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## Commentary on Feteris

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# FETERIS ON 'INSTRUMENTAL' ARGUMENTATION

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I should begin by saying that I agree with the substance of Eveline Feteris' presentation. As she maintains, we *can* usefully distinguish and discuss what she calls 'pragmatic' argumentation; it *can* be analyzed along lines that she suggests; and it *can* constitute 'sound' reasoning. That being said, I want to raise a number of questions about the way in which she develops her analysis. They will, I hope, help her refine her account.

## *What's in a name?*

I want to begin with some comments on the names Feteris uses for 'pragmatic' or 'instrumental' argumentation—reasoning which, on her account, invokes "the consequences of a decision". Let me say at the outset that the term "instrumental" seems to me to best capture the kind of reasoning she discusses, for it justifies a decision by claiming that it would be instrumental in bringing about or preventing some desired consequences.

Whatever one thinks of this, one invites confusion when one calls such arguments 'consequentialist' or 'teleological,' for this contradicts a use of these terms which is well entrenched in ethics and philosophy. In these contexts, we might say that a consequentialist or teleological argument appeals to consequences, but it does so in a more restricted sense than that implied in Feteris' instrumental arguments. For in ethics and philosophy, the crux of a consequentialist argument is an appeal to consequences *as opposed to universal rights or duties*. Looked at from this point of view, it is peculiar to find that consequences in Feteris' sense often include implications for rights and duties.

Consider the following two arguments.

*Argument A.* We should adopt policy X because it is in these circumstances the only way to assert principles of non-discrimination.

*Argument B.* We should adopt policy X because it will, if adopted, make the vast majority of people happy.

Both A and B are consequentialist arguments in Feteris' sense for both can, in a loose sense, be said to advocate policy X because adopting it has some consequences. But only B is consequentialist—or "teleological"—in the sense in which this term is used in ethics and philosophy. It is in this regard significant that Feteris' description of the "Sun Courtyard" case—which she gives as a paradigm example of pragmatic argumentation—suggests that it is not consequentialist in this more familiar sense. I propose that we avoid the confusion this invites by not using the terms "consequentialist" and "teleological" to refer to the instrumental reasoning Feteris discusses.

For the same reason, it is misleading to put the question posed by instrumental arguments as the general question whether the end justifies the means. Posed as a general question, this question is itself confusing for it makes little

sense to say that the end *always* does—or does not—justify the means. The question makes sense only in the context of specific cases, but even in these cases it does not capture the question posed by instrumental reasoning. This is because such reasoning in many cases justifies measures that ensure the priority of rights and duties over what ethicists call teleological ends.

Consider the following blatant example:

We should adopt Policy X because it will ensure that the rights of individuals cannot be trampled, even by those who seek good ends.

This is an instrumental argument in Feteris' sense. It justifies X by appealing to consequences it will have instead of claiming that X is good in itself. But this is an argument which is pointedly not teleological or consequentialist. Indeed, it explicitly denies that the end justifies the means, advocating policy X because it will prevent this from occurring.

*What of slippery slope arguments?*

My second suggestion is that an overview of theoretical analyses of instrumental arguments should include a discussion of analyses of slippery slope arguments,<sup>1</sup> for the latter appear to have a great deal in common with Feteris' account of instrumental reasoning. Even if there is a fundamental difference, a clear statement of this difference will help clarify the nature of instrumental reasoning.

*Should we distinguish between positive and negative instrumental reasoning?*

The affinity of slippery slope reasoning to instrumental arguments underscores Golding's point that there is a negative and a positive version of instrumental reasoning. Following Feteris, we might present the positive version as:

Standpoint: Act X is desirable  
Because: Act X leads to consequence Y  
and: Consequence Y is desirable

In a similar way, we might usefully schematize the negative version of instrumental reasoning as:

Standpoint: Act X is not desirable  
Because: Act X leads to consequence Y  
and: Consequence Y is not desirable

I think we should recognize these forms of instrumental reasoning as two distinct subspecies of instrumental argumentation, for both are common and because their evaluation raises two kinds of concerns we need to distinguish.

*How should positive instrumental reasoning be schematized?*

I want to finish with a comment about the assessment of instrumental reasoning which suggests that we should amend Feteris' treatment. It is a natural consequence of the distinction between positive and negative instrumental reasoning we just noted. If one considers the two schemes that we have sketched from the point of view, one is struck by their apparently different strengths. The negative version of instrumental reasoning seems a straightforward version of modus tollens ("denying the consequent"). Thus we can represent it as:

P1: If X then Y  
P2: Y should be prevented  
C: X should be prevented

Without going into great detail, it seems safe to say that this inference is a straightforwardly valid argument.

In marked contrast, the opposite seems true of the positive version of instrumental reasoning, which is the version emphasized by Feteris. Indeed, it is an inference which looks suspiciously like the fallacy "Affirming the Consequent." Thus we can schematize it as:

P1: If X, then Y  
P2: Y is desirable  
C: X is desirable.

We can illustrate the apparent weakness of this inference with the following example.

P1: If we fired all full-time university instructors and gave their salaries to part-time instructors, then part-time instructors would be better paid.  
P2: Part-time instructors should be better paid.  
C: We should fire all full-time university instructors and give their salaries to part-time instructors.

Assuming that we accept the premises of this argument, it does not follow that we must accept the conclusion, most obviously because we may believe that there are other less drastic ways of ensuring that part-timers be better paid.


Such examples appear to raise serious questions about instrumental arguments when they are characterized as Feteris characterizes them. But I want to finish by noting that her analysis itself contains the seeds of a way around the difficulty, for she herself notes that some authors stipulate that a positive instrumental argument should establish that the action X which is proposed "is the most efficient and profitable way to attain consequence Y". If we accept this point, then we can amend our scheme for positive instrumental reasoning and represent such argumentation as:

Standpoint: Act X is desirable  
Because: Act X leads to consequence Y  
and: Consequence Y is desirable  
and: Act X is the most efficient and profitable way to attain consequence Y

If we understand instrumental reasoning in this way we have a basic model of positive instrumental reasoning which can guide us in both the construction of a good instrumental argument and in the evaluation of instrumental

arguments which are proposed by others. It is this amended version of Feteris' analysis which seems to me to hold the most promise for an analysis of such arguments as they occur in real life contexts.

### *Notes*

1. See, e.g., Leo Groarke, Christopher Tindale, Linda Fisher, *Good Reasoning Matters!* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 246-249. For a detailed account of slippery slope, see Douglas Walton, *Slippery Slope Arguments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992). 

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