Conductive Arguments and Counterconsiderations

**Key themes:**
1. Development of the conception of conductive argument and convergent support, and of relevant methods of evaluation;
2. Development of the notion of counterconsideration;
3. Counterconsiderations explained as frequently occurring within conductive arguments in which ‘pros’ or reasons for are cited and the question of whether there are ‘cons’ or reasons against very readily arises;
4. Counterconsiderations as, in effect, an objections to an argument; this idea as applying not only to conductive arguments but to all the other types;
5. You do not weaken your case by acknowledging one or more counterconsiderations or objections to it;
6. If you acknowledge such objections and are able to address them effectively, you *strengthen* your case and your own credibility;
7. Learning to think in terms of positions, objections, responses to objections and (when appropriate) amended positions can improve one's mental flexibility;
8. The confirmation bias (introduced in Chapter 2 but explained again here);
9. Sensitivity to the fact that there are *degrees of merit* in arguments; it is not a matter of perfection or no support whatever.

**Conductive Arguments and the G Condition**

In conductive arguments, the support for the conclusion is always convergent. The premises count separately in favor of the conclusion; they are put forward as separately relevant to it and need not be linked together to offer support.

The premises in a conductive argument describe or specify a number of relevant factors that count separately in favor of a conclusion or against a conclusion. The argument weighs these factors to provide a basis for the conclusion. Conductive arguments have premises which are independent (rather than linked), which separately converge on a conclusion. They draw together a number of independently relevant factors which, taken together, converge to support the conclusion. Conductive arguments are common in everyday reasoning, as when we draw up a list of pros and cons, plusses and minuses, in order to make a decision (reach a conclusion).
**Convergent support** In arguments with convergent support, each premise is separately relevant to the conclusion and would count as a reason in support of the conclusion, even if other premises were false. Each premise bears independently on the conclusion, they do not link to support the conclusion as in deductive arguments or arguments from analogy.

In order to determine if the premises of a conductive argument adequately support their conclusion, we must collectively consider the premises’ cumulative strength, putting this together with other evidence that might count against the conclusion. We have to consider whether negatively relevant points outweigh the positively relevant ones. This sometimes requires creativity and imagination in thinking of what other counterconsiderations there might be. We should seek out, and reflect on, negatively relevant factors not acknowledged by the arguer, and try to estimate how seriously these would undermine his conclusion.

To accept the conclusion on the basis of the supporting premises, we must judge that the reasons provided in the supporting premises outweigh in significance both the stated counterconsiderations and any other pertinent counterconsiderations.

Obviously there is no formula or rule that we can apply to determine whether reasons for the conclusion outweigh reasons against it. This is a matter of judgment rather than proof.

In a cogent conductive argument, the premises must be positively relevant to the conclusion. How strongly they support that conclusion can be determined only by considering them in the light of points that are negatively relevant to the conclusion.

**Counterconsiderations:** negatively relevant points which count against the conclusion being put forward.

In many conductive arguments, some counterconsiderations are acknowledged by the arguer, who accepts that they have a bearing on his or her conclusion and, in fact, count against it. Acknowledging counterconsiderations does not necessarily weaken your case. Often it strengthens it, because in understanding the counterconsiderations and reflecting on how well your premises support your conclusion despite these factors, you can gain a more accurate understanding of the issue.
Counterconsiderations (CC) can be relevant to assessing other argument types as well:

1. Deductively valid arguments: the validity of these arguments is not affected by the introduction of any new information or CC. But when we come to the task of accepting the premises, CC are relevant. Anything that is negatively relevant to the premises becomes an objection, or CC, the argument itself.

2. Inductive generalizations: CC can bear on the A condition for inductive arguments but they may also bear on the R and G conditions. Most characteristically, they affect G. CC can considerably weaken an inductive generalization’s support. And it is useful to remind ourselves that the premises of inductive arguments virtually never state all the information that bears on the conclusion.

3. Inductive analogies: the new information will be some point of difference between the primary subject and the analogue, a difference that is negatively relevant to the conclusion.

4. A priori analogies: There will be differences between the primary subject and the analogue; the relevance of these differences to the conclusion has to be determined. Any difference that is negatively relevant to the conclusion is, in effect, a CC, and its significance has to be judged or weighed.

**Evaluating conductive arguments**
The fundamental goal in evaluating conductive arguments is to weigh the supporting considerations against the counterconsiderations. This involves making judgments of significance in which we may differentially weigh the various pros and cons. How significant is this supporting reason? How significant is this counterconsideration?

**A method for appraising conductive arguments:**

1. Determine whether the premises offered to support the conclusion are acceptable.
2. Determine whether the premises offered to support the conclusion are positively relevant to the conclusion.
3. Determine whether any CC acknowledged by the arguer are negatively relevant to the conclusion.
4. Think what additional CC, not acknowledged by the arguer, are negatively relevant to the conclusion.
5. Reflect on whether the premises, taken together, outweigh the CC, taken together, and make a judgment. Try to articulate good reasons for that judgment.
6. If you judge that the premises do outweigh the CC, you have judged that the R and G conditions are satisfied. Provided that A is also satisfied, you deem the argument cogent. Otherwise, you deem it not to be cogent.

Conductive Arguments: Additional Arguments

Evaluate the following conductive arguments using the ARG conditions, paying special attention to whether they provide strong or weak support for their conclusions.

1. Regardless of what the students want, the York College Bookstore should not be allowed to sell tobacco products. The College has a moral obligation not to support the tobacco industry. Besides, an educational institute should devote itself to instilling proper behavior in students and abusing tobacco products is not proper. While it is true that many students will smoke anyhow, the College will not be supporting their bad habits. The bookstore may be able to profit from selling tobacco products but where will this desire for profits lead us? Next thing you know, the bookstore will be selling rolling paper, bongs, pipes, pornography, and other drug paraphernalia. We have to say no at some point.

2. Voluntary euthanasia, where a terminally ill patient consciously chooses to die, should be made legal. Responsible adult people should be able to choose whether to live or die. Also, voluntary euthanasia would save many patients from unbearable pain. It would cut social costs. It would save relatives the agony of watching people they love die an intolerable and undignified death. Even though there is some danger of abuse, and even though we do not know for certain that a cure for the patient's disease will not be found, voluntary euthanasia should be a legal option for the terminally ill patient.
3. What grounds have we for attributing suffering to other animals? Nearly all the external signs that lead us to infer pain in other humans can be seen in other species, especially “higher” animals such as mammals and birds. Behavioral signs—writhing, yelping, or other forms of calling, attempts to avoid the source of pain, and many others—are present. We know, too, that these animals are biologically similar in the relevant respects, having nervous systems like ours which can be observed to function as ours do. So the grounds for inferring that these animals can feel pain are nearly as good as the grounds for inferring other humans do.

— Peter Singer