

Cumulative Arguments and Smoking Guns

Mark Vorobej

Following David Ray Griffin, we can distinguish between the following three propositions pertaining to the events of September 11, 2001.

(O) In all significant respects, the official narrative is true.

(S) Many significant elements of the official narrative are not true.

(R) US government officials were complicit in the events of 9/11.

Sceptics believe (S), whereas *revisionists* believe the stronger proposition (R).ⁱ (R) is stronger than (S) in the sense that (R) entails (S), but not vice versa. (R) describes one way in which (S) could be true.

Barry Zwicker has argued recently that revisionists enjoy some kind of strategic advantage over those who support the official narrative.ⁱⁱ I too believe that this claim is true, but not for the reasons Zwicker offers. My aim in this paper is twofold: to explain why some of Zwicker's claims are problematic and to articulate a more defensible account of the strategic advantage in question.

Zwicker's discussion builds upon the work of Griffin who, in *The New Pearl Harbor*, draws a distinction, "critical in the field of 9/11," between cumulative and deductive arguments.ⁱⁱⁱ My focus will therefore be on philosophical topics in the area of argumentation theory. The abstract nature of this material demands a more extensive and methodic discussion than what either Griffin or Zwicker are able to offer, given their other larger and more pressing concerns.^{iv} Some of this material is also controversial. Even as esteemed and progressive an intellectual as Noam Chomsky has claimed that the arguments in support of (R) are "based on a failure to

understand properly what evidence is.”^v It’s important, therefore, to achieve clarity on these issues, especially if a legitimate investigation into the events of 9/11 should ever be conducted.

I

According to Griffin, a *cumulative* argument is

“a general argument consisting of several particular arguments that are independent from each other. As such, each particular argument provides support for all the others.” (p.xxiv)

Consider, for example, the following argument in support of the claim that most of the apples in Albania are green.

- (A1) 1. Alice says that most of the apples in Albania are green.
2. Green apples are the only apples native to Albania.
3. It’s very expensive to transport non-green apples to Albania.
4. Most residents of Albania do not like to eat non-green apples.

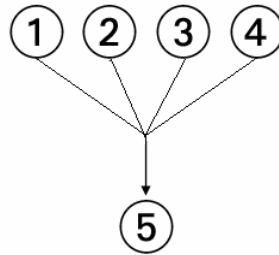
5. Therefore, most of the apples in Albania are green.^{vi}

This, I believe, is the kind of thing Griffin has in mind in speaking of cumulative arguments.^{vii}

Argument (A1) has four premises (1) - (4), and a single conclusion (5). An argument is an exercise in rational persuasion. In offering (A1) as an argument in support of (5) – that is, in attempting to persuade others to believe (5), by appealing to the body of evidence cited within the argument’s premises – one is typically making two claims. First, that it’s reasonable to believe that each of (1) - (4) is true. And second, that it’s reasonable to believe that these four premises collectively provide enough evidence to make it reasonable to believe that (5) is true as well.

These are general remarks about the social practice of argumentation.^{viii} What makes (A1) a *cumulative* argument is the further claim that each of the premises (1) - (4) on its own – that is,

independently of the other premises – provides some evidence in support of (5). We can display this structural feature perspicuously by diagramming (A1) as follows



(D1)

where it's understood that the downward flowing arrows (i.e. the vertical lines) represent evidential relations, and that the single arrowhead directly above (5) represents the drawing of an inference in support of a conclusion. Diagram (D1), therefore, says that while each of the premises (1) - (4) is true, and while each premise independently provides some evidence in support of the conclusion, these four bits of evidence should also be pooled together so that there is then enough evidence available to justify believing that (5) is true as well.

Cumulative arguments therefore exhibit a certain kind of structure. It doesn't follow, however, that cumulative arguments are necessarily good arguments – arguments by which we ought to be persuaded. An argument is merely an *attempt* at rational persuasion and, in proposing a cumulative argument, you may be operating with beliefs which are false or, even if true, controversial. Others may legitimately question whether the premises of your argument are true. Or whether each premise independently provides evidence in support of the conclusion. Or whether the premises collectively provide enough evidence to justify belief in the conclusion. Typically, these questions cannot be answered on structural grounds alone, without examining the specific propositional content of the premises and the conclusion.

Nonetheless, cumulative arguments possess an important structural advantage over certain other arguments. Suppose that, in examining (A1), someone discovers that it's not reasonable to believe premise (1). Perhaps it's discovered that Alice lied, or that her testimony has been misrepresented. Premise (1) should then be discarded. (A1), however, minus premise (1), still provides evidence in support of (5), since (2), (3) and (4) are not affected by the doubts surrounding (1). Whether the remaining premises still provide enough evidence, to justify believing that (5) is true, is again an open question which cannot be answered on structural grounds alone, without examining the propositional content of the remaining premises and the conclusion. But what's true of (1) is true of each of the other premises as well. Removing any single premise from (A1) will certainly diminish, but will not destroy altogether the evidential support for (5). In order to destroy altogether the evidence offered by (A1) in support of (5), one would have to establish, of *each* of the argument's four premises, that it's not reasonable to believe that premise.

Griffin claims, correctly, in my judgment, that the argument he endorses in support of (R) is a cumulative argument.

“[T]he argument for official complicity in 9/11 is a *cumulative* argument. ...

Rather than being like a chain, a cumulative argument is more like a cable composed of many strands. Each strand strengthens the cable. But if there are many strands, the cable can still hold a lot of weight even if some of them unravel.

As the reader will see, there are many strands in the argument for official complicity in 9/11 summarized in this book. If the purported evidence on which some of these are based turns out to be unreliable, that would not necessarily

undermine the overall argument. The cumulative argument would then simply be supported by fewer strands. And some of the strands are such that, if the evidence on which they are based is confirmed, the case could be supported by one or two of them” (p.xxiv).

The last sentence of this quotation deals with the topic of what Griffin later refers to as “smoking guns” (p.196). In the Afterword to the Second Edition of *The New Pearl Harbor*, Griffin identifies no less than 40 smoking guns in support of (R). It’s reasonable to stipulate that, as the name suggests, a cumulative argument must have at least two premises. Suppose we stipulate further that a *smoking gun* is an argument with at most two premises which, if reasonable to believe, provide enough evidence to justify belief in the argument’s conclusion.^{ix} Then we can interpret Griffin to be saying, again correctly, in my judgment, that some (two-premise) cumulative arguments in support of (R) are smoking guns.

II

Still according to Griffin, in a *deductive* argument, by contrast,

“each step in the argument depends on the truth of the previous step. If a single premise is found to be false, the argument fails” (p.xxiv).

The following argument, about an unsolved murder in Monaco, fits this characterization.

- (A2) 6. Molly’s fingerprints were found on the murder weapon.

7. Therefore, Molly committed the murder.

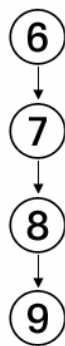
8. Therefore, Molly was in Monaco on the night of the murder.

9. Therefore, Molly was not in Albania on the night of the murder.

If (6) is false (or not reasonable to believe), then (A2) provides no evidence in support of (7), (8)

or (9). If (7) is false (or not reasonable to believe), then (A2) provides no evidence in support of (8) or (9). And if (8) is false (or not reasonable to believe), then (A2) provides no evidence in support of (9). In general, then, in a deductive argument, discovering of any single premise, either that it's false or that it's not reasonable to believe that premise, will destroy altogether the evidential support for all subsequent claims. Therefore, from a structural point of view, (A2) is more vulnerable than (A1). While it's possible that (A1) can still provide enough evidence to justify believing that (5) is true even if one (or more) of its premises are challenged, (A2) cannot possibly provide enough evidence to justify believing that (9) is true unless each and every premise within (A2) stands up to critical scrutiny.

If we diagram (A2) as follows



(D2)

then it becomes clear that argument (A2) is in fact a sequence of three separate arguments, involving three separate inferences. (That is, (6) alone is meant to justify belief in (7), which in turn is meant to justify belief in (8), and so on.) For this reason, deductive arguments, such as (A2), are more commonly referred to as chain, or serial arguments.^x

III

On page 43 of *Towers of Deception*, Zwicker makes the following three claims.

(Z1) Arguments in support of (O) must be deductive in nature.^{xi}

(Z2) (O) “can fail with one proven falsehood.”

(Z3) “To maintain the credibility of [(O)] *all the evidence that follows must be proven wrong.*”

The evidence referred to in (Z3) is a collection of 26 separate “exhibits” which, “legally speaking,” comprise some of the “best” evidence (p.46) in support of (R).

Zwicker’s text strongly suggests that (Z1) - (Z3) are closely related, and that together they establish that, compared to (R), (O) is a far more difficult proposition to defend. And so, because they employ a fundamentally different kind of reasoning, revisionists enjoy a kind of strategic advantage over those who support the official 9/11 narrative. In the remainder of this section, I will offer what I hope is a charitable reconstruction of Zwicker’s argument.

We know that “In deductive reasoning, the whole chain can fail if one link fails” (p.44). Therefore, since supporters of (O) must employ deductive reasoning, all evidential support for (O) will evaporate if it can be established, of even one premise within the deductive argument for (O), that it’s not reasonable to believe that premise. That is, “the official 9/11 story can fail with one proven falsehood” (p.43).

Now, each of the 26 exhibits featured in *Towers of Destruction*, if confirmed, provides enough evidence to make it reasonable to believe that there was some significant form of US government complicity in the events of 9/11.^{xii} Therefore, each exhibit in effect establishes, of at least one premise within the deductive argument for (O), that it’s not reasonable to believe that

premise. And that's because a crucial feature of the official narrative is the denial of *any* significant form of US government complicity whatsoever.

Therefore, there exists a substantial body of evidence emanating from the revisionist camp, each single element of which is powerful enough to demolish the entire argument in support of (O) in one fell swoop. And so supporters of (O) cannot reasonably uphold that position without disposing of each and every bit of such counterevidence -- clearly a laborious and unenviable task.

Revisionists, however, are under no such obligation. It can be reasonable to believe (R) even if there exists strong evidence in support of (O). This is because it can be reasonable to believe (R) even if substantial portions of the official narrative are true. ((R) does not require government complicity within every component of the official narrative.) And it can also be reasonable to believe (R) even if a substantial portion of the cumulative evidence in favor of government complicity is undermined. This is because there are many argumentative strands in support of (R). And, in fact, because the exhibits are smoking guns, "only one exhibit needs to be proven true (beyond a reasonable doubt) for the 'Inside Job' theory to be ... proved" (p.43).

IV

The fundamental problem with Zwicker's position is that (Z1) is false. Zwicker's argument for (Z1) runs as follows.

"Supporters must employ *deductive* reasoning to maintain the official story of 9/11. In deductive reasoning, each step in the argument depends upon the truth of the previous step. For example, to logically believe in the official story you have to believe there were 19 kamikaze Arab hijackers who could hijack four

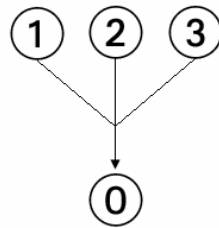
commercial airlines all at once *and* outsmart the \$44-billion-a-year US intelligence apparatus *and* outwit NORAD, the FAA and the US Air Force *and* fly the airliners with pinpoint accuracy into the Twin Towers and Pentagon *and thus* bring the towers down ... *and* that all this was orchestrated by Osama bin Laden or some other member of al Qaeda. The truth of each part of this official story is essential in holding up the whole story” (pp.43-44).

Zwicker is correct in pointing out that (O) is a conjunctive proposition. That is, the official narrative contains many distinct components, and makes a number of very specific claims about a wide variety of different events occurring over a substantial period of time. If any single conjunct within a conjunction is false, then the entire conjunction is false. In this respect, then, (Z2) is true.^{xiii} We must be careful, however, not to confuse (the properties of) a *proposition* with (the properties of) any *argument* offered in support of that proposition. In particular, from the fact that the truth of (O) is dependent upon each conjunct within (O) being true, it does not follow that each step in any argument for (O) depends upon the truth of all the previous steps.

It's usually possible to argue for any particular proposition in any number of ways. And deductive arguments in support of (O) are certainly conceivable. But in fact the most common arguments for (O) are cumulative arguments which are not different in kind from the arguments offered by revisionists in support of (R).

The overall argument for (O) has a great many discrete components. One part involves expert testimony to the effect that fire damage caused the collapse of the Twin Towers. Another part appeals to video footage of the hijackers at various airports. Yet another part incorporates eyewitness testimony from individuals who were present at the Pentagon on the morning of 9/11.

Call these bits of evidence (1), (2) and (3) respectively. Although this material comprises but a fraction of the total evidence available in support of (O), we can easily construct an argument (A3) for (O) which exhibits the following structure.



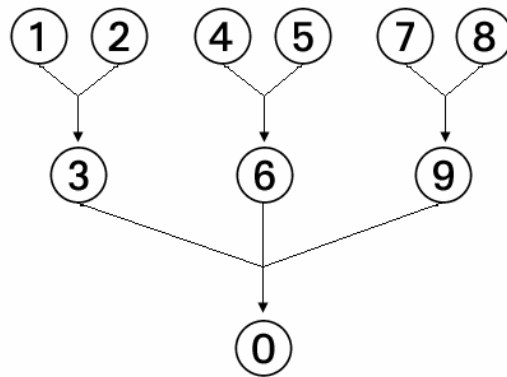
(D3)

(A3) is a cumulative argument. Each premise on its own provides some evidence in support of the official narrative. (1), for example, supports the official explanation of the collapse of the Towers. In providing evidence for this particular component of the official narrative, (1) *ipso facto* provides evidence for the entire conjunctive proposition (O) as well. In order to establish (O), (1) is part of what needs to be established.

In offering (A3) as an argument in support of (O), one is claiming that three discrete bits of evidence ought to be pooled so that there is then enough evidence available to justify believing that (O) is true. Should it be discovered that (1), for example, is false, then, as is the case with other cumulative arguments, this would weaken but would not destroy altogether the evidential support offered by (A3) for (O). Premises (2) and (3) would continue to provide evidence in support of (O). As is typically the case, whether that remaining evidence would be strong enough to justify belief in (O) is an open question.

It's possible, of course, to construct more elaborate arguments in support of (O) –

arguments which appeal to a larger body of evidence and which exhibit a more intricate structure. But this exercise only further confirms the prevalence of cumulative reasoning in support of the official narrative. One can imagine, for example, a cumulative argument (A4) with the following structure



(D4)

where (3) is the proposition that the Twin Towers collapsed as a result of fire damage, (6) is the proposition that the hijackers were members of al Qaeda, and (9) is the proposition that Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. And finally where these intermediate claims, which are used to support (0), are themselves each supported by two separate bits of further independent evidence. (3), for example, could be supported by testimonial evidence in premise (1), and also by entirely separate forensic evidence in premise (2). There is, of course, no limit on the number of premises which could be incorporated within a cumulative argument for (3); or in fact for any other proposition within (A4). Additional cumulative evidence could be cited at any location within diagram (D4), thereby creating an even more intricate and less vulnerable structure.

V

The arguments commonly used to support (O) are therefore not different in kind from the arguments commonly used to support (R). In each case, many discrete bits of evidence independently support the argument's conclusion. And if any single premise is discredited, this typically has no effect on the probative force of the remaining premises which could, in principle, still collectively provide enough evidence to justify belief in the argument's conclusion. So supporters of (R) enjoy no structural advantage rooted in a fundamentally different style of reasoning.

Zwicker's arguments (or exhibits) in support of (R) pose a serious threat to (O), not because they demolish any link in an argument chain, but simply because they provide enough evidence to make it reasonable to believe a proposition, (R), which is *contrary* to (O).^{xiv} If (R) is true, then (O) cannot be true. That is, if there was at least some significant US government complicity in 9/11, it cannot be true that there was no significant US government complicity in 9/11. And this claim holds regardless of how the supporters of (O) choose to argue for that proposition. Therefore, strong evidence that (R) is true necessarily constitutes strong evidence that (O) is false.

This logical point, however, cuts both ways. Since (R) and (O) are contraries, it also follows that if (O) is true, then (R) cannot be true. Therefore, strong evidence that (O) is true necessarily constitutes strong evidence that (R) is false. So, in principle, supporters of (O) pose an equally serious threat to (R).

Despite logical parity on this score, Zwicker is nonetheless correct in claiming that supporters of (R) do enjoy a certain kind of strategic advantage insofar as it's far more difficult to

support (O) than it is to support (R). But this is because of the different semantic content of the two propositions in question, and not because of the nature of the arguments which are (or can be) marshalled in their support. (O) is simply a far stronger and more substantive proposition.

(O) is a conjunction of a great many very specific claims about a wide range of topics. For example, it includes claims about the identity of the hijackers, why Flights 11 and 175 were able to reach New York City, why the Twin Towers collapsed, what kind of object flew into the Pentagon, what caused Flight 93 to crash, etc. So we can usefully think of (O) as being composed of a fairly large number of subnarratives, each of which focuses on a particular topic or event of significance to 9/11, and each of which builds upon and can be tested against a large and more or less discrete body of evidence bearing on that specific topic or event. In order for it to be reasonable to believe (O), it must be reasonable to believe that US government complicity was not a significant factor at any point within any subnarrative.

This is challenging in two (related) respects. Positively, supporters of (O) must construct a great many no-complicity subnarratives, *each* of which must incorporate, in a compelling manner, a separate large and more or less discrete body of evidence. Negatively, (O) can be falsified if it can be established, of *even one* such subnarrative, that it's reasonable to believe in the existence of some significant form of US government complicity within that subnarrative.

Supporters of (R) face less of a challenge. Positively, in order for it to be reasonable to believe (R), it's sufficient to construct a *single* subnarrative which establishes some significant form of US government complicity and which incorporates, in a compelling manner, the limited body of evidence germane to that one specific subnarrative.^{xv} Negatively, (R) can be falsified only if it can be established, in a compelling manner, of *each* subnarrative, that there was no

significant US government complicity within that subnarrative.

Notice the asymmetry. To positively support (O), you must consider every subnarrative and every related body of evidence; whereas to positively support (R), you need to consider only a single subnarrative and a single body of evidence. And to falsify (O), you must establish something about only a single subnarrative; whereas to falsify (R), you must establish something about every subnarrative.

In summary, (O) is harder to prove and easier to falsify. It's worth emphasizing the purely semantic nature of this claim. Although (R) is a substantially weaker proposition, this in no way diminishes its enormous political significance.

VI

As they continue to accumulate evidence relevant to 9/11, revisionists will likely begin to formulate stronger hypotheses, and may eventually be prepared to argue in support of more substantive propositions about what actually did transpire that day. Should this happen, revisionists will begin to lose (some of) the strategic advantage they currently enjoy over those who support the official narrative.

In the meantime, revisionists have produced literally dozens of smoking guns, with *prima facie* credible evidence, in support of (R). Because they are smoking guns, these are arguments which make it reasonable to believe that (R) is true, provided that the premises, upon which these arguments are based, stand up to rigorous critical scrutiny and are themselves established as objects of reasonable belief. And because they are based on what is already *prima facie* credible evidence, these are arguments which must be taken seriously now.

If (R) is reasonable to believe, then (S) – the weakest of the three propositions under

consideration – is also reasonable to believe. So any smoking gun in support of (R) is also a smoking gun in support of (S). As Zwicker correctly states in (Z3), supporters of the official narrative cannot credibly maintain their position without refuting these strong arguments in support of these other propositions.

However, it's important to acknowledge, in closing, the existence of a final symmetry. Smoking guns in support of (O) are also possible.^{xvi} But of course no one would be obligated to refute these arguments unless they are based on premises which are at least *prima facie* credible.^{xvii} (Clear video or photographic evidence of Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon, along with *prima facie* credible evidence of the authenticity of that evidence, would constitute a highly relevant smoking gun in support of one crucial subnarrative, for example.) If smoking guns, with *prima facie* credible premises, in support of (O) already exist within the public domain, then supporters of (R) and (S) similarly cannot credibly maintain their respective positions without refuting these strong arguments. So (Z3) has a significant counterpart which investigators cannot reasonably ignore.

Revisionists, however, would presumably claim that there are no smoking guns, with *prima facie* credible premises, in support of (O) and its principal subnarratives, which are available for public scrutiny. Suppose this is true. It's of course still possible that supporters of (O) are sitting on powerful and *prima facie* credible covert evidence which could be used to generate strong arguments in support of the official narrative. However, if these individuals are not willing to disclose this evidence – so that there continues to be not a single smoking gun with *prima facie* credible premises in support of (O) within the public domain – that would certainly be the most significant asymmetry of all.

Notes

i. *The New Pearl Harbor* (Olive Branch Press, 2004). See pages xxv, 127 and 185, for example.

All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

ii. *Towers of Deception: The Media Cover-Up of 9/11* (New Society Publishers, 2006). Again, all further references will be cited in the text.

iii. The quoted phrase is Zwicker's (p.43). But Griffin himself draws this distinction early on, in his Introduction, and then revisits it in the Afterword to the Second Edition of his text.

iv. Each author devotes only about a single page to this material.

v. Quoted by Zwicker on p.209.

vi. Here I follow the conventional practice of separating an argument's conclusion from its premises by a horizontal line.

vii. Griffin's use of the term "cumulative" is somewhat idiosyncratic. Philosophers usually refer to these as "convergent" arguments.

viii. I discuss the practice of argumentation at greater length in *A Theory of Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

ix. It's not part of the definition of a smoking gun that its premises are *in fact* reasonable to believe. When it has not yet been confirmed that the premises are reasonable to believe, Griffin appropriately speaks cautiously of *prima facie* smoking guns (p.197).

x. In fact, philosophers usually use the term "deductive" to refer to deductively valid arguments –

arguments in which the truth of all the premises would guarantee that the conclusion must be true. Neither (A1) nor (A2) are deductively valid arguments.

xi. Griffin himself does not make this claim in *The New Pearl Harbor*.

xii. Here I'm assuming that Zwicker considers each exhibit to be a smoking gun; at least in the sense that it's true, of each exhibit, if confirmed, that it provides enough evidence to make it reasonable to believe that (R) is true. For suppose, of some exhibit, that it's not a smoking gun. Then supporters of (O) could reasonably maintain that they can ignore – or at least are not obliged to discredit – such weak evidence, and then (Z3) would be false.

xiii. There is of course also another sense in which (Z2) is trivial, because true of any proposition whatsoever. Any proposition will fail if something which that proposition claims to be true can be proven false – even if the proposition in question makes but a single claim.

xiv. If two propositions are contrary then, although they may both be false, they cannot both be true.

xv. Revisionists typically believe that they can accomplish this with respect to many subnarratives. But my point is that, from a logical perspective, they need to succeed only once.

xvi. And this has nothing to do with whether the arguments employed in support of (O) are cumulative or deductive in nature. The strongest arguments are deductively valid arguments. (See note 10.) There are deductively valid arguments in support of (O) which are cumulative in nature, as well as deductively valid arguments in support of (O) which are deductive in nature.

xvii. The following (deductively valid) smoking gun is politically irrelevant in the sense that it can reasonably be ignored: “The President of the US believes that (O) is true. The President of the US is infallible. Therefore, (O) is true.” No one would claim that the argument’s second premise is even *prima facie* credible.

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