10.1 Introduction

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argues that punishment is, scientifically speaking, out of date. He points out that it makes no sense to punish a car when it refuses to start and that it is equally irrational to punish criminals, because in their case something is broken as well: they come from poor families, received poor education or have poor genes. In comparing criminals to broken inanimate objects Dawkins uses argumentation that is based on an analogy. In most approaches to argument schemes this type of argumentation is considered to be a special type of reasoning by analogy or comparison argumentation, often called figurative analogy because of the abstract nature of the comparison.

In spite of the many differences that can be observed among the various typologies of argument schemes, there seems to be general agreement about the importance of analogy or comparison argumentation as a separate category of argumentation: all typologies include a category of this type of reasoning. On closer look however, there are terminological and conceptional differences among the approaches. Whately, one of the first modern authors who dealt with categorizing types of argumentation includes comparison argumentation and the argumentation form he calls “comparison of ratios” (1846/1963, pp. 90–91). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (trans. 1969) include analogy, identity relation (quasi logical) and the use of the rule of justice. Hastings (1962) distinguishes between comparison argumentation and figurative analogy. Both Kienpointner (1992) and Schellens (1985) follow Hastings and make a similar distinction. Govier (1987, p. 58) who does not have the ambition of presenting a complete list of argument forms makes a distinction between comparison argumentation (inductive analogy) and the a priori analogy (logical analogy).1
Although all typologies include comparison argumentation, the figurative analogy is not always among the selected argument schemes. In addition, there is no general agreement on the argumentative usefulness of the figurative analogy. Hastings, for instance, claims that it has less argumentative force than the literal analogy. Some even dismiss the figurative analogy as a form that has no probative force and only serves illustrative purposes (e.g. McBurney & Mills, 1964). This is just a tentative sketch of the situation and certainly not an exhaustive account of all the typologies of argument schemes. It indicates however that there is no general agreement on the nature of comparison argumentation, and more specifically on the status of the figurative analogy. The question is: should the figurative analogy be seen as a special variant of comparison argumentation or should it be dismissed as a form of argumentation altogether? In this paper I argue that, seen from a pragma-dialectical perspective, argumentation that involves a figurative analogy certainly has probative force, yet it should not be seen as comparison argumentation, but instead as a special presentational device that is used to put forward other (symptomatic or causal) types of argumentation. I will discuss the two main variants of (literal) comparison argumentation in order to show that the figurative analogy is a radically different category.

10.2 Two Types of Comparison Argumentation

In the pragma-dialectical argumentation theory comparison argumentation is considered a specific argument scheme along with causal argumentation and symptomatic argumentation. The argument schemes are part of a dialectical testing procedure in which the antagonist and protagonist establish whether a premise supports a standpoint in an adequate way. Central to an argument scheme is the argumentative principle that enables a unique way of “transferring” the acceptability from the premise to the standpoint.

Using one of these argumentative principles involves invoking a special testing procedure in which certain critical questions that are systematically related to the argumentative principle are relevant. The fact that each argument scheme comes with a unique testing procedure that is different from the procedures that go with other schemes is the rationale to distinguish between these three principles and thus to distinguish between the three main types of argument schemes. For each of the main types, a number of variants can be distinguished in each of which the argumentative principle is used in a specific way.

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992), in argumentation based on a comparison relation the argumentation is presented “as if there were a resemblance, an agreement, a likeness a parallel, a correspondence or some other kind of similarity between that which is stated in the argument and that which is stated in the standpoint” (p. 97). This type of argumentation can be characterized in the following way:

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\text{Y is true of X}
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\[
\text{because: Y is true of Z,}
\]

\[
\text{and: Z is comparable to X.}
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