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Commentary on Maurice Finocchiaro: “Famous Meta-Arguments: Part I, Mill and the Tripartite Nature of Argumentation”

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1. INTRODUCTION: GOING META

We ascend to the meta-level whenever our arguments become the subjects of arguments; and when it comes to arguments, “going meta” is always an option. Professor Finocchiaro explains this phenomenon by quoting with approval an observation from Wooldridge, McBurney, and Parsons (2005) that argumentation is an *inherently* meta-logical process. He glosses it with the useful insight that meta-argumentation, like the dialectical tier and illative core, is always potentially present.

This important observation needs glossing itself because there are many different moves in argumentation that can count as belonging to the meta-level.

2. PURE AND UNIVERSAL META-ARGUMENTATION.

Sometimes the ascent to the meta-level is better described as a strategic retreat: the meta-level provides a haven when the ground-level going gets too rough. It provides determined opponents a way to object to an otherwise unobjectionable argument. Sometimes this is manifestly reasonable. For example, someone who is not mathematically savvy enough to spot the error in a supposed proof that $2=1$ might respond, “Although I cannot see anything wrong with it, I will not accept it. Good arguments cannot prove absurd conclusions. I am confident that competent mathematicians could find its flaw.” The ascent is explicit here in the meta-level premise, “good arguments cannot prove absurd conclusions.” This is a universal premise about arguments.

Conversely, we can resort to the meta-level to accept theses whose sole support is admittedly unacceptable arguments: “I understand that the only argument offered for this position is flawed, but I’m willing to accept it anyway because I believe it can be patched up.” Henri Poincaré took essentially this approach to the theorems that came to him in dreams, trusting the results while setting aside questions about the context of discovery. In contrast to the other example, the meta-level premise here is argument-specific: “*this* argument can be fixed.” (See Cohen 2001.)

Neither of these meta-arguments actually *engages* with the workings of their subject arguments. They are “purely” meta-level. None of the premises or inferences in the original ground-level arguments could be recovered from these meta-arguments.

Mill's meta-argumentation begins as pure and universal, but soon requires impure and specific aspects: the causal undermining stage uses the premise, "Custom and habit – *the real reasons for this conclusion* – are not conclusive." The predictive-extrapolation part is parallel.

3. META-LEVEL ARGUMENTATION AND THE DIALECTICAL TIER.

More commonly, the meta-level is used to facilitate interpretation and evaluation. We ascend to the meta-level whenever we act as third-party observers and evaluators *of* arguments, or as theorizers *about* argument. Finocchiaro brings into clear focus the fact that we can be read as doing this any time we engage with an argument in any way. Does this mean that to engage *with* an argument is simultaneously to comment *about* it, and thus that every counter-argument is also a meta-argument? Not exactly; it is not that every responsive move in an argument *is* meta-level but that every one *can be read as* meta-level; every counter-argument *can be* seen as a meta-level move.

Consider these three expressions of resistance: "I'm not convinced," "You haven't convinced me," and "That is not convincing." The first is ostensibly about the original opponent, the second is about the proponent, while the third is about the argument. Which is it? That depends: what do you want to do with it? The differences are accidents of presentation. It will vary as to which yardstick will be the most helpful to use.

What Finocchiaro has shown is that the border between the meta-level and the ground-level illative core dialectical tier is permeable. Let me focus on just the relation to the dialectical tier. All objections can be read either as part of the dialectical tier or as part of meta-argumentation. Two important caveats are needed. First, the converse does not necessarily follow. It may still be that some meta-level argumentation is resistant to assimilation to the ground-level dialectical tier. And second, the fact that all dialectical moves can be read at the meta-level does not mean that they all *should be*.

4. ASYMMETRIC PERMEABILITY

Here is a conjecture on the first caveat: meta-argumentation that is both pure and universal, in the senses noted earlier, *cannot* be reduced to the dialectical ground level. Meta-argumentation that is pure does not engage with the reasons offered in the argument, and the dialectical tier is all about engagement. Meta-argumentation that is universal needs specification before it can apply to the argument at hand. Otherwise, we would be faced with the same regress that Lewis Carroll's Tortoise used to immobilize Achilles (Carroll 1895). Mill's pure and universal meta-argumentation was conjoined with mixed argumentation before it was specified and grounded.

With this in mind, re-consider Finocchiaro's discussion of Mill's meta-principles. Mill begins with the observations that argumentation is counterproductive against entrenched beliefs and ineffective except with intellects "of a high class." Neither one is really a *principle*; at best, they are merely contingently truths about humans. But they do give way to a genuine meta-argumentation principle: when arguing with less-than-ideal interlocutors about entrenched, it is necessary to show the spurious origins of those beliefs before offering positive reasons for the alternatives. There must be something like the aggressive de-briefing used on newly-freed long-term hostages.

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Compare Gilbert Harman's discussion of his principle of "positive undermining" with Mill's comments on causal undermining: they are virtually identical until they are deployed. Harman is trying to explain and deal with the phenomenon of "belief tenacity" as an obstacle to the de-acquisition of beliefs (Harman 1984); Mill is concerned with the subjugation of women. Harman's principle remains at the epistemological or meta-level. It has nothing to say about any particular beliefs. In contrast, Mill had a definite agenda. He deftly avoids both the problem of engagement and the problem of regress by including mixed argumentation that ties the pure meta-level to the ground-level argument at hand. Undermining in itself is both pure and universal. It really is an irreducibly meta-dialectical principle, not just a rhetorical strategy.

5. INADVISABLE ASCENT

The second caveat raised the question as to when dialectical moves –all of which can be read at the meta-level – *should be* read that way. I suppose this is actually a meta-meta-question, insofar as it is a question about relating meta-level and ground-level argumentation.

First, let me do some preparatory undermining of my own and offer reason to be wary about easy ascent to the meta-level. As argumentation theorist we argue about arguments. We act simultaneously on a ground level and a meta-level. The two levels are associated in our minds by, well, custom and habit. Like epistemologists and ethicists who like to think their studies make them better knowers and better persons, we like to think that argumentation theory helps make us better arguers. But it is quite possible to be adept at arguing without being good at argumentation theory, or vice-versa. Argumentation theory can help, of course, but that is because its immediate effect is to help us *understand* argumentation better.

It is true that *any* object-level response can be turned into a meta-comment – just as any assertion, "*p*", can be read as the meta-assertion, "*I think that p*" or "*I am asserting that p.*" But care is needed: the conflation of what is asserted and the implied meta-assertions is the source of much confusion, as attested to by all the ink spilled about Moore's Paradox. The identification of ground-level moves in an argument with their meta-level implication leads to Carroll's regress.

6. CONCLUSION

Finocchiaro does not need, and does not argue for, complete ground and meta-level identification. What he says is, "a piece of reasoning may or may not be analyzed from the point of view of one or more of these tiers depending on the purpose at hand." And that is exactly right. The ascent to the meta-level is justified, retroactively, whenever it furthers our interpretive or evaluative projects. All that is needed is that viewing an argument through the meta-level lens reveals something about the quality or nature of a dialectical exchange. In the beginning of his paper, Finocchiaro mentioned several examples, such as evaluating arguments from analogy, counter-example-situations, and formal paraphrase. Moreover, in the course of his paper he has demonstratively provided us with another: by identifying and isolating the meta-level components of Mill's argument, Finocchiaro has shed a great deal of light on its overall structure.

However, a funny thing happens when we focus on the explicitly meta-level pieces of Mill's argument: the distinctive role of the pure components stands out in marked contrast from the mixed and ground-level parts, putting pressure on the thesis of unrestricted meta-to-ground convertibility. But all Finocchiaro needs is just ground-to-meta convertibility, and that valuable observation is sufficient for his insightful analysis of one very sophisticated argument.

[link to paper](#)

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