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Commentary on: J. Novak's "Substantive Syllogisms"

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Prof. Novak espouses two theses. The first, historical, says that there are more arguments than we perhaps knew about that are structurally, if not on their face, classical Aristotelian syllogisms. The second, pedagogical, says that we should teach such syllogisms because they do not, to use his phrase, "express tedious class inclusions or taxonomies," a fault which he thinks plagues usual presentations of the syllogism.

I have no quarrel at all with his historical thesis, and am grateful to be shown arguments that illustrate it.

I also have little quarrel with his pedagogical thesis, though I should like to express some reservations.

Introductory logic books, and by inference logic teachers, tend to divide into two camps: those which present a good deal of categorical logic, and those which present a limited amount, if any. Prof. Novak's pedagogical thesis would, I should think, appeal to the first camp; but not to the second. Let me speak somewhat on behalf of the second camp.

Merely to get to simple categorical syllogisms requires some fancy footwork. There is the very notions of a category and of category overlap — of horses, of marsupials; of things that are both horses and marsupials; of things that are neither horses nor marsupials — and of getting students to see that there can be categories that are empty (e.g. marsupial horses). Then there are translations from ordinary English (e.g. *Nurses are not doctors* or *A few students have plagiarized their papers*) into standard categorical form (*No nurses are doctors*, *Some students are people who have plagiarized their papers*). Then there are Venn diagrams, which seem initially to befuddle some students, especially regarding white (unfilled) space, which represents a state of no information.

(I'm reminded of a story told by Alvin Plantinga, who spent some time filling the board with Venn diagrams, and finally asked his class if they understood how to prove syllogisms valid or invalid. One student replied that she did, but wondered what all those circles were about.)

I find I'm lucky if I get students to deal successfully with the "tedious class inclusions" that Prof. Novak, with some justification, derides: *All cats are mammals, all mammals are warm-blooded animals, so all cats are warm-blooded animals*. Dull but most students eventually get it. I should think that Plato's argument about immortality might be assigned as an honors or extra-credit assignment, though not for the average introductory logic student. Aquinas's argument about civic knowledge is even farther beyond the pale. This, surely, has (to use another phrase of Prof. Novak's) "a content that is too abstruse for a pedagogic context."

Teachers who choose to minimize their presentation of the Aristotelian syllogism might do so as a matter of personal preference. They might, though, do so as a matter of

following a conventional introductory logic syllabus, which after all has a lot more in it than categorical syllogisms: propositional logic, including such non-categorical syllogisms as the disjunctive and hypothetical; inductive reasoning, including analogical arguments, causal arguments, and probabilistic reasoning; fallacies; and sometimes a brief introduction to quantificational logic which not only encompasses categorical syllogisms but which can also show valid argument forms that are beyond the capacity of the categorical syllogism, including the ever-popular syllogism, *All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal.* (Note: it is an act of desperation to make Socrates into a category, e.g. *All things identical to Socrates.*)

But for those in the first camp, the advocates of teaching lots of categorical logic, Prof. Novak's examples should be inspirational.