

Earning Certainty: The Intensifying Qualifier and the Accountability of Preaching

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Abstract

Preachers are expected to speak with conviction, yet not to claim more certainty than their text will bear. Using Stephen Toulmin's model of argument, this article asks whether the two can be told apart. Toulmin's modal qualifier is normally a limiting device, weakening a claim according to how far its warrant carries. In the expository preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones the qualifier does the opposite — exclusivity, impossibility, universality, categorical certainty — yet the same preacher hedges accurately when his warrant is an inference about human behavior. The reversal traces to a tension, in *The Uses of Argument*, between two accounts of what the qualifier measures. Four tests distinguish such qualifiers from mere emphasis; three conditions determine when preaching with certainty remains answerable to its hearers.

Keywords: Toulmin model · modal qualifier · field-dependence · backing · rebuttal · religious argumentation · homiletics · Martyn Lloyd-Jones

1. Introduction

Preachers live within a tension that is rarely put into words. They are required to speak with conviction and to state what they believe to be true without weakening it until it loses its force. At the same time, they must not claim a degree of certainty that exceeds what the text they are preaching can bear. A congregation can often sense when a preacher has crossed that line, even when they cannot always say why. Consider a preacher who builds his argument from a text his hearers can open and read for themselves. He has anticipated three objections and answered them one by one, and he then draws his conclusion in these words: "Of this I am absolutely certain. Nothing can affect or change the

faithfulness of God.”¹ Has this preacher actually earned his certainty, or has he merely asserted it? Is there a way to tell the two apart that does not rest solely on the hearer’s impression or sympathy?

Stephen Toulmin’s model of the layout of argument offers a way to answer that question without relying on the hearer’s sympathy. The sentence above occupies the position immediately beside the conclusion and registers the force that accompanies it — the position Toulmin calls the modal qualifier. In its ordinary use, the qualifier limits the strength of a claim: it registers how far the data, by way of the warrant, can support the claim. In substantial arguments the warrant rarely confers absolute support, which is why Toulmin’s own examples of qualifiers are words like “probably,” “presumably,” and “so far as the evidence goes.”² If this account is followed, a difficulty arises as soon as a speaker whose argument is substantial says “absolutely certain”: he appears to have overrated his evidence, or to have abandoned argument for assertion.

The sentence just quoted is not an isolated lapse. It belongs to a recurring pattern. An earlier study analyzed sixteen sermons preached by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) at Westminster Chapel, coding every element of each argument according to Toulmin’s model. The result: every qualifier identified strengthened, rather than limited, the claim it accompanied.³ The qualifier slot was filled by several recurring kinds of expression — exclusivity (“the only rational thing to do”), impossibility (“the utter impossibility of ever being sanctified by the law”), universality (“None of us. Not one of us”), and categorial assertion (“This isn’t a theory. This isn’t a philosophy. This isn’t a bit of

¹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The Faith of God Without Effect? A Sermon on Romans 3:3,” sermon 3044, MLJ Trust, as analyzed in Trisfant, “Characteristics” (n. 3 below), § A.1.3.

²Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 100–102. All references are to the first edition of 1958; pagination differs in the updated edition of 2003.

³Johannis Trisfant, “The Characteristics of Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s Logic of Preaching and Its Relevance for Persuasive Preaching: An Analysis of Selected Sermons on Romans Using Toulmin’s and Perelman’s Models” (PhD diss., Theological University of Apeldoorn, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20900155>. The element-by-element analyses of all sixteen sermons are published in its appendices A and B. That study also applied the New Rhetoric of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), which is not at issue here.

psychology. No, no, this is history”).⁴ Across the entire corpus, not a single hedge occupied that position.

There is a temptation to read this finding as a fact about one preacher rather than a symptom of the argument itself — to conclude that Lloyd-Jones was simply a man of extraordinary conviction, and to leave the model itself unquestioned. That conclusion is too hasty, for two reasons. First, the reversal is systematic rather than a matter of personal temperament: the pattern holds across four ministry phases spanning some thirty years, across doctrinal, poetic, and narrative genres of Scripture alike, and it co-varies with other elements of the argument’s layout in ways a purely psychological explanation cannot account for. Second, and more importantly, Toulmin’s own framework supplies the resources to explain it — and doing so requires resolving a tension between two of Toulmin’s own formulations of what the qualifier actually measures, a tension that the literature on modality in Toulmin has only lately begun to register and that has not, so far as this inquiry has found, been traced through to a field where authority rather than inference does the work of backing.⁵

That tension is the subject of this article. Toulmin offers two formulations. On page 90 he writes that our modal terms function “as an indication of the strength of the backing which we have for the assertion.”⁶ On page 101, when he sets out his formal layout, he gives a different formulation: the qualifier indicates “the strength conferred by the warrant on this step.”⁷ Backing and warrant, on Toulmin’s own account, are distinct elements performing distinct functions, so the qualifier cannot measure the strength of both at once without further explanation — and Toulmin offers none. In the fields Toulmin draws his

⁴Sermons 5519, 3123, 3361, and 2002 respectively; see nn. 27, 29, 32, and 33 below.

⁵Andrea Rocci’s extended examination of modality in Toulmin’s text identifies what he calls “latent inconsistencies in the fabric of the book” concerning modality; the present article isolates one such inconsistency — between pp. 90 and 101 — and traces its consequences for a field Toulmin did not consider. Andrea Rocci, “Three Views of Modality in Toulmin,” in *Modality in Argumentation: A Semantic Investigation of the Role of Modalities in the Structure of Arguments with an Application to Italian Modal Expressions*, Argumentation Library 29 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 105–196.

⁶Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 90.

⁷Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 101.

examples from — weather forecasting, citizenship law, the selection of a tennis team — the two readings almost always agree, because a warrant resting on weak backing is itself weak, so the difference between the two readings is nearly invisible. But in a field whose backing is treated as beyond error, the two readings pull sharply apart — and the data examined here show what follows when they do.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reconstructs the qualifier in Toulmin's thought and in the literature that follows him, and isolates the tension between his two formulations. Section 3 sets out the phenomenon itself: a passage in which a hedge and an intensifier occur within a few lines of each other, a typology of four recurring types, and a statement of what the available data can and cannot support. Section 4 argues that the reversal follows from Toulmin's own thesis about the field-dependence of criteria, once the qualifier is read as tracking backing. Section 5 answers the objection that these expressions are not qualifiers at all but mere rhetorical emphasis, and proposes four structural tests for telling the two apart. Section 6 is the destination toward which the rest of the article works: it sets out three conditions under which a preacher's certainty remains answerable to his hearers rather than merely asserted to them — which is the question this article began with. Section 7 closes by pointing to other fields where the same pattern should be found.

This article does not argue that Toulmin is mistaken. Its claim is that the qualifier turns out to be field-sensitive, exactly as Toulmin's own thesis would predict, but that this sensitivity is not adequately captured in his notation. A body of argumentation Toulmin never considered brings the problem into sharp relief, because in it the two readings of the qualifier come apart as widely as they ever do. What follows, then, is not a defense of certainty in preaching, nor an attack on it, but an attempt to say — on grounds independent of whether the reader shares the preacher's convictions — what distinguishes a certainty that has earned its place from one that has merely been asserted.

2. The Qualifier in Toulmin and After

2.1 *The Qualifier in the Layout of Argument*

Toulmin introduces the qualifier relatively late in his layout, almost as an afterthought. Having established the distinction between data and warrant — formulated through the two questions “What have you got to go on?” and “How do you get there?” — he turns to the differences among warrants. Warrants, he writes, “are of different kinds, and may confer different degrees of force on the conclusions they justify.” Some warrants, on his account, “authorise us to accept a claim unequivocally, given the appropriate data,” and such warrants “entitle us in suitable cases to qualify our conclusion with the adverb ‘necessarily’”. Others, by contrast, “authorise us to make the step from data to conclusion either tentatively, or else subject to conditions, exceptions, or qualifications — in these cases other modal qualifiers, such as ‘probably’ and ‘presumably’, are in place.”⁸

Two things in this passage deserve notice. First, Toulmin explicitly makes room for maximal modality: it is not true that his model leaves no place for a hedge-free conclusion; “necessarily” is a legitimate modal qualifier within his own framework. Second, that maximal modality carries a condition: the warrant must license the step unequivocally. In his third and fourth essays, Toulmin stresses that warrants in everyday and professional reasoning are typically substantial rather than analytic — that is, the step a warrant licenses can still be defeated by further information. “Necessarily” is therefore the rare case; “presumably” is the ordinary one. His illustration is a man born in Bermuda who is “presumably” a British subject, a conclusion that holds unless his parents were aliens or he was later naturalized elsewhere.⁹

When Toulmin comes to his formal statement, he treats the qualifier’s function briefly. The qualifier indicates “the strength conferred by the warrant on this step,” while the rebuttal condition indicates “circumstances in which the

⁸Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 100.

⁹Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 101–02.

general authority of the warrant would have to be set aside.”¹⁰ Q and R are thus introduced as a linked pair: together they mark how far a warrant may be pressed, and where its limit lies. The qualifier states the warrant’s reach positively; the rebuttal marks its boundary. On this construction, Q and R stand in an inverse relation — the more rebuttals remain live, the weaker the qualifier that can be justified.

This understanding is carried forward in the literature that follows. Brockriede and Ehninger, in the paper that introduced the model to rhetorical studies, describe the qualifier as marking “the degree of cogency” claimed by the arguer.¹¹ Verheij, reconstructing the scheme for formal evaluation, treats the qualifier as a marker of defeasibility.¹² Freeman, in his epistemic systematization of warrants, assumes that what a warrant confers is a degree of support that may fall short of full certainty.¹³ Textbooks often reduce the element to a bare list of terms — “possibly,” “probably,” “most likely” — arrayed along a scale running from zero to certainty, and usually placed somewhere between the two poles.¹⁴ In a collection revisiting the model half a century on, the qualifier does not even merit a chapter of its own.¹⁵

2.2 Two Formulations, Eleven Pages Apart

Toulmin’s second essay, on probability, offers a different account. Discussing what entitles a speaker to say “probably,” he writes:

¹⁰Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 101. The same account is given in the later textbook restatement: Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1984), chap. 3.

¹¹Wayne Brockriede and Douglas Ehninger, “Toulmin on Argument: An Interpretation and Application,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 46, no. 1 (1960): 44.

¹²Bart Verheij, “Evaluating Arguments Based on Toulmin’s Scheme,” *Argumentation* 19, no. 3 (2005): 348.

¹³James B. Freeman, “Systematizing Toulmin’s Warrants: An Epistemic Approach,” *Argumentation* 19, no. 3 (2005): 331–46.

¹⁴David L. Vancil, *Rhetoric and Argumentation* (McGraw-Hill/Primis Custom Publishing, 1998), 122.

¹⁵David Hitchcock and Bart Verheij, eds., *Arguing on the Toulmin Model: New Essays in Argument Analysis and Evaluation* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006). Recent applications of the model to new domains reproduce the limiting reading without remark; see, for example, Donghong Liu and Minghui Xiong, “Keeping Balance between Loyalty and Modification: A Toulminian Model as Analytical Framework,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024).

Our probability-terms come to serve, therefore, not only to qualify assertions, promises and evaluations themselves, but also as an indication of the strength of the backing which we have for the assertion, evaluation or whatever. It is the quality of the evidence or argument at the speaker's disposal which determines what sort of qualifier he is entitled to include in his statements: whether he ought to say, "This must be the case", "This may be the case", or "This cannot be the case".¹⁶

Here the qualifier measures backing, not warrant — and the difference is not merely terminological. In Toulmin's layout, backing is what underwrites the warrant's own validity: the statute behind a presumption of citizenship, say, or the taxonomic literature behind an inference from plumage to species.¹⁷ A qualifier that measures the strength of the backing reports how solid the ground of the inferential license itself is. A qualifier that measures the strength of the warrant, by contrast, indicates how far that license can carry the argument in the case at hand, exceptions duly noted. In most cases the two track together closely enough that the difference disappears from view: a warrant resting on thin backing is itself weak. That is why the tension between them is so easily overlooked.

The tension becomes visible once backing is treated as admitting no degrees. If a community treats a source as beyond error, backing of that kind does not place a claim at some point along a probability scale. On the backing-reading of the qualifier, the claim is instead placed at the top of the scale, whatever exceptions still attach to its warrant. On the warrant-reading, by contrast, a substantial argument remains substantial however strong its backing, and its author remains entitled only to "presumably." The two readings then issue in opposite verdicts on the very same argument. The corpus examined below displays this tension on nearly every page, which makes it an unusually clear case for testing the two readings against each other.

2.3 Not (Only) Hedging and Boosting

¹⁶Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 90.

¹⁷Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 103–07.

A reader from applied linguistics will observe that intensification is already a well-documented phenomenon with its own vocabulary. Hyland's work on academic discourse describes boosters as the counterpart of hedges — words such as “clearly,” “demonstrate,” “obviously,” “it is certain that.” Hyland shows that writers use both to manage the strength of their commitment and their relationship with the reader.¹⁸ If these sermons showed nothing more than boosting, the finding would be unremarkable and would pose no particular problem for Toulmin's model.

But boosters and qualifiers operate at different levels. A booster is a piece of metadiscourse — a device a writer uses to signal commitment, identified lexically by particular forms. A qualifier is part of the layout of argument — identified structurally, by its position and function within the argument. The two can and often do overlap in academic prose, but a booster may or may not occupy the qualifier's slot; nothing in the metadiscourse framework requires that they coincide. The claim of this article is accordingly structural, not lexical. In this corpus, the slot Toulmin marks Q, positioned beside the claim, comments on the warrant's relevance to that claim; in the data examined here, that slot is filled by intensifying rather than any other kind of expression. This is a claim about the layout of argument — one the hedging-and-boosting literature is not framed, and could not methodologically be framed, to make. Section 5 sets out the four tests used to examine this structural claim.

This distinction also carries analytical consequences. If intensification is read as boosting, the governing question is interpersonal: what is the writer doing to the reader? If intensification occupies the qualifier's slot, the governing question is epistemic: what is the arguer claiming about the relation between his grounds and his conclusion, and has he earned the right to claim it? It is this second question that makes normative assessment possible, and it is the focus of Section 6.

¹⁸Ken Hyland, “Boosting, Hedging and the Negotiation of Academic Knowledge,” *Text* 18, no. 3 (1998): 349–82; and Hyland, *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing* (London: Continuum, 2005).

2.4 Argumentation in Authority-Based Fields

Work on argumentation in fields that rest on authoritative sources remains scattered, but several studies point in a common direction. Jackson and Schneider’s study of the systematic review as a “warranting device” shows that an institutional artifact can function as portable backing: by citing it, a writer can draw on argumentative force the institution has already built up.¹⁹ Work on religious discourse notes that argumentation there often functions to consolidate a community’s identity rather than to persuade a hearer who has not yet taken a position.²⁰ Goodnight, similarly, has proposed that Toulmin’s layout needs a component that records the legitimacy of its own inference, a proposal pointing toward a comparable conclusion.²¹ None of this work, however, asks what happens to the modal qualifier in fields of this kind — a gap that matters, since the qualifier is precisely what records the relation between authoritative backing and the claim being advanced.

3. The Phenomenon

3.1 The Source of the Examples

The examples in this article are drawn from Lloyd-Jones’s expository sermons on Romans, preached on Friday evenings at Westminster Chapel between 1953 and 1968 and published in fourteen volumes.²² The analysis also builds on an earlier study that coded the elements of argument in sixteen sermons from the same series according to Toulmin’s model and published the full results of that analysis.²³

¹⁹Sally Jackson and Jodi Schneider, “Cochrane Review as a ‘Warranting Device’ for Reasoning About Health,” *Argumentation* 32 (2018): 241–72.

²⁰Agnieszka Bryła-Cruz, Martin Hinton, Weronika Olkowska, and Miriam Kobierski, “The Identity Function of Argumentation in Religious Discourse: A Comparative Case Study,” *Argumentation* (2026): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-026-09719-x>.

²¹G. Thomas Goodnight, “Legitimation Inferences: An Additional Component for the Toulmin Model,” *Informal Logic* 15, no. 1 (1993): 41.

²²D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition*, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970–2003). The sermons were preached on consecutive Friday evenings at Westminster Chapel; each volume records its own dates of delivery in its preface.

²³Trisfant, “Characteristics,” appendices A and B.

This article makes no new empirical claim. It starts from a phenomenon that earlier research has already established, and asks a question that research did not ask: what does this phenomenon imply for the model used to identify it? Every figure cited below is drawn from that earlier study and is attributed to it; the examples presented here serve as illustration, not as a sample. This distinction matters for what this article can claim, and Section 3.4 states its limits explicitly.

3.2 A Hedge and an Intensifier on a Single Page

The most direct way to see this phenomenon is through a passage in which the two forms of qualifier appear within a few lines of each other. Expounding Romans 5:6-8, Lloyd-Jones confronts Paul's own deliberately hedged claim — “scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.” He then glosses it in language that echoes Toulmin's own example almost exactly:

You do not find people laying down their lives for a man who is just righteous and correct; but people love a good man and are so attached to him that they say, “I would die for him.” History has many illustrations of this. Yet even in this case, there is no guarantee that one would die for another; it is not certain, it is just a possibility.²⁴

This is a qualifier in the standard sense, and it is correctly used. Its warrant is inferential and its backing is observed human behavior, so the conclusion is entitled only to “possibly” — and Lloyd-Jones states it that way. Two sentences later, moving from the human case to the divine one, the direction of modality reverses:

“But now,” he says, “God commends his love toward us,” and by that he means, “proves it,” makes it conspicuous and plain. God makes it so clear that there can be no question about it.²⁵

²⁴Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 5, Assurance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 121.

²⁵Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 121.

The same speaker, on the same page, within the same argument, hedges one claim and forecloses all doubt on the very next. What changes is not the speaker's temperament but the ground underwriting his claim: in the first case, a generalization about human behavior; in the second, the death of Christ. This comparison answers, in passing, the objection most often raised against an account of intensification of this kind — that the preacher is simply speaking emphatically because that is his manner. The data say otherwise: he hedges accurately when his warrant is inferential, and intensifies when the kind of backing changes. Section 4 explains why that change produces a reversal of modality.

3.3 Four Recurring Types

Intensification in this material does not take a single form but appears in several related patterns, distinguishable by the semantic device used to strengthen the claim.

Exclusivity. The claim is advanced as the only option remaining, with alternatives eliminated outright rather than merely judged weaker. “There is only one deduction that we can draw from what the Apostle says, and that is, that the whole world is ungodly.”²⁶ Elsewhere: “the only rational thing to do”; “there’s only one answer in the world at this moment”; “the Bible alone has got an answer for me.”²⁷

Impossibility. The negation of the claim is stated absolutely: the alternative possibility is not merely weighted low but removed altogether. “There is no such thing as a naturally godly person.”²⁸ Elsewhere: “the law cannot justify us, the law cannot sanctify us,” and “the utter impossibility of ever being sanctified by the law.”²⁹ This type most directly inverts Toulmin’s own paradigm, since

²⁶Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 118.

²⁷Lloyd-Jones, “The Message of the Bible, A Sermon on Romans 15:4,” sermon 5519, as analyzed in Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § A.3.4.

²⁸Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 120.

²⁹Lloyd-Jones, “Sin Uses Law to Produce Death, A Sermon on Romans 7:12–13,” sermon 3123, as analyzed in Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § A.2.1.

“cannot” and “impossible” are the very terms Toulmin uses to introduce the distinction between force and criteria.³⁰

Universality. The scope of the claim is widened to admit no exception, often through emphatic repetition. “There was nothing in mankind to recommend it to God, nothing in human nature, nothing in any one of us to recommend us in any way to God.”³¹ Elsewhere: “None of us means. Not one of us. Not one of us he says. Lives to himself. Not one of us.”³² Universality qualifiers are particularly striking because they often appear just after a limitation has been conceded — at precisely the point where the standard model would expect a hedge.

Categorical assertion. The claim is placed within a category of discourse no longer open to the kind of doubt at issue. “This isn’t a theory. This isn’t a philosophy. This isn’t a bit of psychology. No, no, this is history.”³³ Here intensification works through reclassification: the claim is moved out of the domain where qualification ordinarily operates, rather than merely defended within it.

These types are not mutually exclusive, and some examples combine two at once. But all of them move in the same direction of modalization: the expression accompanying the conclusion drives it toward the pole of certainty rather than away from it.

3.4 What the Prior Research Shows, and What It Cannot Establish

The earlier study found nineteen qualifiers across sixteen sermons, every one of them classified as “more sure” rather than tentative.³⁴ The counts by phase, alongside the counts for backing and rebuttal, are reproduced here because the

³⁰Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 22–35.

³¹Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 124.

³²Lloyd-Jones, “Live and Die to the Lord, A Sermon on Romans 14:5–9,” sermon 3361, as analyzed in Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § A.3.3.

³³Lloyd-Jones, “The God Who Acts, A Sermon on Acts 2:1–2,” sermon 2002, as analyzed in Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § A.4.3.

³⁴Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § 4.1.2.4.

direction of the relationship among them is what grounds the argument of Section 4.

Phase	Corpus	Qualifier	Backing	Rebuttal
1	Romans, early (4 sermons)	4	8	8
2	Romans, middle (4 sermons)	5	15	11
3	Romans, late (4 sermons)	7	20	11
4	Psalms and Acts (4 sermons)	3	6	5

Two things in this table deserve notice. First, the qualifier count moves in step with the backing count across all four phases. Second, qualifier and rebuttal do not stand in the inverse relation the standard Q-and-R construction predicts: phases 2 and 3 have exactly the same number of rebuttals, yet phase 3 shows stronger qualification. Indeed, across the corpus, the sermons that engage the most objections are the very ones that state their claims with the greatest certainty.

The limits of these figures must be stated plainly. They are small counts from a purposive sample covering a single preacher. In addition, the coding protocol recorded only one primary qualifier per sermon rather than every qualifying expression; a finer-grained protocol would likely yield different, and larger, figures. These numbers therefore establish no statistical relationship and support no generalization. What they establish is a direction of association — and it is that direction, not its magnitude, that grounds the argument of Section 4. A reader who doubts these figures may set them aside altogether: the examples in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 already suffice to raise the question this article exists to answer.

One further check deserves mention, since the earlier study worked from audio transcripts, and the qualifiers within them might be suspected of being artifacts of the transcription process. Two of the sermons were subsequently edited for print publication, and the comparison is mixed: the categorial qualifier quoted

above has no direct counterpart in the printed version, which preserves the same argumentative movement in tidier form — “He is not an abstraction. He is not the mere ‘ground of all being.’ He is not ‘the absolute’” — while in another chapter the chain of categorial negation survives intact, complete with the spoken “No, no” that introduces it.³⁵ The editorial practice appears inconsistent, and two cases are not enough to support a general claim about a process of “smoothing.” But one limited conclusion still holds: intensification is not an artifact of transcription, since it survives an independent editorial process, at least wherever the editor chose to keep the quotation.

4. Why the Inversion Occurs

4.1 *Field-Dependence, Applied to the Qualifier*

In the first essay of *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin draws a distinction he calls one that “will prove later of great importance.” The meaning of a modal term, he holds, “has two aspects.” The first is force — “the practical implications of its use” — and the second is criteria — “the standards, grounds and reasons” used to judge whether a modal term is warranted in a given context.³⁶ From this distinction Toulmin draws a generalization: “all the canons for the criticism and assessment of arguments... are in practice field-dependent, while all our terms of assessment are field-invariant in their force.”³⁷ Discussion of this thesis is almost always directed at warrants and backing; that law and physiology license different kinds of steps has become a commonplace of introductions to Toulmin. Far less often noticed is that Toulmin applies the same thesis to the qualifier itself. He writes: “the force of the conclusion ‘It cannot be the case that...’ or ‘...is impossible’ is the same regardless of fields: the criteria... vary from field to field.”³⁸

³⁵D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, Studies in the Book of Acts, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), chaps. 2 and 16. The printed chapter announces treatment of Acts 2:1–21 whereas the recording is cataloged on Acts 2:1–2, so the printed text may consolidate more than one delivery.

³⁶Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 30.

³⁷Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 38.

³⁸Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 36.

Now apply this distinction to the sermons under examination. The force of “the utter impossibility of ever being sanctified by the law” is the same wherever it is uttered: a possibility is ruled out, and the hearer is directed to consider it no further. But whether Lloyd-Jones is entitled to rule it out depends on criteria, and criteria are field-dependent. The question “is this qualifier too strong?” cannot, then, be answered by comparing it with the qualifiers appropriate to meteorology or citizenship law. It must be answered from within the field itself: what must be produced, in this field, to justify that exclusion, and has the arguer actually produced it? Toulmin’s own thesis, in other words, forbids treating intensification as an anomaly on first impression alone. It demands an examination of the criteria before any verdict is reached.

4.2 Transmission Warrants and Unimpeachable Backing

What, then, are the criteria in this field? The warrant that operates consistently across these sermons is a principle of transmission. A warrant of this kind does not license an inference from one state of affairs to another; it licenses the transfer of an epistemic status from an authoritative source to the claim being advanced. “What Scripture asserts is true”; “what held for the apostle holds for every Christian”; “what God has promised will not fail.” The data drawn on are textual — Romans 1:14, Romans 8:31, Acts 2:1-2 — and these texts are treated as fixed points, not as evidence still to be weighed.³⁹ The backing underwriting these warrants is itself layered: it includes the canon of Scripture, theological tradition (Augustine, Luther, Calvin, the Puritans, the Thirty-Nine Articles), and observed human experience. In the sermons analyzed, backing is in fact the single most dominant element, outnumbering every other.⁴⁰

A transmission warrant behaves differently from an inferential warrant when its backing is strengthened. Strengthening the backing of an inferential warrant makes the inference more reliable, but it remains an inference, and its conclusion still carries the residual uncertainty of that inferential step.

³⁹Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § 4.1.2.1.

⁴⁰Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § 4.1.2.5.

Strengthening the backing of a transmission warrant has a different effect: it strengthens the status of the source whose authority is being transmitted. If a community treats that source as beyond error, then what the warrant transmits is not a high degree of probability but the modal status of the source itself. The resulting qualifier states, not chiefly how strongly the data support the conclusion, but the modal status of the conclusion itself — and this is what makes possible the categorial forms identified in Section 3.3. “This isn’t a theory... this is history” makes no sense as a statement about inferential strength, but it makes complete sense as a statement about the status of its source. This is why the two readings that elsewhere seem to coincide come apart in this corpus. On the warrant-reading, every qualifier examined here is illegitimate, however strong the backing. On the backing-reading of page 90, by contrast, the same qualifiers are exactly what the field’s criteria require. The distributional evidence of Section 3.4 — qualification tracking backing rather than rebuttal — supports the second reading.

4.3 The Shifting Function of the Rebuttal

If the qualifier tracks backing rather than warrant, the rebuttal is performing a function different from the one assigned to it in the standard Q-and-R pairing. In the standard layout, R marks “circumstances in which the general authority of the warrant would have to be set aside,” and as long as a rebuttal remains live, the arguer must weaken Q.⁴¹ Harry is “presumably” a British subject because his parents might have been aliens; his qualifier is weak because his rebuttal remains open.

In the sermons analyzed by the earlier study, rebuttals appear frequently — thirty-five times across sixteen sermons — yet not one is left standing; every one is raised in order to be answered. Lloyd-Jones raises objections before answering them: outward obedience might save; grace might cancel moral obligation; election might mean only foreknowledge; a sermon need not

⁴¹Toulmin, *Uses of Argument*, 101. On rebuttal and defeasibility more generally see Douglas Walton, *Methods of Argumentation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31.

address doctrine; man might be master of his own fate. In every case, he answers the objection before carrying his argument forward.⁴² The order is: anticipate, rebut, then state the claim without reservation. The rebuttal thus shifts from a reservation attached to the claim into an obstacle cleared away before the claim is advanced.

This explains the co-variation reported in Section 3.4, which appears paradoxical on the standard model. If a rebuttal functions as a reservation, more rebuttals mean weaker qualification. But if a rebuttal is an obstacle already cleared, more rebuttals mean the claim has been defended more thoroughly — and on the backing-reading, it is thereby entitled to greater force. The positive association between rebuttal density and qualifier strength is a structural signature that, in this field, exceptions are answered rather than left attached to the claim. Two implications follow. First, the relation between Q and R does not work the same way in every field; their inverse relation holds only where the warrant is inferential and defeasible. Second, a high count of rebuttals does not always mean an argument has been “softened” — in a field like this one, that reading can be exactly reversed.

4.4 What Can Be Concluded from This Material

This analysis does not show that Toulmin’s page 101 formulation is mistaken — for fields with inferential warrants, it likely remains the more useful one. What it shows is that the two formulations are not equivalent, that the difference between them is ordinarily invisible, and that in a field like the one examined here the two issue in opposite verdicts. In this corpus, the page 90 formulation fits the pattern of the data better.

This article, accordingly, does not propose replacing the qualifier with a new element, but recognizing a field-specific variant of an element that already exists. An intensifying qualifier is an expression that occupies the Q slot, that raises rather than lowers the modal status of a claim, and that does so by stating the epistemic status of the backing rather than the defeasibility of the warrant.

⁴²Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § 4.1.2.6.

It is therefore a variant, not an exception — one generated by Toulmin’s own thesis of field-dependent criteria, applied to the element least often subjected to that thesis.

5. Is This a Qualifier at All?

The most serious objection to the analysis above is that emphasis has been mistaken for modality. Preachers, like politicians and advertisers, often speak emphatically, and emphasis can be a feature of delivery rather than a structure of argument. If every emphatic expression accompanying a conclusion is coded as a qualifier, an analyst will find intensifying qualifiers wherever a speaker sounds confident — when what has actually been found may be nothing more than a forceful style of delivery. This objection is legitimate and cannot be answered by counting alone; it requires structural criteria.

This article accordingly proposes four tests. An expression may be counted as occupying the qualifier’s slot only if it satisfies all four.

The attachment test. The expression must attach to the claim, not to the data or the backing. “This verse is the clearest in all Scripture” assesses a datum; “of this I am absolutely certain” modalizes a conclusion. Only the second is a candidate qualifier.

The modalization test. The expression must be paraphrasable as a modal operator scoping the claim, without loss of what it contributes. “The utter impossibility of ever being sanctified by the law” paraphrases as necessarily not-p without remainder. “None of us. Not one of us” paraphrases as for every x, p(x), where the repetition adds emphasis and the quantification fixes the modal scope. An expression whose entire contribution survives being paraphrased as “and I say this strongly” fails this test.

The dialectical test. The expression must bear some evident relation to how the argument handles objections — appearing, for instance, after a rebuttal, anticipating a doubt, or closing off an exception the arguer has already conceded. The qualifier, on Toulmin’s own construction, comments on the

warrant's relevance to the step being taken, and that function is only meaningful where the inferential step is actually in question. An expression appearing with no dialectical context of this kind is mere amplification.

The non-redundancy test. Removing the expression must change what the argument claims, not merely how forcefully it is delivered. If the argument, once the expression is removed, still commits the arguer to exactly the same claim, the expression is performing a rhetorical function only, not a structural one.

These four tests must also be applied to expressions that fail them, since a criterion that can rule nothing out is not a useful criterion. Two examples from the sermons on Romans 5:6-11 fail all four tests, each for a different reason.

Describing what it means to be a sinner, Lloyd-Jones piles up a series of epithets and then says: "Hurl your epithets and still you have not said enough."⁴³ The sentence is highly emphatic, but it fails the modalization test: it cannot be represented by a modal operator scoping a claim. What it states is the inadequacy of language, not the modal status of a conclusion. Its meaning survives intact when paraphrased as "and I say this strongly," which shows that its function is amplification.

A second example is more subtle. Arguing that assurance rests on the wholly free character of salvation, he adds: "Because God does not change, and cannot change."⁴⁴ This expression does perform modalization — necessarily not-p represents it without remainder. But it fails the attachment test. What is modalized is not the main claim being put to the congregation, which concerns the ground of the hearer's assurance, but a premise offered in support of that claim. In Toulmin's own terms, the qualifier comments on the warrant's relevance to the step toward the conclusion; an expression that modalizes the backing performs an adjacent but distinct function. The two must therefore be

⁴³Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 122.

⁴⁴Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 125.

recorded separately, so that the analysis does not conflate the strength of a claim with the strength of what supports it.

The result of setting these two examples aside is itself significant. The four tests are applied without regard to the direction of modality — whether an expression strengthens or limits a claim. Their exclusion of these two examples is therefore not an artifact of criteria designed from the outset to find intensifiers. The accurate hedge examined in Section 3.2 passes all four tests despite limiting its claim, which shows that the tests can recognize qualification that limits as readily as qualification that strengthens. The four tests thus show that the phenomenon under discussion is structural: the qualifier's slot really is filled by expressions that modalize, and — except where the warrant is inferential and human — that modalization runs in only one direction.

6. When Is Intensification Accountable?

For a preacher, this is the question that matters most. A model that merely recorded the inversion without assessing it would leave it unresolved. Toulmin's project was never a purely descriptive taxonomy; it was also meant to criticize and evaluate arguments. An account of the intensifying qualifier must therefore supply a standard for assessing it. Without such a standard, any confident claim made in the name of authority could appear equally justified — which is why a normative boundary is needed. If backing of the kind examined here can justify strong qualification, there must be criteria that keep that justification from being extended to any claim whatsoever made in that authority's name.

This article proposes three conditions. None of the three settles the truth of the claim itself — that lies outside what argumentation theory can be asked to do — but together they determine whether an argument remains open to examination and judgment by its hearers.

Backing must be exhibited, not merely claimed. A qualifier that reports the strength of its backing is accountable only if that backing is actually produced

and open to examination. The difference lies between merely invoking an authority and actually exhibiting it — between “Scripture teaches this” and setting out the text, the tradition, and the experience adequately enough that a hearer can examine the matter for himself. In this corpus, backing is the single most frequent element in every phase; phase 3 alone contains twenty instances drawn from Scripture, named theological authorities, and observed life.⁴⁵ An argument with a maximal qualifier but backing that is only gestured at, never shown, has claimed a right it has not yet earned.

Rebuttals must be engaged in their strongest form. If a rebuttal functions as an obstacle already cleared rather than a reservation still carried, the validity of the next step depends on whether the objection actually answered is a genuine form of that objection. An argument that rebuts a weak version of an objection and then states its claim without reservation has not earned a qualifier that strong. It is on this second condition that Lloyd-Jones’s material is most open to criticism: his rebuttals are numerous and detailed, but whether he engages his opponents in their strongest form is a question that has already been raised about his preaching and cannot be settled by structural analysis alone.⁴⁶ This condition is accordingly offered as a criterion for evaluation, not as a final verdict on Lloyd-Jones.

The scope of the qualifier must not exceed the scope of the backing. This is the strictest of the three conditions, and probably the easiest to violate in practice. Backing underwrites the status of a source only so far as what that source actually states. Trouble arises when a claim moves further from the source’s own statement — through interpretation, through application to circumstances the source never addressed, or through inference toward a practical conclusion — while the qualifier remains just as strong. Under those conditions, certainty about a text can quietly become certainty about a still-contested application, with no additional backing to support the shift. Structurally, the failure appears

⁴⁵Trisfant, “Characteristics,” § 4.1.2.5.

⁴⁶See, for the critical case, Gary Stewart Benfold, “A Critical Evaluation of the Evangelistic Preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones with Special Reference to His ‘Acts’ Series of Sermons and Its Relevance for UK Pastors Today” (DMin thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2017).

when the qualifier's force stays constant while the distance between backing and claim keeps widening. It is worth noting that in the earlier study's data, qualifier density is highest in Phase 3 — the hortatory chapters of Romans — precisely where the distance between text and application is greatest. Phase 3 is therefore the most important site for testing this third condition critically, whatever the outcome turns out to be.

Taken together, these three conditions distinguish an intensifying qualifier from a bare assertion. A bare assertion also occupies the Q slot and also strengthens a claim; what distinguishes it is the absence of exhibited backing, of engaged opposition, and of disciplined scope. This distinction matters beyond homiletics: it is the difference between an argument that invites its hearers to examine it and one that simply demands their submission — and that difference can be read off the argument's own structure, without speculating about the arguer's intentions. For a preacher the three conditions amount to a discipline rather than a formula: show the text rather than merely cite it, answer the strongest form of the objection rather than the weakest, and let the claim travel no further than the backing does. A congregation cannot verify a preacher's sincerity. It can, where the argument is laid open in this way, verify his reasoning — and that is the accountability an authoritative claim owes to those who are asked to receive it.

7. Conclusion

The modal qualifier is among the least examined elements of Toulmin's layout, and what discussion it has received generally assumes that its function is limiting. That assumption is never stated as a thesis in *The Uses of Argument*; it is better understood as an inheritance from the kind of field Toulmin chose to draw his examples from, where warrants are inferential, defeasible, and supported by evidence admitting degrees of strength. In fields of that kind, Toulmin's two accounts of the qualifier — as a report of backing strength and as a report of the strength conferred by the warrant — issue in the same verdict, which is why the difference between them is almost never visible.

The corpus of sermons examined here makes that difference visible. In this corpus the qualifier's slot is filled by expressions that strengthen: exclusivity, impossibility, universality, categorical assertion. The strength of the qualifier moves together with backing, not inversely with rebuttal. Rebuttals are answered rather than carried as reservations. All of this is exactly what the page 90 formulation predicts and the page 101 formulation forbids — and none of it requires rejecting Toulmin's framework. On the contrary, the pattern can be read as a direct consequence of Toulmin's own thesis: the criteria governing a modal term are field-dependent even though its force is not. That thesis has so far been applied chiefly to warrants and backing. The qualifier turns out to be the element that displays its consequences most clearly.

At least three directions for further research follow from this analysis. First, comparison within religious discourse: preaching traditions differ in the degree of authority they attach to their sources, and the account offered here predicts that qualifier behavior will vary accordingly — growing stronger as backing is regarded as closer to infallible. Second, comparison across fields: originalist constitutional argument, clinical reasoning that cites guideline recommendations as settled, and magisterial teaching all combine a transmission warrant with highly authoritative backing. If this analysis is correct, these fields should likewise show intensifying qualifiers and a positive co-variation between qualifier and rebuttal. Third, methodological development: the four structural tests proposed in Section 5 need to be tested, applied, and corrected, since this phenomenon cannot be studied reliably until emphasis and modalization can be reliably told apart.

In the end, what these sermons chiefly show is not that a preacher possessed certainty. What they show is that a model built to measure how far an argument falls short of full certainty must also account for the case where an argument is claimed to reach it. Toulmin, on page 90, had already opened a path toward that account. The preacher who says “of this I am absolutely certain” has not, on that ground alone, abandoned argument for assertion. Whether he has earned the

right to say it is the question this article has tried to make answerable — which is the most that argumentation theory, applied to the pulpit, can be asked to do.

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