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Commentary on Dima Mohammed's "How to Argue (Well) About Evaluative Standpoints? Argumentation in Accountability Practice"

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Professor Mohammed's paper aims at answering the question of what counts as a good defense of an evaluative claim about the conduct of a political agent. If successful, it promises to break new grounds in our understanding of political accountability, a fundamental practice in today's liberal democracies. And it promises to do so by combining views concerning the structure of evaluative claims and arguments that are available in philosophical and critical-thinking literature.

After considering some insights from that literature, Professor Mohammed develops her own proposal of the 'scheme' (which I'll understand in terms of 'logical form') most suitable to defend political accountability claims. Her proposal, if sound, would make a contribution to the analysis of evaluative arguments beyond those of concern in this paper – i.e., beyond political-accountability arguments. As acknowledge in the paper, analogous logical forms might underline other accountability arguments familiar in the context of institutional bodies charged with an accountability role.

The success of Professor Mohammed's project hinges on these two theses:

Thesis 1: There is a link to be found between claims of a certain type and what counts as a good defense of them.

Thesis 2: There is a link to be found between (political) accountability claims and what counts as a good defense of them.

General thesis 1 seems plausible. After all, for example, empirical claims are commonly supported by evidence, or defeated by counterevidence. And a priori claims stand or fall on the strength of reasoning alone. But I think that thesis 2, if challenged, would be very difficult to defend. In this commentary, I would like to draw a contrast between that thesis and the more modest

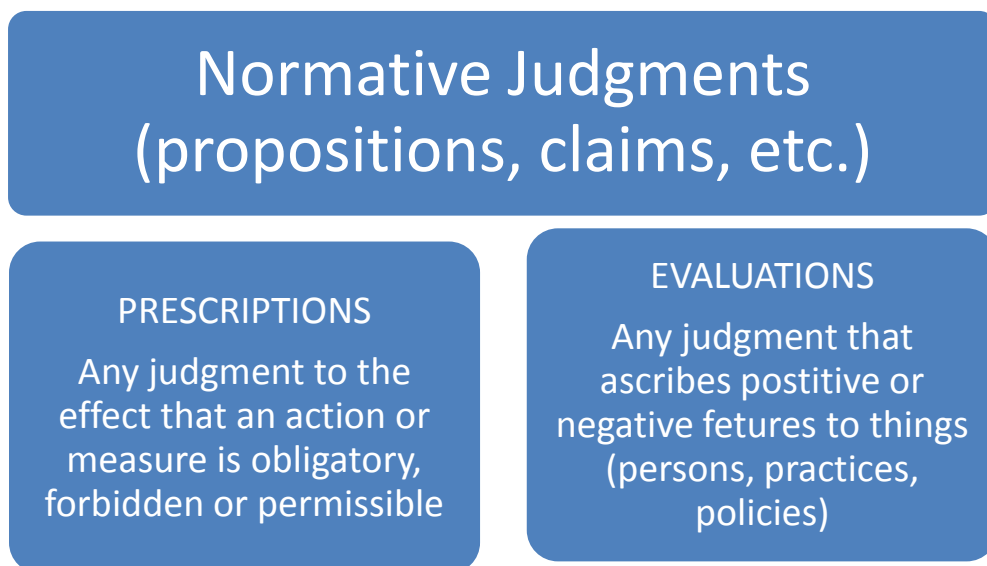
Thesis 3: There is a link to be found between claims with normative force and what *does not* count as a good defense of them.

Prominent among philosophical reflection on the logical form of argument for claims with normative force are David Hume's remarks on the Is/Ought gap and G. E. Moore's Naturalistic Fallacy charge. Each of these is consistent with thesis 3, which in turn is compatible with thesis 2, since they could both be true (or false, as sometimes argued in the case of Hume's Is/Ought gap or Moore's Naturalistic Fallacy). But thesis 3's scope is more modest, for it does not assert the existence of a positive correlation between claims with normative force and the logical structure of any good defense of them.

Hume's and Moore's insights on the logical form of normative arguments (more on the 'normative' label later) can be regarded as part of a skeptical tradition according to which thesis 2 is too long a shot. As for other types of claim, normative claims admit of numerous good defenses, with no especial link to arguments of a particular kind. Given skepticism of this sort, the quest for an argument form that provides the best defense of a normative claim about the conduct of a political agent would turn out to be futile. Furthermore, the burden of arguing would be on the anti-skeptic camp.

In what follows, I'll explore whether the material covered in Professor Mohammed's paper can meet this challenge, which requires arguing persuasively for a positive link between accountability claims and the argument scheme that is best suited to defend them. But first, let's consider some terminological issues.

Although as noted by Professor Mohammed the fact/value distinction have been under scrutiny for some time, for the purpose of argument analysis it is helpful to distinguish judgments that exclusively make a factual claim (e.g., 'Mr. Williams was denied kidney-dialysis') from those that also have normative force (e.g., 'Denying kidney-dialysis to Mr. Williams was wrong'). The former judgments are commonly called 'purely descriptive'; the later 'normative.' Evaluative judgments and prescriptions can be regarded as making up the category of normative judgment – i.e., judgments with normative force. If 'Dead is bad,' then that is usually a reason for avoiding measures that hasten or cause death: such is the normative force of that evaluative judgment. To evaluate Major Petersen as corrupt agent is to make a judgment with a certain normative force: it provides a reason for thinking that he has engaged in activities that are forbidden for a public official. On this framework, accountability judgments are not only evaluations using terms such as 'Agent A's performance was satisfactory' (or 'honest,' 'efficient,' 'wasteful,' etc.). They can also consist in backward- or forward-looking prescriptions such as 'The Major should not have put pressure on state workers to vote for her' (backward looking prescription of accountability) and 'This Major should provide evidence that her taxation of cigarettes will have an impact on public health' (forward looking prescription of accountability). If I am right, the picture that emerges has, on the one side, purely descriptive judgments and on the other, something like this



With this taxonomy in mind, let's now turn to the argument forms that might provide good structures for defending normative accountability judgments. Here Professor Mohammed's proposal is first inspired in what she refers to as an evaluative symptomatic argument scheme (hereafter, 'ESAS'), which runs as in Figure 1.

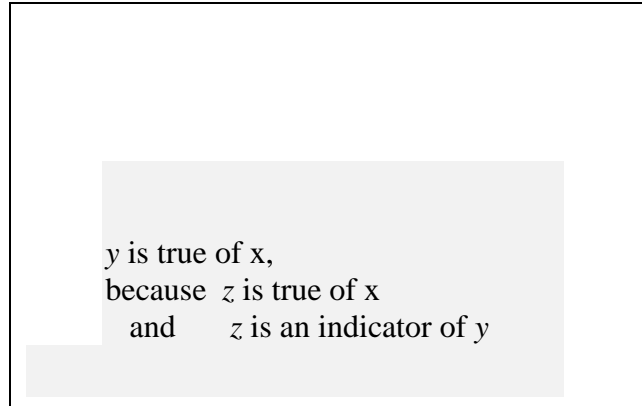


Figure 1 (Mohammed 2016: 6)

Here, x is a political agent, z is a descriptive property or set of properties concerning that agent's performance (having followed established procedures, managed the budget, etc.), and y is an associated evaluative property (satisfactory, efficient, wasteful, corrupt, etc.).

But as a representation of the logical form of an argument, the scheme in Figure 1 is extremely odd: why put the conclusion first? Why make a semantic ascent from ' x is y ' or ' x has property y ' to the cumbersome ' y is true of x '? Translated into a standard argument form, ESAS would become the plausibility argument form in Figure 2, a familiar structures from defenses of different types of claim.

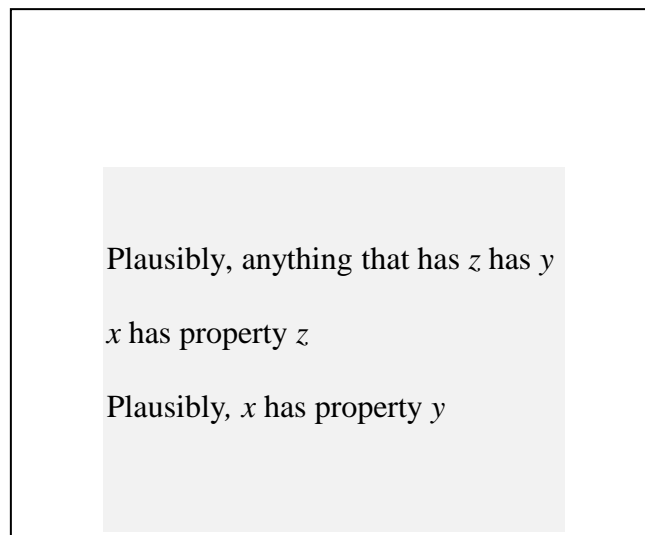


Figure 2

To Figure 1 basic structure, Professor Mohammed adds Govier & Allen's 2011 notion of a conductive argument, which is one whose premises independently contribute to supporting its conclusion. She thus obtain more complex schemes that share Figure 1 basic structure. The schemes can be adapted to apply to negative evaluations of inefficient or otherwise unsatisfactory performance of a political agent. Here is an example of simple ESAS:

Satisfactory conduct is true of the executive agent A

because *having policies/plans/action which are in line with the collective goals* is true of A
and *having policies/plans/action which are in line with the collective goals* is an
indicator of *satisfactory conduct*

Figure 3 (Mohammed 2016: 9)

I now submit that more needs to be said before skepticism about Professor Mohammed's thesis 2 can be ruled out. For recall that is the thesis that accountability claims are especially linked to logical forms that are good vehicles for their defense. But the argument in Figure 3 also admits reconstruction by means of a plausibility logical form along the lines of Figure 2. Once that's done, it has not tendency to suggest any especial link between the accountability claim that an executive agent's conduct is satisfactory and a particular argument form that best serves the purpose of defending that claim.