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Title: Attention to Kinds of Claims in Argument Evaluation

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Response to this paper by: James Freeman

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There are at least two different *kinds* of claims that can be argued for. One can provide an argument for a claim about the way the world *is* in some particular place at some particular time. And, on the other hand, one can provide an argument for a claim about the way the world *ought to be*, specifying some particular place and time or not doing so. I propose to call the first kind of claim an ‘is-claim’, and the second an ‘ought-claim’. To clarify, here are some examples. Suppose that someone, by asserting the appropriate declarative sentences, makes the following claims:

- 1) It is raining
- 2) This turnip weighs 2 lbs.
- 3) Toronto is north of Atlanta
- 4) Jean Chretien is the Prime Minister of Canada
- 5) Al Gore should be the President of the U.S.
- 6) Murdering the innocent is wrong
- 7) Turnip tastes awful

As I see it, (1)-(4) are claims about the way the world is, and are, thus, is-claims in the terminology that I have proposed. (5) and (6), meanwhile, seem to me to be claims about the way the world ought to be, (5) implicitly specific to the present and (6) not so. Thus, they are ought-claims in my terminology. I’m not sure about (7). I definitely do not take it to be an ought-claim, but it is not implausible to think it an is-claim. The uncertainty here seems to arise given some important difference between, e.g., attributing the predicate ‘weighs 2 lbs.’ to an object and attributing the predicate ‘tastes awful’ to an object—the latter, unlike the former, appears to be subjective in character. (Perhaps, a further kind of claim needs to be distinguished, a ‘yuk-claim’ for a claim like (7), and a ‘yum-claim’ for the claim that turnip tastes wonderful.)

Regardless, I hope that these examples have adequately clarified what I mean when speaking of is- and ought-claims. Perhaps you already agree with me that this distinction among claims is justified. However, if you do not, I have a brief argument that I think you might find convincing. Consider the fact that what makes claims like (1)-(4) *true* or *false* is something about the way the world is: it is because the world happens to have certain features rather than others that each of (1)-(4) is true or false. If someone claims, for example, that it’s raining, the truth or falsity of this claim depends solely, it seems to me, upon the state of the weather at the relevant place and time. But now consider a claim like (5) or (6); consider, for example, the claim that murdering the innocent is wrong. It would seem that the way the world is has absolutely no bearing whatsoever upon the truth or falsity of this claim. The way the world is might *explain* why someone makes this claim, but the truth or falsity of the claim itself does not appear in any way to depend upon the way the world is. In view of this fundamental difference between the truth or falsehood of what I call is-claims and what I call ought-claims, then, I

maintain that there is indeed a difference in kind here, and that the distinction is not only justified but very important to recognize.

Why, you might ask, is it so important to recognize this? I believe it to be so because I think it necessitates a further distinction among arguments. An argument for an is-claim is essentially an attempt to establish its truth to someone else, and the same holds for an argument for an ought-claim. But if each kind of claim depends upon something fundamentally different for its truth or falsehood, then it would seem to follow that arguments for each will take fundamentally different forms. And this, in turn, seems to imply that evaluating an argument of the one kind ought to be a fundamentally different task from evaluating an argument of the other kind. For the sake of brevity, I shall call arguments for is-claims 'is-arguments' and arguments for ought-claims 'ought-arguments'.

II

In what way, then, does an is-argument differ fundamentally from an ought-argument? Well, of course, the first fundamental difference consists in the fact that their conclusions differ in kind from one another. And we have already considered the reasons for thinking this so. What I now wish to urge is that the set of implicit or explicit premises ordinarily provided in an is-argument differs fundamentally from that ordinarily given for an ought-argument. Suppose that someone provides another person with an argument for the claim that Jean Chretien is the Canadian Prime Minister by quoting several recent newspaper articles describing him as such. This argument, then, consists of several premises to the effect that such-and-such a newspaper describes Chretien as the Prime Minister.

What I wish to draw your attention to here is that the claims given for the conclusion are, like the conclusion itself, is-claims. And this is not surprising. It makes sense that, in order to establish the truth of some is-claim (i.e., in order to establish that the world is a certain way), one would ordinarily make further is-claims. If one's goal is to establish that some object in the world has some property or that some set of objects in the world stand to one another in some relation, then one seems bound to make certain claims about other features of the world. In other words, in attempting to establish that the world is some way, one seems bound to making other claims about the way the world is.

But suppose, now, that someone provides another person with an argument for the claim that Al Gore should be the U.S. President, by claiming that Gore is more intelligent than Bush and more trustworthy than Bush. This argument consists of a couple of premises to the effect that Gore has the properties characteristic of intelligence and trustworthiness to a higher degree than does Bush. But is this all that the argument amounts to? Mustn't we attribute at least one further claim to the arguer in addition to these is-claims? It seems to me that at least one implicit premise needs to be recognized; namely, a premise that expresses the arguer's belief that Gore's having these properties in a higher degree somehow establishes the conclusion. The arguer must have in mind some belief or attitude that amounts, essentially, to thinking that a person having these properties to a higher degree than some other person *ought* to be the President rather than the other person. It seems, in other words, that the argument contains at least one implicit ought-claim, and that the reasoning of the arguer is not fully understood without recognizing this. Again, I think it is not surprising that this ought-argument must have at least one ought-claim among its premisses. If one's goal is to establish that it ought to be the case that some object

have some property or that some set of objects stand in some relation to one another, then one seems bound to doing *more* than merely making claims about the way the world is. In attempting to establish that the world ought to be some way (regardless of whether it is or is not that way), one needs to do more than simply describe several features of the world as it is—one must at some point make a claim that applies to the way things ought to be, apart from how they, in fact, are.

These considerations appear to point to a fundamental difference between what I have been calling is- and ought-arguments. Normally, an ought-argument will contain at least one, perhaps implicit, ought-claim in its set of premises—i.e., at least one claim that applies to the way things ought to be rather than, say, the way they are. On the other hand, an is-argument will not normally have any such ought-claim among its premises; rather, it will ordinarily contain only is-claims—claims applying to the way things are, set forth in order to establish another claim about the way things are.

III

But, now, if most (perhaps all) is-arguments differ in some fundamental way from most (perhaps all) ought-arguments, then does this not mean that the two ought to be evaluated in fundamentally different ways? This is the question that I shall now address.

The standard procedure for evaluating any argument whatsoever consists of two parts. First of all, each of the premises is to be evaluated individually, as true or false or, alternatively, as acceptable or unacceptable. Secondly, the evaluator is to determine whether or not the truth of the premises provide an appropriate degree of support for the truth of the conclusion. Some maintain that the degree of support provided by the premises ought to be evaluated in relation to the claim to this effect expressed (explicitly or implicitly) in the argument, thus straying to an extent from the standard procedure described above. It seems to me also that an evaluation as to the degree of support is only appropriate when considered in relation to this. Thus, when describing some "standard" analyses of arguments below, I shall employ the standard procedure, bearing in mind also this additional consideration.

Consider the is-argument discussed above, in which various newspapers are quoted in order to support the conclusion that Chretien is the Canadian Prime Minister. Following this standard procedure, we are to, first of all, evaluate each of the premises as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable. Let us consider how we would go about doing so. There are here several claims to the effect that such-and-such a newspaper describes Chretien as Prime Minister. Clearly, the most effective means of evaluating each claim is to obtain copies of the newspapers quoted and see for ourselves whether they do, indeed, describe Chretien in this way. If obtaining the newspapers is impossible for some reason we might instead check the claims of the arguer against those of a more reliable source, perhaps the author(s) of the articles in question. One thing to notice about both of these methods of evaluating these premises is that both involve some form of empirical investigation. No doubt, reasoning is involved; but, in both cases, the strategy is to go out and look something up or find someone and elicit some relevant information from them. And, considering that these premises are themselves is-claims, claims about how things are, it makes sense that this is the strategy adopted. Remember, we pointed out earlier that what makes an is-claim true depends upon how things are in the world. Not surprising, then, that

one embarks upon an empirical investigation of some kind in order to evaluate them as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable.

The second part of our evaluation of this argument is to consist in determining whether or not the premises provide the degree of support that the arguer appears to think they do. Someone making this argument might intend it as a conclusive one. But it seems equally plausible to think, rather, that the truth of the premises is thought by the arguer to make the truth of the conclusion merely probable or slightly less than certain. Let us say, then, that the arguer thinks that the truth of the premises makes the truth of the conclusion *at least* probable. Now the evaluator must determine whether or not this is actually so. Is it actually the case that if these premises are all true, then the truth of the conclusion is at least probable? (I'll let you answer this question for yourselves, but I must say, that, personally, I believe this to be so, despite the fact that quality journalism is rare nowadays.)

Let us turn now to an evaluation of the ought-argument described above, in which it is argued that Gore should be the U.S. President because he's more intelligent and more trustworthy than Bush. Here we have a couple of explicit is-claims that, together with an implicit ought-claim, are given in support of the conclusion. Employing once again the standard two-part procedure, we begin by evaluating each of the premises individually as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable. And in order to evaluate the is-claims, we might look up certain relevant facts about the history of both Gore and Bush in addition to looking up certain facts relevant to their present character. Once again, the strategy is primarily empirical: we attempt to evaluate each claim by discovering certain properties that Gore and Bush have and have had, because these claims themselves are claims about properties that the two men have and how they relate to one another with respect these properties. But consider the implicit ought-claim to the effect that the more intelligent and trustworthy of two people ought to be the President. How do we go about evaluating this claim? Right off, it seems entirely misguided to embark upon some empirical investigation. An empirical investigation will inform us as to how things are in the world, but this claim makes an assertion about how things ought to be in the world regardless of how they actually are—*regardless, that is, of what any empirical investigation would reveal*. Evaluating this claim adequately, then, seems to require a very different mode of inquiry. Again, reasoning will no doubt be required; and one might also consult the claims of others upon this issue. However, it would seem that, at some point, the evaluator must consult his or her own intuitions (moral intuitions, perhaps) in order to evaluate this claim. One might, for example, evaluate the claim as false because they don't believe that higher intelligence and trustworthiness alone are sufficient for deciding, between two people, which ought to be President. And it would seem that this evaluation rests at bottom upon some intuitive belief or set of intuitive beliefs that this evaluator has about what kind of person ought to be President.

However this ought-claim is evaluated, the evaluation is not complete until we have determined whether or not the truth of the premises provides the degree of support that the arguer appears to think they do. Here, again, the evaluator is to determine, first of all, the degree of support that the arguer appears to attribute to the premises, and, secondly, the degree of support that actually exists. It would seem that in this argument, as with the is-argument evaluated above, it is most reasonable to think that arguer believes the truth of the premises to make the truth of the conclusion at least probable. And so now we are to determine whether or not this is actually so: if it is indeed the case that Gore is more intelligent and trustworthy than Bush and it is the case that the more intelligent and trustworthy of two people ought to be the U.S. President,

does this make the truth of the conclusion certain, probable or merely possible? Well, it's pretty clear that if these premises are true, their truth makes the truth of the conclusion *certain*, and the belief attributed to the arguer, concerning the degree of support provided by the premises, is to be evaluated as true or acceptable.

If we now compare the two evaluations, it is apparent that, though there is no clear difference with respect to evaluating the degree of support provided by the premises, there is a fundamental difference with respect to evaluating the premises. This fundamental difference comes down to the fact that one is usually (perhaps always) required to evaluate an ought-premise when evaluating an ought-argument, and seldom (perhaps never) required to do so when evaluating an is-argument. And, as we have seen, evaluating an ought-claim as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable, appears to be a fundamentally different task from evaluating an is-claim as true or false. Because is-claims are claims to the effect that the world is a certain way, evaluating them is primarily an empirical task; ought-claims, on the other hand, are not claims about the way the world is, so no amount of empirical investigation will *alone* provide the means necessary for a final determination as to their truth or falsity, acceptability or non-acceptability. Something else is required, and I have suggested that it is most likely an appeal to certain intuitions about the way things ought to be, *moral* intuitions perhaps.

IV

These considerations seem to me to imply that the standard procedure for evaluating arguments needs to be modified to some extent. First of all, I think that the fundamental difference between the process of evaluating ought-claims and is-claims implies that the first part of the standard procedure, that demanding the evaluation of premises, ought to be modified. As it stands, the evaluator is told simply to evaluate any premise, whether it be what I call an ought-claim or what I call an is-claim or otherwise, as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable. But if the evaluator-to-be is a student in a first-year critical thinking course, it would seem that more ought to be said. The student will likely be, at some pre-philosophical or intuitive level, cognizant of the fact that she cannot evaluate a typical ought-claim as true or false in the same manner that she can evaluate a typical is-claim as true or false. Indeed, the initial reaction in students is often to insist that ought-claims simply cannot be evaluated as true or false, that there is no fact of the matter, and that, therefore, they are wasting their time engaging in such an exercise. I think that this somewhat natural yet deleterious reaction can be overcome by making it clear at the outset that one is *not* being asked to evaluate an ought-claim as one should evaluate an is-claim; rather, when evaluating an ought-claim, one is asked to appeal to one's intuitions about what ought to be, thereby, perhaps, embarking upon some kind of moral inquiry in which relevant questions about what is 'right' or 'good' are explored.

Of course, care must be taken to make it apparent that one is being asked to think about what *ought* to be the case, not merely what they would *like* to be the case. One way to appreciate this distinction is to consider a scenario such as the following. Suppose I am eating lunch in a restaurant, surrounded by many others who I have seen almost everyday at this time for several years, because we all have our lunch break at the same time and choose to eat at this restaurant. I know them all to this extent; but, other than that, we are complete strangers to one another. One day I happen to notice that one of them drops a piece of paper on the floor as she is leaving. I don't think much of it at the time, and continue eating my lunch. When I get up to leave about twenty minutes later, I glance at the piece of paper as I'm walking past it, and see that it's a

lottery ticket. I pick it up, noticing that it's a ticket for tomorrow's jackpot. And tomorrow, I learn that I'm holding the winning ticket—worth a cool two million dollars. Undoubtedly, I would *like* to keep all the money for myself. Nevertheless, there is some sentiment in me insisting that this *ought not* to be the case: I *ought not* to keep all the money; rather, I *ought* to contact the original holder of the ticket and work something out—perhaps a way of sharing the money.

In view of the first modification described above, I think, secondly, that the first step in the evaluation of any argument ought to be that of determining what kind of claim it is that the arguer is providing an argument for. Is it an is-claim, an ought-claim, or some other kind of claim? If the conclusion is an ought-claim, there is almost certainly going to be at least one (explicit or implicit) ought-claim among the premises. And if it isn't explicit, then the evaluator must identify it before proceeding to an evaluation of the premises.

In conclusion, let us consider the following modified procedure for evaluating arguments, formulated in view of the points raised in this paper. Supposing that the argument to be evaluated has been interpreted correctly, the evaluator is now asked, first of all, to determine what kind of claim the conclusion is, i.e. whether it is an ought-claim, an is-claim, or some other kind of claim. This is the first step. If it is determined that the conclusion is an ought-claim, the evaluator is now required to identify any implicit ought-claims among the premises if they haven't done so already. The next step is to evaluate the premises, and then, finally, to determine the degree of support provided for the conclusion by the premises, squaring this with what the arguer most likely intended in this respect.

This procedure can be summarized as follows.

Step #1:

(i) *Determine what kind of claim the conclusion is.* Is it a claim about how things are in the world? Or, is it a claim about how things ought to be? Or, is it some other kind of claim?

(ii) *If the conclusion being argued for is an ought-claim, then identify any implicit ought-claim(s) among the premises, if this hasn't been accomplished already in the interpretation of the argument.* Is the arguer explicitly or implicitly using ought-claims to establish the conclusion? If so, what are they?

Step #2:

Evaluate each of the premises as true or false, acceptable or unacceptable. In doing so, be sure to recognize whether a given premise is an ought-claim or an is-claim or some other kind of claim; recognizing this will reveal the manner in which the premise is to be most adequately evaluated.

Step #3:

(i) *Determine the degree of support that the arguer most likely believes to be provided by the premises.* If you were ask the arguer what the truth of the premises implies about the truth conclusion, what would do think the arguer would most likely say? (Does the arguer most likely believe that their truth makes the truth of the conclusion certain? Probable? Possible?)

(ii) *Determine the degree of support that is actually provided by the premises.* Now, ask yourself: What does the truth of the premises actually imply about the truth of the

conclusion? (Does it imply that that truth of the conclusion is certain? Probable? Possible?)

(iii) *Determine whether or not the belief attributed to the arguer in (i) is correct.* Compare your answer in (ii) to that attributed to the arguer in (i): Are they identical? In other words, is the belief you attributed to the arguer correct?

Step #4:

Overall evaluation. If all premises are evaluated as true, and the belief attributed to the arguer as to the degree of support provided by the premises is evaluated as correct, then the argument is (so far as these considerations are concerned) a good one; otherwise, it is not.

Here, the standard two-step procedure is modified in the two ways suggested earlier. First, an initial step has been added at the beginning, in which the evaluator is required to determine what kind of claim the conclusion is and to identify any ought-premises if the conclusion is an ought-claim. Second, it is made explicit that, when one is evaluating each premise as true or false, one ought to recognize what kind of claim it is and adopt, based upon this, the appropriate manner of evaluating it. I have added the final step, concerned with overall evaluation, merely to show how the previous two steps come together into an evaluation of the argument as a whole. I recognize that there may be additional conditions that must be met in order for an argument to be evaluated as 'good', over all. But I shall not treat this issue, as my concern in this paper has been merely to modify the standard procedure in the ways that I have suggested. More modifications may be necessary, but, here, I have been concerned only with two.