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Commentary on: P.D. Asquith's "Rules, Defaults, and the Meta-level of Informal Logic"

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This paper covers a considerable territory. It moves from instructions to be found in elementary logic textbooks all the way to the prospects for their computer automation, passing through such issues as the nature of rules, defaults, heuristics and the 'meta-data' associated with logical analysis. I can only touch on a few aspects of all this, and will start with the beginning and the textbook instructions.

Professor Asquith's questions about the nature of these instructions brings to mind an old distinction we used to draw between knowing-*how* and knowing-*that*. The instructions here considered are so-called 'how-to' instructions, but knowing the instructions, considered by itself, falls on the knowing-*that* side of the line; it is knowing *that* you will perform a certain task (call it the target task) *if* you perform certain other tasks (call them the method tasks). There may be alternative ways of performing the target task and so there may be alternative instructions. It may also be that the method tasks must be sequenced in a certain way; in that case knowing the sequence will also be a part of knowing the instructions.

As Asquith points out, such instructions are often formulated as imperatives, but they are what Kant would call hypothetical imperatives; they have no practical consequence until you set out actually to perform the target task. And even then, knowing the instructions won't do you any good if you do not know how to perform the method tasks. This is where the knowing-*how* comes in. To be sure, there may also be further instructions for doing a method task, which will reduce it to what we might call a method sub-task. But ultimately, the instruction hierarchy must get down to tasks that you already know how to do. To be effective, instructions must connect target tasks with pre-existing abilities, or, as I shall call them, basic skills, including, if need be, the skill of properly sequencing the method tasks. You need to have these skills if you are to learn how to do the target task by learning the instructions. But if you do know the instructions and do possess the skills then you will be able to perform the target task.

This way of thinking about instructions leads to two questions about our logic textbook instructions: What is their target task? What are the basic skills they presuppose?

Asquith gives a rough statement of the target task at the outset of his paper: the instructions are for "argument recognition and reconstruction." And Govier's last rule specifies it further; the task is to convert an original text into a standardized version, presumably one to which rules of logical evaluation can be applied. This is the target task which I think we may call the *interpretation* task; it is typically a preliminary to an evaluation task in which we decide whether the argument interpretation has discovered is any good.

And as for the basic know-*hows* presupposed by the interpretation instructions, the most important is clear from Govier's first rule; to carry out these instructions you must be able to read and understand the passage. But other skills are needed as well. For one thing, as Asquith points out, the target task is one of finding and reporting meta-data, and this requires knowledge of the

meta-language in which such data are reported, which requires being able to understand and apply its concepts, such as those of “premise”, “conclusion”, etc. And, as Asquith notes, this will require reasoning, and in particular reasoning that involves the weighing of reasons for and against applying these meta-concepts to particular text elements (Section 5.2).

That this kind of reasoning is involved in carrying out the instructions leads, I believe, to two interesting ideas, one about our conception of the target task, the other about the required skills.

With regard to the target task, the notion of reasoning as the weighing of pros and cons is helpful because it suggests a useful extension. That task has been conceived as having to do with *argument*, (Section 5.1) but, as Asquith points out, there is lack of agreement about just what argument is. He suggests moving to “giving a reason” as a necessary condition for argument, but there is uncertainty about that too. I suggest we move even beyond this to the notion of having a reason as part of a rational thought structure, that is, a collection of thoughts (beliefs, intentions, attitudes, whatever) structured on the basis of some being reasons for or against others. Change some of the thoughts in such a structure and rationality will require changing others. Some such structures, or portions of them, will be expressed as arguments, but others will be expressed in other ways. And reasons may be present in the expressed thought structure without being *given* as reasons.

For example, suppose I say, “Jones is from Alberta so he must be a supporter of the Reform Party.” That expresses a fragment of a thought structure in which the Alberta bit figures as a reason for the Reform Party bit. And I have expressed it straightforwardly as an argument in which the one bit is *given* as a reason for the other. But suppose I say instead, “Even though he has a Ph.D. in Political Science, Jones supports the Reform Party”. I do not here present an argument, but still there is an expression of a fragment of a rational thought structure, one in which the Ph.D. bit figures as a reason against the Reform Party bit. But it is not clear that I am *giving* it as such a reason. My point might be simply that even though the Ph.D. *may* be a reason against the Reform hypothesis, it would be outweighed by other considerations.

Such reason organized thought structures, or rather, scraps of them, can find expression in scraps of language, and so we can say that the target task of our instructions is to find and report the relevant features of a rational thought structure expressed in a given passage, and we needn’t get hung up about the exact nature of argument and the giving of reasons. Arguments and reason giving will just be special cases of thought structure expression, and interpretation will consider that aspect when relevant to context and purpose. The Ph.D. thing might or might not be relevant to a discussion about Jones and Reform, and so the target task might or might not require taking note of it.

Now for the second idea. That the reasoning employed in carrying out the target task involves weighing pros and cons also tells us something about the required basic skills. The method tasks will include the exercise of judgment; if they are rule following tasks, then at least some of the rules will be of the *ceteris paribus* type, and judgment will come in when the other things are not equal.

One is reminded here of the ethical theory of W. D. Ross according to which ethical knowledge consists in knowing rules of *prima facie* obligation; if you promised to do it then, other things equal, you ought to do it. But when other things are not equal -- you are, say, considering returning a borrowed sword to a friend who has now gone murderously insane -- you must weigh up the various conflicting obligations. And, says Ross, quoting Aristotle, “the

decision rests with perception" (*The Right and the Good*, 1930, p. 42). Or, to put it another way, an exercise of judgment is required. That's the way it is with the interpretation phase of logical analysis too.

But none of this means that there is anything wrong with the textbook instructions. They provide a framework for the exercise of this judgment as well as practice for developing it. And, I think, this is the way we really want it. Suppose we had a judgment free procedure for extracting arguments from texts. It would, of course, be rather complicated. Suppose that its complication were such that, say, getting the structure of my Alberta-Reform argument were about as hard as using long division to divide 17 into 193 to an accuracy of 5 decimal places. Would we actually want to teach such a thing to students, and have them use it? Would we use it ourselves?

And so our familiar instructions should not be regarded as failed attempts to be like that. But there may still be a place for automation. Once judgment has done its work it may be possible to automate other parts of the job. And at the end of the paper Asquith indicates several possibilities along this line. Instructions, different from the ones given to students, could be given to computers which could then generate useful logic exercises, and sample interpretations against which students could try their judgment. That's all to the good, but we never wanted to treat the students themselves as computers.