Presumptive reasoning, and arguments exemplifying such reasoning, have lately garnered increasing attention in informal logic and the study of argumentation. Two recent publications emphasizing their importance – Blair 1999 and Walton 1996 – have insisted on a crucial role for argument schemes in the evaluation of such reasoning. In this presentation, I want to clarify the role I think argument schemes play in the evaluation of presumptive reasoning – and to do so principally in contradistinction to the accounts that Blair and Walton have given of that role. But let me first explain the notions of presumptive reasoning and of argument scheme.

1. PRESumptive reasoning

For purposes of this paper, I’ll take presumptive reasoning to refer to arguments or inferences that exemplify something like the following pattern:

1) When A is the case, then typically or usually B is the case or: other things being equal B is the case.
2) A is the case here.
3) So presumably B is the case here.

Here are two examples:

(A) “Facts” reported in reputable newspapers are usually true; the Washington Post, a reputable newspaper, reports that George W. did not visit California during March 2000. So presumably, George W did not visit California during March 2000.

(B) Residents of Canada typically speak either French or English. Sally lives in eastern Canada. So presumably Sally speaks either French or English.

Inferences of this sort have several interesting features.

1) They trade on the fact that two different sorts of things are typically or usually related in a certain way, or are so related “other things being equal.”

2) The support that they provide to their conclusions is defeasible. That is to say, there are possible facts—consistent with the facts stated in their premisses or consistent with the evidence they appeal to—that would cancel the presumptive support if they should come to light. Another

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1 ‘Presumptive reasoning’ is the term used in Blair 1999 and Walton 1996 for the kind of reasoning I am talking about. Not every discussion of this kind of reasoning uses that term for it. For example, in my discussion of this topic in Chapter I, I did not use that term (though I did speak there of arguments whose effect was to create a presumption in favor of their conclusion). See also Rescher 1977.
way of stating this is to say that the presumption such inferences create in favor of their conclusions can be refuted or overcome by additional evidence consistent with their premisses. For example, eyewitness testimony from a highly reliable source who saw George W. in California in March would override the support provided in example A. And the fact that Sally is only 11 months old would undermine the support provided in example B.

3) Prominent among the facts or considerations that undermine presumptive support are facts which indicate that the case at hand is untypical or unusual – that other things are not equal. The fact that Sally is less than 12 months old exemplifies this – the typical Canadian isn’t less than 12 months old.

4) Because presumptive reasoning is defeasible, conclusions arrived at by such reasoning invite a search for overriding or undermining evidence.

Presumptive support resembles probabilistic support in that both kinds of support are defeasible. Moreover, we may be tempted to give a statistical interpretation to the use of words like “typical” or “usual” in these contexts. To do that would turn presumptive inferences into a special case of statistical syllogism, which is a species of probabilistic reasoning. Most of those who write about presumptive reasoning insist, however, that such assimilation is a mistake – though they seldom make very clear why it is a mistake.

There is, I think, strong reason to hold that the two are importantly different. In probabilistic reasoning, acceptance (even tentative or provisional acceptance) of a conclusion is based solely on the probability of the conclusion given the evidence or premisses – the higher the degree of probability demanded, the more stringent our probabilistic standards. But it is a commonplace in the epistemological literature that a purely probabilistic criterion of acceptability leads to incoherent results.

As pointed out in Chapter 10 (p. 103 above), presumptive support can be cancelled by additional information in two distinct ways:

1) The additional or new information can override the presumptive support because the new information provides strong evidence that the conclusion of the original inference is false. Thus if three trustworthy friends independently describe seeing and talking with George W in various California cities during March 2000, that’s pretty strong evidence that he was there. Many of us would judge that such evidence would override the evidence to the contrary afforded by the Post report.

2) The additional or new information can undermine the presumptive support without providing a reason for believing that the conclusion of the original inference is false. Thus if we learn that Sally is only 14 months old, we can neither be confident she hasn’t yet speak, nor confident that she does.

Since every concrete case is untypical in some respect or other, to undermine presumptive support by showing that the case at hand is untypical we must show that it’s untypical in a respect that relevant to the conclusion being drawn.

By which I mean reasoning of the form: Most A’s are B’s, this is an A, therefore this is probably a B.

This is standardly taken to be the moral of Kyberg’s lottery paradox. Imagine a fair lottery with several billion tickets. For each ticket, the probability that it will lose is extremely high. If we hold that very high probability of a conclusion warrants its acceptance, we will have to conclude that each ticket will lose and that therefore no ticket will win. But that conclusion contradicts one of our premisses –