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Commentary on Woods

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Commentary on: J. Woods' "A Resource-based Approach to Fallacy Theory"

In his paper John Woods sketches a theory of fallacies and considers two problems in particular. In my comment I shall first compare Wood's theory (or perhaps Woods' and Gabbay's theory) to other theories, especially my own and Sally Jackson's and then I shall turn to the two particular problems.

I and Sally Jackson both accept essentially the standard[1] definition of fallacy as an argument which is invalid but appears to be valid. In this definition 'valid' must be understood in a general sense as 'logically correct.' It must not be assumed that the validity in question is deductive validity; perhaps it is inductive. And it must not be assumed without discussion that deductive validity is truth-preservingness. Perhaps other logical correctness, such as non-question beggingness or Belnap-Anderson relevance restrictions are required.

Many fallacy theorists have generalized validity and invalidity to include many other kinds of goodness and badness. Woods does this himself, though, since the details are deferred to his and Gabbay's book, I shall in my comments ignore this divergence from the standard definition.

Many theorists have also dropped the 'approach to be good' part of the definition and simply see fallacies as bold arguments. Woods does *not* do this.

Now Jackson's theory is substantially different from mine in that I allow only fallacies of ambiguity to be real fallacies and Jackson allows a wider set. Woods here agrees with Jackson. However my and Jackson's theory are structurally very similar as I shall explain. And here Woods' theory shares this same structure. So his theory is very similar to Jackson's, leaving aside divergences from the standard definition which I am ignoring.

All three of us see a fallacy as an argument (or, Woods says, intellectual endeavor) which is invalid (or bad) but which appears to be valid (or good). And we all three explain the contrast between the invalidity and the apparent validity in terms of different levels of rationality. And we all three understand *rationality* as, roughly, doing the best you can with what you've got.

Let me explain my theory first.

I distinguish two levels of rationality, rationality 1 and rationality 2. A person who reasons in a way that is rational 1 makes no logical errors. His deductive arguments are deductively valid. His inductive arguments are inductively valid.

By contrast I consider the actual philosopher. He *is* a professional thinker with time to examine his arguments and with many logical tools and skills. But he deals in areas where our concepts are unclear and vacillating. So he cannot always distinguish between valid arguments and arguments whose invalidity is hidden by ambiguity. So he does the best he can. He puts forth arguments that appear to be valid to him and considers the objections and counter-arguments that arise. This procedure is rational 2. A fallacy arises when an argument is rationally 2 taken as valid, or rational 1, when it isn't.

Sally Jackson's theory is structurally similar but focuses on the ordinary person (actually

Jackson's and Wood's theories can be seen as *general*, including the ordinary person story as one special case and my philosopher story as another. I ignore this here.) The ordinary person does not have the time to examine every argument thoroughly and does not have the logical tools and skills to do so easily. So, given that they can't thoroughly examine every argument, it is reasonable for them to follow a second best procedure. I will call this procedure *rational 3*. When an argument comes along they subject it to a *low scrutiny*. If it passes low scrutiny, they look for danger signals. If there are danger signals, they take the time for more complete scrutiny. But if not, they accept the results of the low scrutiny. For instance, suppose an ordinary person is looking at an instance of affirming the consequent. He notes the first premise is a conditional and it *does* connect the other two statements. He fails to consider the *order* of the connection which would be considered in complete scrutiny. So far the argument is probably valid. He looks for danger signals. Is the argument given by a particularly untrustworthy and deceitful person? No. Does it have a very implausible conclusion? No. So, no danger signals and low scrutinizing is sufficient. So he concludes, rationally 3, that the argument is valid. But it isn't. Hence we have a fallacy.

Now I said that Woods' theory is close to Jackson's theory. However in the first particular problem that he raises in his paper, he departs from Jackson's and my approach. For me and Jackson, innocently falling into fallacy is blameless. Of course it would be blameworthy to knowingly deploy a fallacy to deceive others and, as Woods notes, it would also be blameworthy to fall into a fallacy through laziness when with due care you should have seen through it. But in the Jackson style[2] story about the ordinary person falling into affirming the consequent, the ordinary person is following the expected rational 3 procedures with expected care and that procedure misses the invalidity of the object argument. The person is blameless.

So Woods begins to wonder. Traditionally fallacies are blameworthy. If there is no blame, is there really a fallacy at all?

And when we look at the story about the person affirming the consequent, we may wonder further. The object-argument affirms the consequent and is invalid. But the ordinary person thinks this object-argument is valid on the basis of a probabilistic meta-argument. This meta-argument notes certain features of the object-argument, reflects that arguments with those features are usually valid and concludes, with probability, that the object argument is valid.

Now this meta-argument has a false conclusion. The object argument *isn't* valid. But a probabilistic or inductive argument can have true premises and false conclusion – I call it then *unfortunate* — and still be a valid probabilistic or inductive argument. For instance, at one time people argued that all (then) observed swans were white therefore all swans are white. This quite valid inductive argument was subsequently found to be unfortunate when the black swan was discovered in Australia. Or again, at one time people had tried and tried and tried to create vacuums without success. They concluded quite reasonably that nature abhors a vacuum. Unfortunately, this conclusion turned out later to be false.

So similarly the meta-argument in our example, if carefully stated to include only the information about the object argument that the person has time to take into consideration, will be valid though unfortunate. (This validity will be what I elsewhere call intense validity. The conclusion is probable given *only* the information stated in the premises.) So Woods thinks the ordinary person doesn't commit any fallacy and looks elsewhere for fallacy.

My own view is that, given the Woods-Jackson account of *appearance* of validity,[3] the ordinary person *does* commit a fallacy. Suppose I'm the ordinary person. I deploy the meta-

argument, stating only such facts about the object argument which make it appear to be valid. That is, the argument before me, whatever exactly it may be, is valid. My meta-argument is internally valid. No fallacy so far but now I deploy the object argument itself to derive the conclusion from *its* premise: p ⊃ q, q, therefore, p. And *there I* fall into invalidity and fallacy.[4]

Now let me turn to the other problem Woods raises. In work I am doing elsewhere I am considering inductive fallacies. I consider some supposed inductive fallacies, false cause, hasty generalization, confusing cause and effect, overlooking a common cause. I propose to argue that these supposed fallacies aren't real *fallacies* at all. They are kinds of *unfortunateneces* which even valid inductive arguments are vulnerable to. Even a valid inductive argument might arrive at a false causal conclusion or at a generalization which turns out to be premature -- the black swan is discovered the next day! -- or in some subtle way confuse cause and effect or overlook a common cause.

Historically these supposed fallacies seem to be based on rife failure to discriminate invalidity from mere unfortunateness. Aristotle (false cause) has no real concept of inductive validity. The Port Royal Logic (Hasty Generalization) used abhorring the vacuum as its chief example of the supposed fallacy. Mill (the other two) thinks the white swan argument, since unfortunate, must have been logically defective. Nor, as Woods himself notes, have textbook discussions improved the situation. Why not just reject these supposed fallacies?

I was proposing however to develop a contrary theory that would save these fallacies and then to argue *against* that theory. As it happens, Woods in his paper gives the very sort of contrary theory I had in mind.

Consider arguments to show the effectiveness of new medicines. Originally such arguments merely report that the medicine is given and lots of people get better. But then it is discovered that lots of people may get better even if not treated — spontaneous remission. And then it is discovered that even more people get better if given placebos. So, over time the standard for what we might call the *professional validity* of an argument for medical effectiveness rises. So some out-of-date person might know the old standard but not the new one and might think the old standard still current. Thus he thinks a given argument which meets the old standard only is valid, but it isn't. Thus a fallacy. And if the requirements for validity are designed to prevent a certain sort of unfortunateness, then the fallacy is one pertaining to that unfortunateness. Thus the traditional supposed fallacies are saved.

I propose to argue against this theory by arguing that in a *true* fallacy there is a fixed standard. The fallacy appears to satisfy that very standard, say the new one, that it actually fails to satisfy. In Woods' theory, the supposed fallacy does not even appear to meet the new standard; it only meets an old standard wrongly thought to be still current.

So let me sum up. Woods gives a theory of fallacies of a *sort* I approve of. He raises two rather deep problems for any theory of this sort. In each case, I am inclined to go a different way than he's going.

Notes

1. Recently, in a brilliant *tour de force* Hans Hansen has argued that the 'standard definition' isn't really standard at all ("Straw-thing of fallacy theory," *Argumentation* (2002) 16: 133-55). Woods endorses Hansen's conclusion. I don't, and will argue elsewhere that it is wrong, despite Hansen's powerful argument. Note here that Woods himself seems really to know perfectly well that the standard definition really is standard. He says it is a 'common misconception' of what a fallacy is. But is there really any difference between a common conception of what something is and a standardly accepted definition of it?

  True, Woods says this misconception is common only among the logically naive. But this is clearly false. The logically naive don't have the concept of 'validity,' and think a fallacy is just a falsehood. The common conception is common among philosophers and logicians, not the naive. Around 1970, Hamblin writing in Australia or wherever, cites the definition as standard. About the same time, I, writing my PhD thesis in Detroit, Michigan, allude to the very same definition as being the common acceptation of the word, 'fallacy.' How did me and Hamblin come to hallucinate the same definition independently of each other? Because it *was* standard.

2. In her paper Jackson does not actually give an account of affirming the consequent, but her account of syllogistic fallacies is similar and affirming is a simpler example. See Sally Jackson, "Fallacies and heuristics," in *Analysis and Evaluation*, vol. 2 of the Proceedings of the Third ISSA Conference, edited by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Blair and Willard (Amsterdam: Sic Sat, 1995) pp. 257-69.

3. On my use of 'appears to be valid,' affirming does not appear valid. Roughly, there is no valid form F such that it appears to satisfy F.

4. It is important here that the meta-argument does *not* contain a full specification of what the object argument, the supposedly valid deductive argument, *is*. The meta-argument is internally valid; its conclusion is probable given *only* the information in its premises. However, once the object-argument is specified in toto, the meta-argument is externally *in*valid with respect to this further information. For this further information makes the conclusion of the meta-argument logically impossible, and therefore acceptance of the conclusion is *not* rational.