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Famous Meta-Arguments: Part I, Mill and the Tripartite Nature of Argumentation

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ABSTRACT: In the context of a study of meta-arguments in general, and famous meta-arguments in particular, I reconstruct chapter 1 of Mill's *Subjection of Women* as the meta-argument: women's liberation should be argued on its merits (supporting it with reasons and defending it from objections) because the universality of subjection derives from the law of force (which is logically and morally questionable) and hence provides no presumption favoring its correctness. The raises the problem of the relationship among illative, dialectical, and meta-argumentative tiers.

KEYWORDS: deep disagreement, dialectical tier, illative tier, meta-argument, Mill, women's liberation

1. COMMON AND FAMOUS META-ARGUMENTS

A meta-argument is an argument about one or more arguments; otherwise an argument may be called a ground-level argument.¹ Meta-arguments occur commonly when *evaluating* ground-level arguments. For example, we can easily reconstruct as meta-argumentation (see Finocchiaro forthcoming a, forthcoming b) what goes on when one uses what Krabbe (1995; 2003) has called the methods of "counterexample-situation" and of "formal paraphrase" to show formal invalidity; and when one employs what Govier (1985) has called the technique of "refutation by logical analogy" to show some flaw in an argument; and when one is engaged in considerations of what Woods and Hudak (1989) have called "parity of reasoning" to show that an argument is as bad or as good as another.

Another context which is likely to have mutually fruitful inter-connections with meta-arguments is that of what Fogelin has called "deep disagreements" (Fogelin 1985; 2005. Cf. Adams 2005; Campolo 2005; Feldman 2005; Friemann 2005; Turner and Wright 2005). This claim strikes me as inherently plausible, but it is really a working hypothesis or an item for a future research project rather than a summary of an analysis that has already been carried out. Similarly, there are other topics that such a research agenda could include. One involves the question whether meta-argumentation should be regarded as an aspect of all argumentation, instead of or in addition to being regarded as a special type of argumentation; in that case, meta-argumentation would be something like

¹ This sentence is an adaptation of Krabbe's (2003, p. 641) definition of *metadialogue*. I owe to Krabbe the sparking of my interest in meta-arguments.

the illative and the dialectical tiers of argument, always potentially present, but not necessarily actually exhibited. Another fruitful research project would be the exploration of the relationship between meta-argumentation and the theory of argumentation, for one might ask whether a theorist of argumentation does or can do anything above and beyond arguing about arguments (cf. Finocchiaro 1980, pp. 299-302; 2005, pp. 92-108). Finally, and this should perhaps be one of the first things to explore, one could survey existing contributions to the study of meta-arguments; for example, there is a branch of computer science that focuses on the meta-cognitive aspects of argumentation and reasoning, and the potential relevance of this work can be glimpsed from the fact that some authors have developed a formalization of meta-arguments which takes as its “starting point the view that arguments and dialogues are inherently meta-logical processes. By this we mean that the arguments made by protagonists in a debate must refer to each other” (Wooldridge, McBurney, and Parsons 2005, section 1; cf. Perlis 1988 and Costantini 2002).

However, this paper focuses on *famous* meta-arguments, by which I mean arguments such as the following. One of these is Socrates’s argument about misology in Plato’s *Phaedo* (88A-91D), replying to those who despair of the value of reason and argument in determining whether or not the soul is immortal. Another famous meta-argument is found in Galileo’s “Considerations on the Copernican Opinion” (translated in Finocchiaro 1989, pp. 70-86), where Galileo, before discussing particular arguments for and against the earth’s motion, criticizes some meta-argumentative claims, i.e., argues for their falsity; the first pair of these is that the earth’s rest has been *conclusively proved* true and that the earth’s motion is *indemonstrable*. A third famous meta-argument is Hume’s criticism of the design argument for God’s existence, in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.² And there is also the argument in Mill’s *Subjection of Women*, chapter 1, most of which is aimed at justifying the propriety of argumentation in light of difficulties suggesting that in this particular case argumentation is superfluous, or perhaps even counterproductive. Mill’s meta-argument is more accessible in its content than the others, and it happens to raise an important theoretical issue; thus here, due to limitations of time and space, I shall limit myself to it.

2. META-ARGUMENTATION IN MILL’S *SUBJECTION OF WOMEN* (i, 1-17)

Mill’s essay on *The Subjection of Women* is well known as an important contribution to the cause of women’s liberation and to feminist theory. Some scholars also recognize the essay as one of Mill’s “finest pieces of argument” (Okin 1988, p. v). However, when it comes to understanding, assessing, and appreciating the details and nuances of Mill’s argument, we find little beyond the point that it consists of two main parts: the first aims “to disarm his opponents” (Okin 1988, p. xi) by showing that “there is absolutely no reason to suppose that [women] are not” (Ryan 1997, p. xxxix) the equals of men; the second part articulates a number of reasons in favor of women’s liberation and equality. On the other hand, Hans Hansen (2006) has moved the analysis of Mill’s argumentation in general to a higher and more sophisticated level, but I believe even he has missed the crucial meta-argumentative component of this particular Millian essay.

Mill begins his essay with a clear and explicit statement of his aim. It is, he says,

² Hume’s argument has already been analyzed by Barker (1989) with such great informal-logical insight that the main thing left to do is to adapt his conclusions to meta-argumentative purposes.

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to argue “that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (par. 1).³ For the purpose of our discussion, a number of approximations and conventions will be useful.

Mill’s conclusion has two equivalent aspects: that the principle of the subordination of women (to men) is wrong; and that the principle of equality of women (to men) is right. That is, in this context the principle of subordination and the principle of equality are taken as opposites. Moreover, for short, we may drop the term “principle,” and speak more simply of subordination or equality. Furthermore, since Mill also uses the term subjection as synonymous to subordination, we shall follow him in treating these two terms as equivalent. Thus, arguments for the equality of women are simultaneously arguments against subjection; arguments against equality are simultaneously arguments for subjection; and objections to one are simultaneously arguments for the other.

Despite the clarity and explicitness of his statement of the conclusion, Mill does not go on immediately to elaborate supporting reasons or replies to objections. The first supporting reason does not come until chapter 2, where he tries to show that the subordination of women is wrong because it produces considerable evil and harm in marriage. The second reason comes in chapter 3, where he argues that subjection is wrong because of its harmful effect in the public sphere of employment and citizenship. And a third positive reason is found in the fourth and last chapter, where he suggests that subordination is wrong because its abolition would result in considerable benefits and advantages in marriage, social relations, and the psychological well being of women. These reasons may be regarded as the illative tier of Mill’s overall argument.

Mill articulates these reasons after he tries to refute the objection that the subordination of women is right because it corresponds to the nature of men and women. His reply to this objection is found at the end of chapter 1 (par. 17-24), and it may be regarded as the dialectical tier his overall argument.

However, at the beginning of chapter 1, immediately after his clear and explicit statement of the conclusion, Mill engages in a number of methodological or meta-cognitive reflections (par. 2-17) required by the special features of the situation at hand. These considerations are the focus of this paper since they are best viewed in terms of the notion of meta-argument.

3. ARGUMENT UNNECESSARY AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE?

To begin with, in this case the conclusion to be justified conflicts with deep feelings and strong emotions. But, Mill asserts, “so long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it” (par. 2). If we accept this principle, it would seem to follow that argumentation is going to be not only ineffectual, but counterproductive.

Additionally, Mill is acutely aware of the fact that the conclusion he advocates conflicts with “almost universal opinion ... universal usage” (par. 3) and “established

³ References to chapter 1 of Mill’s *Subjection of Women* (e.g., Mill 1988; 1997) will be given by indicating the paragraph rather than page number.

custom” (par. 4). But, he fears, “a cause supported on the one hand by universal usage, and on the other by so great a preponderance of popular sentiment, is supposed to have a presumption in its favour, superior to any conviction which an appeal to reason has power to produce in any intellects but those of a high class” (par. 3). If this principle is correct, it would follow that the question is settled and there is nothing to argue about.

But are these principles correct? Do we have to accept these two principles which ground these skeptical, misogynical conclusions? That is, here we have two arguments about the role of argumentation in assessing the subjection of women: they advance conclusions that limit the role of argumentation in some ways; and they use premises some of which are factual and uncontroversial, but some of which are themselves principles of argumentation. It should come as no surprise that one may decide to question these principles themselves.

In fact, according to Mill, although these principles cannot be summarily dismissed, they are one-sided and too extreme. In his own words, “I do not therefore quarrel with them for having too little faith in argument, but for having too much faith in custom and general feeling” (par. 4). We need a more balanced and multi-faceted principle. Mill formulates it as follows: “established custom, and the general feeling, should be deemed conclusive against me, unless that custom and feeling from age to age can be shown to have owed their existence to other causes than their soundness, and to have derived their power from the worse rather than the better parts of human nature” (par. 4). That is, custom and feeling should not be allowed to prevail unconditionally or simpliciter; but rather they can prevail if and only if they cannot be shown to derive from causes that are logically unsound and morally questionable. In particular, if one can show that the custom and feeling which favor the subjection of women derive from logically or morally questionable causes, then they will lose their presumptive force and the issue can be argued about on its merits. This in turn would open the door to argumentation.

However, although this balanced and many-sided principle thus rescues argumentation, it also places a very heavy burden on the arguer. For in this situation, Mill is saying that he has to do something above and beyond what is required in normal argumentation. What is normally required is already subject to a very high standard.⁴ In Mill’s own words, “before I could hope to make any impression, I should be expected not only to answer all that has ever been said by those who take the other side of the question, but to imagine all that could be said by them ... and besides refuting all arguments for the affirmative [i.e., the subjection of women], I shall be called upon for invincible positive arguments to prove a negative [the denial of subjection]” (par. 3). I interpret Mill to be saying that to justify a claim C, the normal requirements are (1) to answer all objections that have already been advanced against the claim by its opponents; (2) to invent potential objections and answer them; (3) to advance reasons supporting the claim; and (4) to defend these supporting reasons from objections. These requirements could also be interpreted in terms of the illative tier and the dialectical tier of an argument. But these tiers and these requirements are not enough in certain cases, for, in Mill’s words, “even if I could do all this, and leave the opposite party with a host of unanswered arguments against them, and not a single unrefuted one on their side, I should be thought to have

⁴ My account may be compared and contrasted to the one given by Hansen (2006, pp. 100-102). He also speaks of Mill’s “standard,” and interprets it in terms of a tripartite structure that corresponds to what I am calling the normal requirements but does not take into account exceptional situations like the present one.

done little” (par. 3). The additional requirement is the one mentioned above.

This is not just an additional requirement that increases the burden of proof, but a new *kind* of requirement. For it does not seem to involve the examination of evidence for and against the truth of the claim in question, but rather an examination and critique of the causes that produced the prevailing belief with which the claim conflicts. Let us call this additional requirement *causal undermining*. In fact, the main argument in chapter one of Mill’s essay fits this scheme and performs this function. Let us analyze the details of that argument.

4. CAUSAL UNDERMINING

One key claim is that “the inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest” (par. 5). For, Mill speculates, this inequality “arose simply from the fact that from the earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man” (par. 5). This speculation, in turn, is in accordance with (and supported by) the fact that history shows “how entirely, in former ages, the law of superior strength was the rule of life; how publicly and openly it was avowed” (par. 7). From that initial origin, the subordination of women was kept into existence until our present age by the fact that it generally happens that “institutions and customs which never had any ground but the law of force, last on into ages and states of general opinion which never would have permitted their first establishment” (par. 8).

With this argument (par. 4-8), Mill is stating and supporting his causal-historical explanation of the subjection of women. The root cause is claimed to be the so-called law of the strongest, that is, the superior physical strength of men. But he is clear that this by itself does not amount to showing that the subjection of women is wrong;⁵ to think so would be tantamount to committing the so-called genetic fallacy, to use present-day terminology. Rather, this argument is merely one step of the main meta-argument of chapter 1 trying to show that, in accordance with the nuanced and balanced principle stated above, custom and feeling do not provide a conclusive presumption in favor of the subjection of women and the issue must be argued on its own merits. That principle stipulated a second condition besides the causal explanation, namely a critique of the logical soundness and moral propriety of this cause. Accordingly, Mill tries to show that this cause is neither. He does this dialectically so to speak, namely by replying to possible objections.

The first objection is that the law of the strongest, when applied to the relations between men and women, is natural. In Mill’s words, one could object that “a comparison cannot fairly be made between the government of the male sex and the forms of unjust power ... adduced in illustration of it, since these are arbitrary, and the effect of mere usurpation, while it ... is natural” (par. 9). Mill’s illustrations had been slavery, absolute monarchy, and military despotism (par. 8).

Mill’s reply is that this objection presupposes a flawed concept of what is natural. In his own words, for those who raise this objection, “unnatural generally means only uncustomary, and ... everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women

⁵ “I have not yet shown that it is a wrong system: but everyone who is capable of thinking on this subject must see that even if it is, it was certain to outlast all other forms of unjust authority” (par. 8).

to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural” (par. 9). At this stage in the discussion, Mill does not say what the correct conception of natural is, and whether or not the subjection of women is natural in that correct sense, and why. Later (par. 18-24), he has more penetrating things to say about that issue. Here his main point seems to be that to claim that the subordination of women stemming from the law of the strongest is natural, says nothing more than that it is customary and universal. But he has already agreed that the subjection of women is an established custom and universal practice; indeed his predicament derives from this fact together with the principle that universal custom creates a presumption stronger than reason or argument. His way out of this predicament is not to deny this fact, but to deny this principle, and replace it by a more nuanced principle. In short, the question is not whether the subjection of women is customary, but whether it is right or natural, and to argue that it is natural because it is customary is to beg the question.

Another objection brings us closer to the question of moral propriety. It is that the application of the law of the strongest to the relationship between men and women is accepted by women. In Mill’s words, one could object that “the rule of men over women differs from all ... others in not being a rule of force: it is accepted voluntarily; women make no complaint, and are consenting parties to it” (par. 10).

Mill replies to this objection by saying that as a matter of fact, many women do not find their state of subjection acceptable. This is shown by the fact that in England there had been petitions to Parliament for women’s suffrage; in the United States there was an organized party favoring women’s liberation; and similar developments had occurred in France, Italy, Switzerland, and Russia. Secondly, “many more women ... silently cherish similar aspirations; but ... are ... strenuously taught to repress them as contrary to the properties of their sex” (par. 10). Thirdly, “no enslaved class ever asked for complete liberty at once” (par. 10). Fourthly, there would be many more complaints by women if complaints were not a major cause for their being mistreated. Finally, “all causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men” (par. 11).

In this reply, Mill seems to be admitting the relevance and probative force of the objection, but denying its truth. In this case, to deny that women find their subordination acceptable, is equivalent to asserting that they find it unacceptable. And in turn this assertion would lend probative weight to the counter-conclusion that the subjection, and the root cause that produced it, are morally questionable.

With this critique, Mill has undermined the initial presumption in favor of the subjection of women due to custom and feeling, for he has now satisfied both conditions stipulated in his balanced guiding principle. That is, Mill has now completed his main meta-argument. This meta-argument starts with the premise that “established custom, and the general feeling, should be deemed conclusive ... unless that custom and feeling from age to age can be shown to have owed their existence to other causes than their soundness, and to have derived their power from the worse rather than the better parts of human nature” (par. 4). He then goes on to argue that the universal custom and feeling owe their existence to the law of the strongest, and this claim provides the second premise of the main meta-argument. Additionally, he argues that the law of the strongest is not really natural but customary, and it is endorsed by women not freely but under duress; and this critical claim provides a third premise. The conclusion is that, in his own

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words, “the preceding considerations are amply sufficient to show that custom, however universal it may be, affords in this case no presumption, and ought not to create any prejudice in favor of the arrangements which place women in social and political subjection to men” (par. 12). This meta-conclusion in turn opens the door to argumentation: “the question should not be considered as prejudged by existing fact and existing opinion, but open to discussion on its merits, as a question of justice and expediency” (par. 17).

5. PREDICTIVE EXTRAPOLATION

However, in this particular case, Mill thinks he can argue that there is a presumption against subjection (i.e., in favor of equality). In his words, “but I may go farther, and maintain that the course of history, and the tendencies of progressive human society, afford not only no presumption in favor of this system of inequality of rights, but a strong one against it; and that, so far as the whole course of human improvement up to this time, the whole stream of modern tendencies, warrants any inference on the subject, it is, that this relic of the past is discordant with the future, and must necessarily disappear” (par. 12).

Mill’s argument in support of this claim is a historical prediction or predictive extrapolation: he detects a long-lasting historical trend; he claims that this trend is a good thing; he predicts that the trend will continue; but the subjection of women conflicts with this trend; and he concludes that the subjection of women will eventually disappear.

The trend is described and evaluated by Mill as follows: “the modern conviction, the fruit of a thousand years of experience, is, that things in which the individual is the person directly interested, never go right but as they are left to his own discretion; and that any regulation of them by authority, except to protect the rights of others, is sure to be mischievous” (par. 13). Here we have what may be called the principle of individual freedom, and Mill seems to be saying that this principle has been found to be good through historical experience and empirical observation. However, he also gives a deeper reason for the soundness of this principle, namely that “in all things of any difficulty and importance, those who can do them well are fewer than the need, even with the most unrestricted latitude of choice: and any limitation of the field of selection deprives society of some chances of being served by the competent, without ever saving it from the incompetent” (par. 14).

Mill’s prediction that this trend will continue is less explicit, but it may be found in his call to action meant to ensure that the principle continues to be followed and is expanded to the case of women. He urges us that “if this principle is true, we ought to act as if we believed it, and not to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more than to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide the person’s position through all life” (par. 14).

However, as things stand, i.e., until the principle is expanded to this new area, “the disabilities, ... to which women are subject from the mere fact of their birth, are the solitary examples of the kind in modern legislation” (par. 15). This discrepancy between the subjection of women and the principle of individual freedom “raises a *prima facie* presumption on the unfavorable side, far outweighing any which custom and usage could in such circumstances create on the favourable; and should at least suffice to make this ...

a balanced question” (par. 16).

In what sense is this a meta-argument? Its final conclusion is that the principle of individual freedom provides a presumption against the subjection of women. Its premises are the claims that this principle is widely practiced, generally beneficial, and specifically inconsistent with the subjection of women.

Let us compare this argument with the previous one, aimed at the causal undermining of the universal belief in subjection. The conclusion of that meta-argument was that established custom and general feeling do not provide a presumption in favor of the subjection of women. Its premises were that such custom and feeling are the result of the law of the strongest, and that this law is logically and morally questionable. There the ground-level argument was this: the subjection of women is right because it is in accordance with almost universal custom and feeling. That meta-argument was trying to show that this ground-level argument is inferentially unsound, at least in the sense of deductively invalid.

What is the ground-level argument in the case of the predictive extrapolation? Perhaps it is this: the subjection of women is wrong because it conflicts with the principle of individual freedom. If so, what is the predictive extrapolation saying about it? It seems to be claiming that this argument is inferentially sound, at least to some degree.

Thus, the causal undermining and the predictive extrapolation seem to constitute two complementary meta-arguments. They are complementary in the sense that one is retrospective and the other prospective. But they are also complementary insofar as from each Mill seems to want to draw the same further conclusion, namely that the issue should be argued about on its merits, by means of the presentation, defense, and criticism of supporting reasons and critical objections. In other words, the causal undermining and the predictive extrapolation are distinct subarguments of the same longer, more complex argument advocating the value of merit-based argumentation on the question at hand. Moreover, the two arguments are meta-arguments insofar as they are, respectively, about two identifiable ground-level arguments.

6. META-ARGUMENTATIVE VS. DIALECTICAL VS. ILLATIVE TIERS

But now a problem emerges. If this analysis is accepted, is not the causal-undermining meta-argument merely a negative evaluation of the corresponding ground-level argument about the presumptively decisive role of custom and feeling? If so, it would be a normal part of the dialectical tier of Mill’s argumentation. And is not the predictive-extrapolation meta-argument merely a positive reason in support of Mill’s main conclusion that subjection is wrong? In this case, it would be a normal part of the illative tier of Mill’s argumentation. However, as we saw above, Mill claims that with these preliminary considerations he is doing something above, beyond, distinct from, necessary for, and prior to what is normally required in argumentation.

My solution of this difficulty is along the following lines. The distinction between the meta-level and the ground-level of argumentation is similar to the distinction between the illative and the dialectical tiers of argumentation. It is not a dichotomy or material difference such that a piece of reasoning belongs to one of these tiers in virtue of properties which it may possess or lack in a physical sort of way. Rather the distinction is a conceptual difference such that a piece of reasoning may or may not be analyzed from

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the point of view of one or more of these tiers depending on the purpose at hand.

Let me begin by elaborating this point with regard to the distinction between dialectical and illative tiers. Given any claim, one could always raise the question, what reasons if any there are in support of the claim. This question may be regarded as the prime or minimal objection to any claim. If one anticipates it, one constructs the illative tier and gives the supporting reasons even before the objection has actually been raised. Or one can wait until after the objection has been explicitly raised. In either case, the illative component can be interpreted as a part of the dialectical tier.

However, I do not think this establishes the exclusivity, or even the primacy, of the dialectical tier, as claimed by the proponents of pragma-dialectics.⁶ For in a way analogous to how one attempts to interpret the illative component in terms of the dialectical tier, one can try to do the reverse and reinterpret the dialectical tier in terms of the illative component.

Consider an argument whose illative component consists of premises P-1 through P-n and conclusion C. And suppose the argument also has a dialectical tier with objections O-1 through O-k, respectively answered by replies R-1 through R-k. Now consider the conjunction of an objection and its corresponding reply, (O-j & R-j), or some appropriately reworded phrasing of it that might be needed for grammatical propriety. It seems to me that such a conjunction would constitute a reason supporting the conclusion C. It would be like saying that one reason for accepting the conclusion is that if one objects to it in such and such a way, such an objection would be incorrect; or collectively considered, one reason for accepting conclusion C is that all objections against it fail, i.e. that there are no objections to it. In other words, an objection to a conclusion C may be seen as a reason against it, a reason for claiming not-C; and if a reason R for not-C is a bad reason, then the claim that R is a bad reason for not-C, may be seen as a reason for C. Of course, such a reason would not be a conclusive reason, and to claim such conclusiveness would be to commit a damaging version of the fallacy from ignorance. But we are clearly dealing with reasons that, however strong, fall short of conclusiveness, and for such cases the explicit refutation of an explicit objection may be viewed as a supporting reason.

The upshot of these considerations is that while the presentation of supporting reasons may be regarded as a reply to a weak or minimal objection, the refutation of objections may be regarded as a weak or minimal supporting reason. There thus seems to be a symmetry between the illative and the dialectical tiers.

A similar asymmetry seems to exist between the meta-argumentative level and the illative and dialectical tiers. First of all, as mentioned earlier, the dialectical tier can be easily viewed as meta-argumentation insofar as it consists of replies to arguments against the conclusion C, and hence as arguments about arguments against C. Next, the illative tier consists of positive reasons, premises P-1 through P-n, supporting conclusion C; but the explicit statement of such an argument may be viewed as an implicit claim that this argument (P-1, ..., P-n, so C) is correct; the latter claim is a meta-argumentative assertion about a ground-level argument; and the considerations that made that original ground-level argument cogent are implicitly reasons supporting the meta-argumentative assertion.

The two points made so far involve viewing the dialectical tier and the illative tier

⁶ For more details and references, see Finocchiaro 2006.

in terms of the meta-argumentative tier. Can we now do the reverse? Can we start with a meta-argument and view it in terms of illative and/or dialectical tiers. I believe we can. In fact, the two meta-arguments from Mill reconstructed above provide good examples of this process, which may be called the “grounding” of the meta-level. The causal-undermining meta-argument can be seen as a criticism of the objection by Mill’s opponents based on the alleged probative conclusiveness of established custom and general feeling. On the other hand, the predictive-extrapolation meta-argument can be seen as a roundabout statement of a useful, if inconclusive, preliminary argument by Mill, grounding his conclusion that subjection is wrong on the fact that it contradicts the principle of individual freedom.

Thus, the meta-argumentative tier may be viewed as the meta-level reflection of the dialectical and illative tiers, and the latter two tiers as the ground-level embodiment of the meta-argumentative tier. However, just as the symmetry between the illative and dialectical tiers does not amount to a conflation or confusion of these two roles, the symmetry between the meta and ground levels ought not to lead to their conflation. Both symmetries may be viewed as refinements contributing to a better understanding of the relationship among the meta-argumentative, the illative, and the dialectical tiers of argumentation.

7. SUMMARY

I began by introducing meta-arguments as an important topic in argumentation theory that has many ramifications into areas of existing and future research. Famous meta-arguments were then introduced by means of several examples spanning a variety of disciplines and periods in the history of thought. I focused on the first part of chapter 1 of Mill’s *Subjection of Women*, where he engages in some meta-cognitive reflections, before going on to reply to a key objection in the rest of that chapter and to articulate three supporting reasons in the other three chapters. Mill begins by formulating two objections that seem to suggest that the subjection of women is a special topic where argumentation is counterproductive or superfluous. He answers these two objections by rejecting the two principles of argumentation on which they are based and replacing them by a more balanced and nuanced principle, which places on him the heavy burden of causally undermining the universal belief in the subjection of women, to pave the way to arguments and objections on the merits of the issue. In accordance with this principle, he argues that the subjection of women derives from the law of the strongest, but that this law is logically unsound and morally questionable, and hence that custom and feeling provide no presumption in favor of the subjection of women. Additionally, Mills thinks that in this case he can also make a predictive extrapolation; accordingly he argues that there is a presumption against subjection based on the principle of individual freedom, which is widely accepted, generally beneficial, and inconsistent with subjection. This predictive extrapolation and the earlier causal undermining constitute two complementary meta-arguments. Nevertheless, they may also be viewed, respectively, as the criticism of an objection, and the statement of a supporting reason, and hence as elements of the dialectical and illative tiers, rather than as a distinct meta-argumentative part of the overall argument. The paper ends with an attempt to solve this difficulty, by stressing that there is a symmetry between meta and ground levels analogous to the symmetry between

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illative and dialectical tiers, and that meta-argumentation may be seen as a component of argumentation distinct from but related to the illative and dialectical components.

[link to commentary](#)

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