 1971). On this understanding, we have a set of reasons for the conclusion. Each reason consists of a particular instance combined with whatever linking premise is required to move probatively from example to conclusion. The reasons have no relationship to one another beyond simple companionship: that is, none implies another, none is a consequence of another, none supplies a premise for another, and so forth. Each reason is independent and points directly to the conclusion. Presumably, each reason is individually insufficient to support the conclusion. That is why there are several instances rather than one. The arguer implicitly proposes that the examples are collectively sufficient to support the conclusion. Because it does not matter in principle what order the premises are in, this argument scheme has a rhetorical flavor of nonlinearity and merely-narrative-discipline to it.

The second way of understanding induction’s structure makes induction into a more linear sequence, one that requires a premise that comments on the other premises. Italicizing the commenting premise, this scheme might be:

The first case has certain properties F and also another property G;
The second case has certain properties F and also another property G;
The third (up to N) case has certain properties F and also another property G;
*These three (N) cases are sufficient to justify a general conclusion;*
Therefore, any case that has properties F will have property G.

This formulation is immediately attractive to those of us who have studied induction in the guise of sampling and social science, because we are taught to think explicitly about issues such as representativeness, sampling frames, sample size, and so forth. As a practical matter, the italicized premise simply locates the fissure point for several of the critical questions used to evaluate an induction. The same critical questions apply equally whether this or the first structural description is used.

I suggest that the example be regarded as the base schema. A good argument can be made for induction being the prototype, however. Considering only the forms discussed so far—example, illustration, and induction—induction is most encompassing. An example can be thought of as a very simple induction, a sort of degenerative case that requires no additional apparatus in comparison to induction (provided that we draw a general conclusion from the example rather than a particular conclusion). In contrast, an induction does require an element not present in arguments from example. This additional element is most clearly expressed by the commenting premise (if one wishes to grant that there is one), or is otherwise apparent in the idea of conduction. A simple argument from example does not involve convergence or joint sufficiency. So it might make sense to identify induction as the overarching idea. I prefer to say that example is the key idea, because I think it is the essential component and the base probative relationship that appears in each of these argument schemes.

2.4 Analogy

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, pp. 371–398) distinguish analogy from example. They consider the prototypical form of analogy to be “A is to B as C is to D.” The key distinction between example and analogy is that argument from example asserts that two things (the instances or category) directly resemble each other, but in analogy it is the two *relationships* (among four things) that resemble each other (pp. 372–373). This is clear enough, and the
difference seems unbridgeable. But perhaps the clarity is deceptive. Consider: negotiating with the Taliban is analogous to negotiating with the Nazis. Or more elaborately: Taliban negotiations are to oppression as the Munich negotiations were to territorial conquest. Wasn’t this an example?

Perhaps we had better look closely at the schematic summary of analogy from Walton et al. (2008, p. 315):

- **Similarity Premise:** Generally, case $C_1$ is similar to case $C_2$.
- **Base Premise:** A is true (false) in case $C_1$.
- **Conclusion:** A is true (false) in case $C_2$.

This does not immediately join up with the schema in the *New Rhetoric* (i.e., A is to B as C is to D), so we need to expend a moment on explication.

Consider a simple argument: A writer’s pencil is like a carpenter’s hammer. Or more elaborately: A pencil is to a writer as a hammer is to a carpenter. As written, the analogy proposes that carpenters and hammers are better known than writers and pencils, so that the hearer is drawing a conclusion about pencils and writers (case $C_2$) from information about hammers and carpenters (case $C_1$). What is the A in the Walton et al. (2008) schema? It is the relationship in each case: the relationship between writers and pencils is the same as the relationship between carpenters and hammers. So A might be expressed as “the defining tool” or something similar, leaving us with “a pencil is A, the defining tool, for a writer, just as a hammer is A, the defining tool, for a carpenter.” In other words, we have one example of a defining tool (hammer) that we propose as resembling another instance (pencil), which is also thereby offered as a defining tool.

So in examining the Walton et al. (2008) skeleton, we can now perceive that the A for $C_1$ is an example that resembles the A for $C_2$. We are now in a position to see how this can be covered by the Walton et al. description of example:

- **Premise:** In this particular case, case $C_1$ has various properties $F$ and also property $A$.
- **Conclusion:** Therefore, since case $C_2$ also has properties $F$, then it also has property $A$.

This explains how carpenters’ hammers are examples that resemble writers’ pencils; how hammers and pencils are analogous; how Munich’s outcomes are examples of expected outcomes for Taliban negotiations; and how Munich and Taliban negotiations are analogous.

In both the tool and negotiation materials, I have chosen argument parts that are elements of roughly the same conceptual domain. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) make a point of noticing that often the theme and phoros of an analogy come from different domains, as for instance when some description of light is made analogous to spiritual illumination. I think my analysis still works in such cases, but the argument itself (i.e., the analogy) is likely not to be as tight. Perhaps it is this domain-crossing capability that results in analogy being “viewed with distrust when used as a means of proof” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 372). Not all examples are good ones.

### 2.5 Precedents, Anecdotes, Narratives, and Personal Testimonies

My title promises consideration of four other distinguishable sorts of argument. Precedent has already been mentioned. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) see a precedent as a judgment in an earlier legal case that is used as a forcible example in deciding a current case. The court’s
reasoning in the old case is held to be an example of how the current court should reason about the instant case.

An anecdote is a narrative, sometimes humorous and usually brief. A two sentence story might be called an anecdote and ten pages a narrative. Varying lengths of arguments do not immediately justify different analytical schemata. Stories told probatively make a point and they do so by encasing the point in plot and/or character so that the conclusion emerges. The Munich story yields the point that appeasement fails. A story, short or long, is therefore an example.

Sometimes arguers tell stories about themselves. We call these self-disclosures or personal testimonies. The Munich materials might be more striking if I had summarized them as Neville Chamberlain’s own reflections on his actions. A first person story might well be more present and involving than a third person story such as the one about Munich, but it is still essentially a story and therefore an example.

This is a convenient place to make a general point: in distinguishing all these sorts of argument our basis may have been rhetorical rather than structural. The same schema can be used for different presentations that can be more or less persuasive. Well-told stories, for instance, will probably make more impression than recital of boringly similar instances; first person narratives might elicit more identification and emotional resonance than dry objective accounts; analogies might seem more creative and intellectually exciting than a simple enumeration of parallel instances; and so forth. It might be important for rhetorical scholars to insist on the distinctions that I am setting aside here. But in labeling argument types, I propose we stick to structure. The base structure for all these things seems to be argument by example.

3. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

My argument to this point can be evaluated directly, based on what I have said. But there is also an indirect way to test it. If I am right, then the critical questions for all these argument variants ought to be comparable, if not essentially the same.

Let us begin with Walton et al.’s (2008, p. 314) critical questions for argument from example. Recall that their scheme for the argument involved one premise about the example and drew an immediate conclusion about a general class of instances, which might be taken to be a statement about a second instance.

CQ1: Is the proposition claimed in the premise in fact true?
CQ2: Does the example cited support the generalization it is supposed to be an instance of?
CQ3: Is the example typical of the kinds of cases the generalization covers?
CQ4: How strong is the generalization?
CQ5: Do special circumstances of the example impair its generalizability?

The first question would seem applicable to any argument with a premise. The study of narrative reminds us, however, that we can give further specification of what we might mean by “true” in this question. Fisher (1987) says that there are two considerations in a narrative’s fidelity. One is whether the material is internally consistent: that is, whether characters act the same way in different parts of the story, whether acts have the same consequences throughout, etc. The other matter is external: whether people in the story act the way people in the world act, whether consequences play out in the story the way they do in the wider world, etc. These specifications are only pertinent in a well-developed example (they could be asked about the
Munich and Taliban negotiations, but probably not about the pencil-owning writer). Where relevant, however, they develop the idea of truth beyond simple factual verification.

Question 2 is specific about the relation between an instance and its generalization: is the example relevant and sufficient? Whether we consider that the example schema has an “implicit premise” or not, it is the implicit premise that is at issue here. It is the bridge to a particular conclusion about another instance, or it is essentially the same as the conclusion in the Walton et al. (2008) schema. The same movement from instance to generalization appears in argument from illustration, as we saw. For induction, the movement to generalization is complicated by the fact of conductive argumentation, but we need only to make “example” plural in the critical question to accommodate this fact. Since I was able to offer a schema for analogy that matched the Walton et al. skeleton for example, we can see that the same sort of “implicit premise” is operative there. In analogy the issue is whether the case’s features justify adding $A$ to what we believe about the case, and this is the parallel generalization. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) skepticism about the power of analogies is probably aimed at this critical question, since analogies will often only be suggestive of the generalization about $A$ rather than giving the sounder grounds we expect in argument from example or induction. Since the other argument types—narratives, personal testimonies, and the like—only seem to be renaming of “example” the critical question is equally pertinent to them.

Question 3 concerns the example’s typicality and its capacity to generalize. Walton et al. (2008) take for granted that this and the other questions apply straightforwardly to illustration, and that seems to be so. The matters in question 3 are worked out with precision in scientific treatments of induction, where we learn details about random sampling, likely error tolerances and sample size, and similar ideas. When the examples are numerous (or should be) these matters can be used to detail the third question. For analogy, this question translates into a concern for whether the theme and phoros are properly matched. Walton et al. (2008, p. 315) offer a critical question for analogy (“Are there differences between $C_1$ and $C_2$ that would tend to undermine the force of similarity cited?”) that seems to be asking in part whether $C_2$ is typical of $C_1$ in important respects.

The fourth question asks about the strength of generalization. This has to do with the degree to which the premises support the conclusion. Like the first critical question, this one seems to apply to any argument scheme. Certainly it is reasonable to ask whether an illustration, induction, analogy, or story is over- or under-claiming its point.

The last question inquires about special characteristics of the premise’s example that interfere with its generalizability. In most respects, this repeats the concern of question 3 about typicality. But particularly in the case of examples, it has a special relevance. No two cases of any general category are likely to be identical, especially when the instances are empirical (i.e., historical, observational, etc.). The fact that the examples are different in the first place is a guarantee that some differences can be found. The theme and phoros of an analogy, for instance, are supposed to be different so that a lesson from one pairing can be applied to a second one. Especially when theme and phoros are taken from different intellectual domains, substantial differences between them are going to be immediately apparent. For analogy, this question transforms into a more particular concern that the element $A$ that is moved from $C_2$ to $C_1$ is unique to a feature of $C_2$ that does not appear in $C_1$. This is a very good question.

For analogy, Walton et al. (2008, p. 315) have a critical question that does not appear to be contemplated in the list of questions for example. Perhaps it should be. The question is, “Is there some other case $C_3$ that is also similar to $C_1$, but in which $A$ is false (true)?” The
parallel question for example would be, “Is there another example that has property $F$ but not property $G$?” Whether applied to analogy or example, this is the opportunity to inquire about counter-instances or competing stories. Possibly Walton et al. regard this as the sort of thing that might be offered to support a criticism on the grounds of question 4, but it seems to me that it is a sufficiently important matter that it ought to be elevated to be its own critical question. The current critical questions all have to do with the internal workings of the argument by example, but the importance of an instance external to the constructive argument seems to be an advance that ought to be transported from analogy to example in general (cf. Johnson, 2000, on the dialectical tier).

So I hold that the same set of critical questions, elaborated when circumstances allow (e.g., by inquiring about narrative coherence or sampling frames), serves any of the sorts of arguments I have been examining. This indirect test of my thinking seems not to offer any objection to it.

4. CONCLUSION

As I remarked earlier, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, pp. 96–97) proposed a system of argument schemes that this paper has some consistency with. They say that there are three general kinds of argument: symptomatic arguments (these rely on a relation of concomitance between premise and conclusion; argument from sign is an example), similarity arguments (these rely on a relation of analogy; this category is the present paper’s topic), and instrumental arguments (these rely on a relation of causality; means-end arguments are an example). In developing the similarity scheme, they supply a useful list of ways of specifying the sort of relationship we might find between two instances (p. 99). The first instance might have these relations to a second one: it might be comparable to the second; it might congrue with the second; it might remind one of the second; it might be the same as the second; it might be analogous to the second; it might be related to the second; it might correspond to the second in a crucial way; it might be defined along the same major lines as the second; or it might be just like the second. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst present these as characteristic expressions rather than an exhaustive list. Still, this seems to be a nicely detailed set of ways that instances can be related to one another. Since we are also concerned with the possibility that one or more instances can support a generalization, it is worth noticing that these are also ways of connecting a particular case to a category of cases as well.

Although example, illustration, induction, analogy, precedent, anecdote, narrative, and personal testimony have important differences in their rhetorical character, they all seem to have the same essential structure. They move from one instance (or a set of them) to a conclusion about either another instance or a category of instances. In this, they work as examples. Therefore I believe that they should all be seen as instances of the same argument scheme, answerable to the same critical questions.

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