The Ambitious and the Modest Meta-Argumentation Theses

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Abstract: Arguments are weakly meta-argumentative when they call attention to themselves and purport to be successful as arguments. Arguments are strongly meta-argumentative when they take arguments (themselves or other arguments) as objects for evaluation, clarification, or improvement and explicitly use concepts of argument analysis for the task. The ambitious meta-argumentation thesis is that all argumentation is weakly argumentative. The modest meta-argumentation thesis is that there are unique instances of strongly meta-argumentative argument. Here, we show how the two theses are connected and both are plausible.

The thesis that we think about our thinking, reason about our reasoning, or argue about our arguments is not a surprising one. In some ways, its statement is proof of its truth. Of course, just as we can reason badly, we can reason badly about our reasoning, and so an interesting (and potentially more surprising) possibility is opened: that there are unique errors to be made at the meta-cognitive and meta-argumentative levels of our reasoning (See Aikin and Casey 2022c; 2022d; 2023). Further, there may be unique norms and expectations we have of ourselves and our interlocutors when we operate at this meta-level. So, a set of conditions for successful meta-level reasoning and argument arises, necessitated by how we are assessing our assessments of our first-order reasoning.[1] Consequently, arguers proceed with an expectation that these meta-considerations bear on, are used in monitoring, and direct our first-order reasoning.

It is in this expectation of norm-monitoring and norm-directedness that we think an interesting loop occurs between our first-order reasoning and our norm-sensitivity on the meta-level: *maybe all our reasoning requires that we are implicitly keeping tabs on whether our reasoning lives up to those norms and reasoning about which norms apply*.[2] The modest thesis

[1] For overviews of those norms and errors at this level, see Aikin and Casey 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2023.

[2] For others who have argued for versions of this thesis, see Cohen 2001 and Godden 2019. Others have argued that there are further deliberations on how strictly rules are to be enforced (Lisciandra 2023).

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is that there are instances of explicitly meta-argumentative arguments that have particular vocabulary for those norms and forms. Again, the modest thesis is not surprising—the disciplines of logic and argumentation theory would not be possible were this thesis not true (See Finocchiaro 2013.). But this modest thesis bears the seeds for an ambitious (and surprising) thesis, that all argument is implicitly meta-argumentative. We will show how these two theses are connected and why there is good reason to think they are both true.

1 The Modest Thesis

An *argument* is a set of reasons given in support of a conclusion, and *argumentation* is a process of reason and argument exchange in pursuit of evaluating the overall case bearing on some issue. Arguments are meta-argumentative when they are arguments about arguments or argumentations for the purpose of evaluating, explaining, or otherwise understanding whether, how, or why they work (See Aikin 2020; Cohen 2001; Finocchiaro 2013; Marraud 2015; Wooldridge, McBurney, and Parsons 2005.). *Meta-cognition* is thinking about thinking, and that meta-level thinking plays two roles: monitoring and controlling our first-order thoughts. It is a commonplace to invoke the image of a thermostat to evoke the dual role of monitoring and controlling. (For examples of the image, see Ackerman and Thompson 2017; 2018.) The force of the image is that the thermostat monitors the temperature of a building, and when the temperature reaches some thresholds, the thermostat will activate other parts of the environmental system to regulate those temperatures. So, if things are too cold, the thermostat kicks on the heat. And if things are too hot, the thermostat engages the cooling system. Once the temperature returns within the prescribed bounds, the thermostat will disengage those systems. Meta-cognition, on this image, monitors our first-order thinking, and when it is given indicators that there needs to be re-direction, it engages corrective systems. In fact, there is good evidence that all of our first-order thinking has a background meta-cognitive monitoring (and potential control) in the process. Meta-cognitive monitoring and control are central elements to all reasoning (Ackerman and Thompson 2017; 2018). Call this the meta-cognition thesis.

An example may be useful to show that the meta-cognition thesis is plausible. It is drawn from the extensive research establishing that there is a consistent belief-bias in our evaluations of our own reasoning. In short, if we believe the premises and conclusions of an argument, then we are strongly inclined to endorse the reasoning as good. Consider the following syllogism (the *dog-syllogism*):

> All dogs are mammals.
>
> Some mammals are pets.
>
> So, some dogs are pets.

Given that people hold the premises and conclusion of the dog-syllogism to be true, they will likely assess the reasoning as acceptablethis is the belief bias. Because they feel right about the inputs and outputs, they do not engage the more costly testing measures for evaluating the reasoning. Only if there has been some hint of trouble (false premises or conclusion) or a kind of social provocation or priming (like, "this is a test" being communicated to them), most people do not detect the fallacious form the reasoning takes. The fallacy can be shown with the following counter-example (the *triangle-syllogism*):

All triangles are polygons.

Some polygons are squares.

So, some triangles are squares.

The monitoring function for our first-order reasoning engages correctives only when prompted, and acceptable input and output does not engage that support-quality detection. We monitor our reasoning, but we engage our controls only when our monitoring comes upon something that prompts the engagement. That, again, is how belief bias works, because acceptable inputs and outputs are the low-cost path to reasoning endorsement. So, the dog syllogism, because it is truth-in and truth-out, doesn't get the scrutiny for reasoning that the triangle syllogism would. Further, notice that it's only once we have the counter example provided do we now have the explicit meta-argument about the initial argument, essentially of the following form:

Valid arguments do not have counter-examples.

The dog syllogism has a counter example (the triangle syllogism).

So, the dog syllogism is not valid.

Notice that once we've got the meta-argument above, we are using explicitly meta-argumentative concepts and vocabulary: validity, counter examples, logical form, syllogism, etc. The observation about background monitoring and how corrective methods are engaged now occasions an observation about our explicit and shared reasoning about arguments. And these distinct observations now yield an explicit distinction. On the one hand, we have what is the endpoint of our thinking about the arguments—we have an *explicit meta-argument*. An argument is explicitly meta-argumentative when it is about an argument and uses meta-argumentative concepts and vocabulary in the evaluation and explanation of the argument's success or failure. But there must be a sense that we are also performing metacognitive tasks as we argue at the outset—otherwise we would not be able to explain the belief bias and the credence difference between the dog syllogism and the triangle syllogism. So, when we give and accept arguments like the dog syllogism, we are implicitly monitoring (and controlling) our shared reasoning—they are implicitly meta-argumentative arguments. An

argument is implicitly meta-argumentative when meta-cognitive processes of monitoring and control of the reasoning processes are necessary for the reasoning's performance. The key here is that the belief bias shown in the dog syllogism (and the fallacy committed) is best explained by our errors in reasoning about our reasoning, and those who did not fall for the fallacious inference did so because they, for external reasons, engaged a more costly reasoning check and yielded a nascent form of the explicit meta-argument.

In the case of those who did not fall for the fallacious dog syllogism (a large portion of our intelligent and critically sensitive readership, we expect), it is because a different meta-cognitive monitoring trigger was set off. Likely, it was that you were cued that this was a test or trick, so you engaged your higher-cost reasoning assessment systems, or you've merely developed the habit of applying rules to what are clearly basic syllogisms. All this was because we announced it as a dog *syllogism*. In this case, you were still reasoning about the reasoning, just not according to the belief bias heuristic, but some higher-cost but more reliable method. So, either way, there were meta-cognitive tasks being performed in the background yielding the end results of endorsing or rejecting the dog syllogism.

There, on the basis of these considerations, are two senses that an argument can be meta-argumentative: implicitly or explicitly. This distinction now allows us to state the two theses:

> *The modest meta-argumentation thesis:* some arguments are explicitly meta-argumentative.
>
> *The ambitious meta-argumentation thesis:* all arguments are implicitly meta-argumentative.

As we noted at the outset, the modest thesis is not a surprise at all, but there has been some progress here. We have more determinatively identified the obvious so that we can understand what's not quite so obvious—namely, the ambitious thesis.

It is worth giving the full argument for the modest meta-argumentation thesis, since if the objective is real mastery of the obvious (and we'd joked at the outset that stating it seems proof positive of its truth), we must bring that mastery to bear.

1. There are fallacy accusations in argument exchange.
2. Some fallacy accusations are arguments.
3. Fallacy accusations are explicitly meta-argumentative.
4. *So*, there are some explicit meta-argumentative arguments.

The case for premises 1 and 2 is that, in light of our case from the counter example to the dog syllogism, we have a fallacy accusation that is overtly argumentative. Next, the case for premise 3 is that the argument about the dog syllogism is explicitly meta-argumentative, as it uses the concepts

of validity, counter example, and syllogism. Further, one could, in variations of the arguments, speak of undistributed middle terms or mood IAI in Figure 1. The point is that in these instances, we not only reason about our reasons, but we do so with a vocabulary to systematically explain our evaluations. These are explicit meta-arguments, and so, the modest thesis follows.

2 The Ambitious Thesis

The case for the ambitious thesis requires some reflection on what we are doing in the argumentative process. The insight, we think, of the dog syllogism and its connection to the belief bias is that our bad reasoning is as much a problem of attention (to the wrong things) as it is inattention (to the right things). The takeaway is that even when we reason badly at the first order, we are monitoring and controlling our reasoning at another level—we choose heuristics, engage in testing strategies, and we decide to continue or terminate reflection on a question. And so, it's the meta-work, too, that contributes to the errors on the first order.

Another way to appreciate the case for the ambitious thesis is to emphasize the fact that arguments are inference-inducing speech acts. That is, arguments are given for the sake of moving from inputs to outputs, and an important element of making an *inference, qua inference*, is that one doesn't just take the input in and spit out the output. One endorses that movement of mind. That is, it seems a constitutive part of an inference that one finds the premises, all things considered, to be appropriate support for and reason to accept the conclusion.[3]

The claim here is not that the *validity* of the argument depends on our assessment. That relation obtains between premises and conclusions regardless of our attention. Rather, the issue is what we are doing when we respond to arguments *as arguments*. Our invocation of meta-level reasoning here is our best way to acknowledge that this is an intellectually demanding task, one that requires that we reflect upon our cognitive work and endorse it as we do it. In the same way that our beliefs, as our beliefs, have an endorsement element to them, so do our inferences. A parallel Moore's paradoxical arrangement can be shown between them. Consider:

(a) The internal inconsistency of saying: "I believe that it will rain, but it will not."

(b) The internal inconsistency of saying: "I reason that q, since p, but q does not follow from p."

The point is that in both cases, not only does the Moore's paradoxical nature of those statements show that there's a constitutive endorsement internal to both belief and inference, but their explicit statements (in argu-

[3] Versions of this constitutive thesis of reasons can be found in Aikin and Casey 2022d, Godden 2019, and Valaris 2014.

ments, particularly) have the same commendative force.[4] This endorsement is what it is because we have positively evaluated the beliefs (against the evidence) and the inferences (against background standards of support). One model for this evaluation is that there are cognitive seemings that make some inferences more plausible than others (see Huemer 2016; Fumerton 2015; Moretti 2019). So, syllogisms like Barbara, *modus ponens,* simple inferences to the best explanation, and the like will all have plausibility on their face in ways that obvious fallacies (like the triangle syllogism), complex implications, or evidentially underdetermined circumstances will not. We can become more or less sensitive to these forms, and we can become insensitive to how bad some are because of other cognitive heuristics (as we see in the belief bias cases). So, cognitive seemings are defeasible and sometimes are results of misleading heuristics, but they are the background of our normative evaluations that make inferences intellectual achievements so that in performing them, we also endorse them.

Argumentation, by extension, will more prominently highlight meta-argumentative elements. So long as we consider argumentation a process of reason and argument exchange over what the best resolution to some question or issue is, it will have the implicitly meta-argumentative features reviewed. We will reason over whether some reason was good or determinative, we will deliberate over whether we need more evidence or whether one of us is biased, and over who has the burden of proof. As we reason more about our reasons as we exchange them, what was implicit in how we'd done so individually now begins to become explicit and public. It will not be explicit in every case, but in the background. The case, then, for the ambitious thesis can be stated as follows:

1. All arguments and argumentations are essentially inferential products and processes.
2. All inferences constitutively require endorsements from processes of meta-cognitive monitoring and control.
3. Arguments that require meta-cognitive processes of monitoring and control are implicitly meta-argumentative.
4. *So*, all arguments and argumentations are implicitly meta-argumentative.

The insight behind this argument is primarily that of taking argument and argumentation to be either a product of our reflection on our reasons or the process of that reflection, so with them we are endorsing, making explicit, and trying to display the support these reasons provide for our conclusions. That reflective enterprise requires that we are at least implicitly surveying those reasons against a backdrop of quality criteria, completeness

[4] See Aikin 2006 for the commendative force of self-attributions of belief. For deployments of Moore's paradoxical features of belief, see Adler 2006; for use of the paradox for inferences and arguments, see Aikin 2011.

of evidence, procedural fairness in the exchange, and so on. And, again, that such normative positive evaluation is constitutive of these practices is shown in the Moore's paradoxical nature of statements endorsing those inferences in the first person, but denying them in the objective mood. The consequences, we believe, of this result are multiform.

First, we think that we need develop not only a program of evaluation for our first-order reasoning, but also for our meta-argumentative evaluations. Again, simply being aware of the belief bias should itself be a new norm for our evaluations of our argument evaluations. Second, now that we see that our initial argument-assessment tools are defeasible, we have reason to introduce new meta-argumentative considerations on whether closing inquiry is too hasty or on whether pursuing further critical questions is a waste of our time. Third, and finally, we have good reason to believe that many of the errors we make and many of the disagreements that divide us are not merely conflicts on the first order, but are also disagreements on how and whether particular argumentative norms bear on our exchange. If all argument is implicitly meta-argumentative, then clarity on all the levels will be more useful than attending only to the material issues initiating the critical discussion. Consequently, our objective is to open further inquiry into the norms of meta-argument and the variety of ways we fail to follow them.

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