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Good Arguments and Fallacies

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GOOD ARGUMENTS AND FALLACIES

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Abstract:
To understand what a fallacy is one needs to understand what a bad argument is and what it is for an argument to appear good. I will argue that from an intuitive standpoint a good argument should be understood in roughly the way Richard Feldman has proposed, that is, as an argument that gives people reason to believe its conclusion. However, I will also argue that an externalist condition that requires that the premises really do support the conclusion must be added to the internalist account which only requires that a person be justified in *believing* the premises support the conclusion.

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Recently Richard Feldman and Larry Powers have addressed the question, "What is a good argument?". Their answers are quite similar but I will argue that Feldman's answer is too weak and Powers' too strong. After defending an account of a good argument that I hope is neither too weak nor too strong, I will address the question of what a fallacy is. A fallacy is a bad argument that *appears* to be good. To have an adequate account of a fallacy we need both an account of what it is for an argument to *be* good and of what it is for it *to appear* to be good. I argue that the common sense account of a good argument I construct by modifying the accounts of Feldman and Powers is not appropriate for determining what a bad argument is in the sense used in the definition of a fallacy.

I

Feldman starts out by criticizing what he calls logical views of what a good argument is. The first of those accounts says that an argument is good if and only if it is valid and has true premises (Feldman, p. 159). Feldman argues that these conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient for an argument to be a good one. They are not necessary because inductive arguments can be good ones even though the premises do not necessitate the conclusion, so even though they are not valid, they are good arguments (Feldman, p. 161). And even deductive arguments can be good arguments if they contain false, but justified, premises (Feldman, p. 166). So a good argument need not be valid nor have true premises. And those conditions are not sufficient because an argument with all true premises can be valid, but not good, if the person considering the argument has no reason to believe that one or more of its premises is true (Feldman, pp. 165-66), or reason to believe one or more is false. Feldman says, "Good arguments are arguments that provide people with reason to believe their conclusions" (p. 165) and arguments that contain true, but unjustified, premises don't provide such reason.

After rejecting logical accounts of a good argument, Feldman offers his own epistemological account of what a good argument is. The first view he offers that does not require that a good argument be valid is the following:

> E2. An argument is a good argument for S if and only if (i) S is justified in believing the conjunction of the premises of the argument and (ii) the argument is either valid or cogent (Feldman, p. 177).

He requires that S be justified in believing the conjunction of the premises, rather than just the individual premises themselves, to avoid possible counterexamples involving Lottery Paradox cases. But he argues against E2 on the grounds that conditions (i) and (ii) could be satisfied even though S does not have reason to believe the conclusion of the argument because of other background evidence S possesses that defeats the argument.

So Feldman proposes E3, which is just like E2 except that the following condition is added:

(iii) the argument is undefeated for S (Feldman, p. 178).

Feldman argues that even E3 does not provide sufficient conditions for an argument's being good. The problem is that condition (ii) might be satisfied even though S does not realize it is. There could be a valid but complicated derivation where someone is justified in believing the conjunction of its premises, where his justification for believing the conclusion is not defeated by other things he justifiedly believes, but where he is not justified in believing the conclusion because he does not see how the conclusion follows from the premises. In such a case Feldman thinks all three conditions of E2 would be satisfied but the argument would *not* be a good one for the person considering it since it would not give him reason to believe its conclusion (Feldman, p. 178).

One might contend that in such a case condition (iii) is *not* satisfied since *the argument is* defeated for that person since he is not justified in believing the conclusion *follows from*, or *is supported by*, the premises. But rather than argue over what it is for an *argument* to be undefeated, I propose we follow Feldman and make explicit the requirement that for an argument to be a good one for S, S must be justified in believing the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion.

Having shown that (i) justified belief in the premises, (ii) validity or cogency and (iii) the lack of defeat are *not* sufficient for an argument to be a good one, one would have thought that, based on his example, Feldman would simply have added a fourth condition:

(iv) S is justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion.

Instead, he replaces (ii) by (iv). While he has shown that a good argument need not be valid, by appealing to good inductive arguments, and could have shown a good argument need not be cogent, by appealing to good deductive arguments, he has not shown that a good argument need be *neither* valid *nor* cogent. And, in fact, the opposite seems to be true.

Suppose an argument involves the fallacy of equivocation but someone is justified in believing the conjunction of the premises of that argument, justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion and his justification for believing the conclusion of the argument is not defeated by anything else he believes. Then, according to Feldman's account, that argument is a good argument for that person. But clearly the argument has a serious flaw in it and so is not a good argument for that person or anyone else. Feldman's condition, which only requires that a person be justified in believing that premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion, is too weak. It must be satisfied, as the example of the complicated derivation shows, but another condition regarding the real relation between premises and conclusion must also be satisfied.

So I think the "core notion of a good argument" Feldman is looking for is captured by the following account, not his final account:

E4*. An argument is a good argument for person S if and only if (i) S is justified in believing the

> conjunction of all the premises of the argument (ii) the argument is either valid or cogent (iii) S's justification for the conclusion of the argument is not defeated and (iv) S is justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion.

Unlike Feldman's account, this account is not purely epistemic because of (ii) which requires actual validity or cogency.

Larry Powers does not explicitly give an account of what a good argument is, though from the title of his paper ("What is a 'good' argument?") one might have expected him to. Instead he defines notions of internal and external validity and of soundness. His account of internal validity is:

> IV: An argument is internally valid if (and only if?) a person who knew the premises to be true *and had no further relevant information* would have good reason to believe the conclusion. (182-83)

Powers says his notion of internal validity is the same as Feldman's notion of cogency (p. 183) though Powers' account concerns whether a person would have reason to believe a conclusion if he *knew* the premises to be true, and had no further relevant information, while Feldman's account considers whether he would have such reason on such information if he merely *justifiedly believed* the premises to be true. This is a difference but not a crucial one since both cogency and internal validity concern the support the premises *themselves* give to the conclusion.

Powers then goes on to define external validity as follows:

> EV: An argument is externally valid for a person if (and only if?) that person would have good reason to believe the conclusion if he were to know the premises, *given* his other relevant knowledge. (p. 183)

The idea here seems to be that external validity requires not only that the premises, if known, give the person good reason to believe the conclusion (which is what internal validity requires) but also that the justification the premises provide for the conclusion not be defeated by other things the person knows. That justification could be defeated if what that person knows provides strong justification for the denial of the conclusion (if, say, there were an overriding defeater). So Powers' EV seems to combine Feldman's notions of cogency and lack of defeat.

Does his account of external validity also imply condition (iv) of E4*, the one that requires that the person be justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion? It certainly seems to since how could a person have good reason to believe the conclusion of some argument, whose premises he knows to be true, without being justified in believing that those premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion? If the premises are properly connected to the conclusion but the person is not justified in believing they are, then the premises might *provide* reason to believe the conclusion but the person would *not have* such reason.

But Powers' EV does not imply condition (i) of Feldman's account of a good argument. It could be true that a person *would be* justified in believing some conclusion on the basis of certain premises and that his justification *would be* undefeated by other things he knows even though he is *not in fact* justified in believing the conjunction of those premises (and thus not in fact justified in believing the conclusion).

Powers adds something like Feldman's condition (i) to his account of external validity to produce an account of

soundness. That account is:

> S: An argument is sound for a person if (and only if?) it is externally valid and he knows its premises to be true. (p. 183)

Now the requirement that the premises be *known* to be true is stronger than Feldman's (i). While I think that knowledge implies justification, surely the reverse is not true.

And if we take Powers' account of soundness to be his account of a good argument, I think Feldman's weaker account is superior. Surely there can be good deductive and inductive arguments whose premises are false, and hence not known to be true. But on Powers' account these arguments would not be good ones since the premises would not be *known* to be true. Because of problems associated with the Lottery Paradox, Feldman's requirement that the person be justified in believing the *conjunction* of the premises seems an improvement over requiring only that each individual premise be known or rationally believed.

While Powers' account of soundness is too strong as an account of a good argument, as we have seen, Feldman's is too weak. I think the proper account is E4*.

II

I have tried to construct a common sense notion of what a good argument is based on what Richard Feldman and Larry Powers have written about the nature of a good argument. However, I think it would be a mistake to use that common sense notion of what a good argument is to define a fallacy, understood as a bad argument that appears to be good. That is because the common sense notion contains several epistemic requirements, namely, that the person be justified in believing that the conjunction of the premises is true and that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion and the requirement that the argument not be defeated for that person. But failure to meet any of these requirements does not make the argument a "bad" one in the sense that is relevant to defining what a fallacy is.

Consider first the requirement that for an argument to be a good one for a person that person must be justified in believing that the conjunction of the premises is true. To test whether the common sense account of a good argument can be used in the definition of a fallacy, the example will have to be one where the person is *not* justified in believing the conjunction of the premises is true (thereby making the argument a bad one) but where it *appears* that he is so justified.

As Powers has argued elsewhere ("The One Fallacy Theory," pp. 308-11), "appears" should not be given a psychological interpretation, should not be taken to mean that the person giving the argument merely *thinks* it is good. Powers argues that if "appears" is given a subjective interpretation, many logically flawed arguments that appear good to most people (say, because the premises and conclusion are true) will be fallacies—though they really only involve mistakes in reasoning due to ignorance. And arguments that are logically flawed because they contain equivocations will not be fallacies if they don't appear good to most people because, say, they seem to have true premises but a false conclusion. I would add that if "appears" is given a psychological interpretation the notion of a fallacy will be person—relative since a logically flawed argument might appear good to one person (and so be a fallacy for him) but not appear good to another (and so *not* be a fallacy for her). But an argument either does or does not commit a fallacy; it cannot commit a fallacy for one person but not another. A fallacy is not a person-relative notion. So the psychological interpretation of "appears" must be mistaken.

But in the context we are considering, what would it be for someone *to appear* to be justified in believing the conjunction of the premises of an argument, even though he really is *not* justified, if it is not merely for him *to think* that he is so justified? I think it would be for him to be justified in thinking he is justified in believing the conjunction is true even though he is not. That could happen if all the experts in epistemology agree that some false epistemic principle is true and a believer is aware that they all think that principle is true (though not aware that it is really false). Imagine that all these experts accept the Gambler's Fallacy, our believer is aware they do and on this basis believes that the probability that a coin that has come up heads ten times in a row will come up heads on the next flip is less than one half. Then he is justified in believing that he is justified in believing the probability is less than a half even though he is not justified in believing it is less than a half. The beliefs of the experts give him *an excuse* for believing what he does, just as non-culpable ignorance can give a person an excuse for doing what he does. But a person with an excuse is not justified in doing or believing what he does if what he does or believes is contrary to the relevant moral or epistemic norms.

According to the common sense notion of a good argument, the believer's argument will be bad, because he is *not* justified in believing one of its premises (namely, the one that says a coin that has come up heads *n* times in a row has less than a 1/2 chance of coming up heads on the next flip) yet, in the sense relevant to fallacies, it *appears* that he is. Hence, using the common sense notion of a good argument, we would have to conclude that the believer commits a fallacy. But he does not. The experts are the ones who commit a fallacy—the Gambler's Fallacy—not our novice. The lack of justification for the premises does not by itself turn an argument that appears good into a fallacy.

Similar remarks can be made about the lack of justification for thinking the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion. Feldman's beginning logic student who is *not justified* in believing some complicated derivation is valid, and so *not justified* in believing the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion, commits no fallacy even if the argument appears to satisfy all the conditions of E4*. In other words, he commits no fallacy even if the argument is a bad one (*on a common sense understanding of "bad"*) that appears good.

And an argument that is "bad" simply because it is defeated will not be a fallacy even if it appears good. Suppose, to allude to Plantinga's humorous example, a student justifiedly believes that 9 out of 10 Frisians can't swim and that Feike is a Frisian. On that basis he believes that Feike can't swim—despite also justifiedly believing that 9 out of 10 (though not all!) Frisian lifeguards *can* swim and that Feike is a Frisian lifeguard. So his argument is defeated even if he does not realize it. So it is a bad argument on the common sense understanding of a good argument. But he commits no fallacy in ignoring relevant evidence, even if the argument appears good, that is, even if he is justified in believing, say, on the basis of the testimony of experts in epistemology, that his background evidence does *not* defeat his argument.

Furthermore, if defeat in an argument that appears good could turn that argument into a fallacy, then the very same argument could be fallacious for one person and not for another. But, as I have argued, a fallacy is not a person—relative notion. The argument that Feike can't swim, based on the premises that he is a Frisian and 9 out of 10 Frisians can't swim, is not fallacious for someone who does not know that Feike is also a lifeguard and at least most Frisian lifeguards can swim. It is also not *fallacious* for someone who knows that Feike *is* a lifeguard, etc., even though that person is not justified in believing that Feike can't swim. Arguments can be bad even if no fallacies have been committed.

Failure to satisfy any of the *epistemic* requirements of the common sense notion of a good argument does not necessitate that argument commits a fallacy if it appears good. For the purpose of defining a fallacy, a good

argument is one that is either valid or cogent. So a bad argument will be one that is neither valid nor cogent. An argument will appear good if it appears to be either valid or cogent, that is, has a form that resembles the form of a valid or cogent argument. So a fallacy will be an argument that is neither valid nor cogent but has a form that resembles the form of a valid or cogent argument.1

Note

1. I want to thank my colleagues Larry Lombard, and especially Larry Powers, for their comments on an earlier draft. I initially accepted a psychological account of an argument's appearing good but abandoned it after discussions with them.

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