May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Russell

Richard Feldman

COMMENTS ON BRUCE RUSSELL'S *GOOD ARGUMENTS AND FALLACIES*

Richard Feldman
Department of Philosophy
University of Rochester

Bruce Russell argues for two main theses. First, he proposes an amendment to the epistemological notion of a good argument that I had proposed a while back. Second, he argues that this notion of a good argument is not the one at work in discussions of fallacies. I will make a few comments on each main point.

1. What is a good argument?

In a paper entitled "Good Arguments," I proposed an account of what it is for an argument to be a good one. There are, I suspect, a variety of notions of a good argument. For example, in cases in which you want to convince another person to do or believe a certain thing, a good argument would be one that has its desired effect. Whether the argument has any logical or rational merit is independent of its persuasive power. The notion of a good argument that I was after was one, perhaps the one, under discussion in critical thinking courses. Here, the focus is on argument analysis. One wants to know when an argument provides reason to believe its conclusion. A good argument is one that does provide support for its conclusion. A bad argument fails to do that.

It's clear that given this general idea of a good argument, being a good argument will be a relational notion. What's a good argument for one person or group may fail to be a good argument for others. I suggested that an argument is a good argument for a person provided it satisfies three conditions. First, I think that arguments provide rational support for their conclusions only if the premises are justified (reasonable) ones. Arguments can have true premises that a person has no reason to accept. Such arguments do not provide the person with good reason to believe their conclusions. However, arguments with false but well justified premises can provide good reasons to believe their conclusions. So, an argument is a good one for you only if you are justified in believing (the conjunction of) its premises.

Second, I want to allow for good arguments that are not deductively valid. I use the word 'cogent' to describe the structure of such arguments. Let's say that when an argument is either valid or cogent, the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion and the argument is "well-formed." Now, imagine an argument that is in fact valid, but the connection between the premises and the conclusion is enormously hard to see. You don't have any reason to think that the premises do support the conclusion. In that case, the argument does not provide you with any reason to believe its conclusion. It's not a good argument for you. This leads me to say that what's required is that you justifiably believe that the argument is well-formed, that is, that you justifiably believe that the premises are properly connected to the conclusion.

Finally, I added a "no-defeater" condition. I will ignore that here.

So, my proposal was that an argument is a good argument for a person provided the person is justified in believing the conjunction of its premises, and the person is justified in believing that the premises are properly connected to the conclusion, and the argument is not defeated for the person.

Russell's objection is that this account omits the requirement that the argument actually be valid or cogent. He proposes adding this as a fourth condition, beyond the three I identified. An example that brings out the difference between us is a somewhat odd sort of case. It is one in which a person is justified in believing that a certain argument is well-formed, but in fact the argument is not well-formed. Such an argument meets my three conditions, but fails Russell's added condition. What might such an example be like? Well, suppose a student is taught by a reputable logic teacher that a certain pattern of argument is valid. The student encounters an argument conforming to that pattern. The student knows the premises of the argument to be true. Finally, suppose that the teacher is wrong. The pattern is not valid. My proposal implies that the argument is a good one—it does provide the student with a good reason to believe its conclusion. Russell's proposal rules otherwise, since the argument is in fact not well-formed. I continue to like the view I initially proposed. Upon encountering an argument of the sort described, I think the student would be justified in accepting the conclusion. The student can justifiably think, "The premises of this argument are true, and necessarily, if those premises are true, then the conclusion is true as well. So, the conclusion is true." It seems to me that, for such a student, the argument does its job, rationally. If you are willing to accept the idea that arguments can succeed with false but justified premises, then I think you ought to accept the analogous idea that arguments can succeed when they are justifiably, but mistakenly, believed to be valid. So, I'm not persuaded that I should accept Russell's modification of my account.

Russell proposes as an objection to my view a case in which "an argument involves the fallacy of equivocation," but the three conditions I propose are all satisfied. Equivocations are typically arguments that involve ambiguous words or phrases. People fooled by them typically fail to recognize the ambiguity. This makes it difficult to know exactly what propositions, if any, it is that they are believing when they contemplate the argument. This makes it very difficult to assess Russell's objection, absent a specific detailed case. I suspect that, once the details are spelled out, for each specific argument that can be expressed in a case of equivocation, either one or more of the conditions I've spelled out wouldn't be satisfied or I'd be willing to accept the result that the person is justified in believing the conclusion and that the argument is a good one for that person.

2. Fallacies.

Russell argues that the epistemological notion of a good argument just discussed will not do in the account of what a fallacy is. A fallacy, he says, is "a bad argument that appears to be good." For discussion of this point, the dispute about just how to spell out the epistemological notion of a good argument doesn't matter. Neither of the epistemological accounts discussed would suffice. I think I agree with Russell about this. Arguments that are bad, because they fail one or another of the conditions described, need not count as "fallacies," even if they appear to be good arguments. Of course, much depends upon what's meant by "appears to be a good argument." I don't have any firm grasp of that idea.

Russell goes on to say that a fallacy is "an argument that is neither valid nor cogent but has a form that resembles the form of a valid or cogent argument." I will make a few comments about this proposal, and about fallacies generally.

I should begin with two preliminary comments. First, Russell didn't have the time in his paper to say very much about the notion of a fallacy that he's trying to explicate. Sometimes the word "fallacy" is used simply to designate an argument that is invalid, or perhaps an argument that is neither valid nor cogent. This is a purely formal notion, though it is applied with difficulty to arguments in ordinary language. The other notion of fallacy is the one common in critical thinking. This is plausibly taken to be a bad argument that appears to be a good. They are bad arguments that often mislead people. So, I'll assume that this is what Russell has in mind.

My second preliminary comment amounts to putting my cards on the table. I think that the things ordinarily identified as fallacies are an assortment of good arguments, bad arguments, and non-arguments. I doubt that there is any well-defined notion here at all. I think that we'd be best off evaluating arguments in terms of the sorts of conditions just described, and I fear that encouraging students to play "Name that Fallacy" is often counter-productive. I won't develop this point here.

As for Russell's account of the fallacies as ill-formed (i.e., neither valid nor cogent) arguments that resemble in form a well-formed argument, I will make two points. First, it's not at all clear to me that the arguments that are ordinarily classified as fallacies do have forms that resemble the forms of valid or cogent arguments. Resemblance, of course, is a tricky notion, so it's hard to be confident of much here. I think that arguments in which one affirms the consequent or denies the antecedent are supposed to be fallacies. I don't know whether such arguments resemble the form of their valid counterparts. Other so-called fallacies are such things as appeals to fear or appeals to pity. When the things said in such appeals are spelled out as arguments, one of two things happens. One possibility is that they look nothing at all like valid or cogent arguments, as in "Those thugs will beat you up if you believe p. Therefore, p is false." If that resembles the form of a valid or cogent argument, then, as far as I can tell, every argument does. So, the resemblance requirement rules out nothing. Another possibility is to spell out the appeal to fear or pity in such a way that it is valid but it includes a ridiculous generalization linking the premise to the conclusion. Assuming the first sort of reconstruction, fallacies need not resemble in structure well-formed arguments. Assuming the second, fallacies need not be invalid. I suspect that appeals to fear and the like are counted as fallacies because people are sometimes convinced by them, not because of their resemblance in form to good arguments.

Second, Russell requires that fallacies be neither valid nor cogent. This rules out as fallacies some of the prototypical arguments classified as fallacies. Arguments that are said to be question-begging or circular are, typically at least, surely valid. Stripped to their essentials, they have the form "P, therefore P." Whatever their alleged defect, it isn't invalidity. One of the other classic fallacies is the so-called "false dilemma." These are arguments by elimination. They are valid. I think that the problem with them, typically, is that the disjunctive premise is not justified. In any case, they don't satisfy Russell's requirement that they be neither valid nor cogent. Arguments classified as fallacious appeals to authority are often exactly the same in structure as reasonable testimonial arguments. Numerous other examples along these lines could be given. So, the arguments typically classified as fallacies need not be bad in form. Typically, they have unreasonable premises.

So, Russell's proposal does not capture the class of things typically regarded as fallacies. As I noted above, I may not have understood Russell's goal here properly. Perhaps he thinks the arguments just mentioned are not fallacies, but have some other defect instead. But, if that's the case, then I don't see why he doesn't simply say that a fallacy is an ill-formed argument. There's no need to add the clause requiring that fallacious arguments resemble the form of well-formed arguments.

View Paper by B. Russell
View Index of Papers and Commentaries
Return to Main Menu