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# Reply

## Interpreting Arguments and Judging Issues

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In a recent article in this journal,[1] Jonathan Berg offers some principles for the guidance of those attempting to identify the argument(s) present in discursive prose. In addition to doing so, he makes some background remarks having to do with his interest in accurately capturing the argument(s) intended by the author, as opposed to using the author's remarks as a mere springboard for the construction by the reader of arguments (perhaps better in some way than the author's) compatible to some extent with the author's words but not necessarily with his/her thoughts. My primary interest in this paper is with this background matter of the point of "argument analysis."[2]

At first sight there seem to be two main, and distinct (though not mutually exclusive) motivations that one might have in subjecting a piece of argumentative prose to serious critical scrutiny. The first I shall call "biographical".[3] It has as its task the accurate portrayal of the argument(s) that the author has in mind. The second, I shall call "answer-oriented."[4] I shall elaborate upon this latter first and return to biographically motivated analysis in due course.

Let us assume that some individual, Horace McSmith, say, has discoursed upon the vexing moral controversy concerning the proposal that the Palestinians supplant Israel with a sovereign state of Palestine. A reader, June Prune, say, might be interested in coming to an as well thought-out a position on this issue as possible and, recognising the limitations of intellectual soliloquy, she might seek the stimulation of others' ideas. In this vein, she read Horace's remarks. Now, if her motivation is primarily one of arriving at the best thought-out answer possible,[5] then June's interest in Horace's arguments is instrumental.[6] Those remarks are viewed as merely contributory to her own thoughts. The reason for even bothering to read *Horace's* remarks is that he might have something to say of use to her own deliberations. Thus, her *starting* point is to gain at least a *rough* grasp of the line of thought he's advancing.[7] Suppose he says that "the Palestinians have historical association with the land and no-one can lay moral claim to sovereignty over land without such historical association, thus the Palestinians should be granted sovereignty over what is now Israel."

June ought at least carry out what I call "a rough structuring" of Horace's claims so that she has his ideas in a sequence and layout that act as a clear starting point for her thought. Were I June, I would portray Horace's views as follows.

*Premise One:*

The Palestinians have historical association with the land (currently forming Israel).

*Premise Two:*

No-one can lay moral claim to sovereignty over land without historical association with it.

So, (conclusion) the Palestinians should be granted sovereignty over what is now Israel.

Now June could, if she were to be interested in capturing precisely the argument that Horace intended, proceed to ask herself: What implicit claims are being intended by Horace to be "read between the lines"? Does he really mean the (morally) necessary condition claim of Premise Two (which is not strong enough to generate the conclusion) or did he just express himself badly? Does he subscribe to a sufficient condition claim (that having historical association with the land morally warrants laying claim to sovereignty over the land)[8]? What does he mean by "historical association" given that the Israelis' ancestors were also associated with the land (a point he presumably knows)? And so on.

But to gain intellectually beneficial input from Horace's words, June needn't bother with such efforts concerning Horace's mental biography. Assuming for the moment that she hadn't much considered the moral significance of historical association, she now has, with a little thought, a rich range of possibilities and questions to consider. For instance, she can ask: just what could be meant by "historical association" in this context? and, that settled, whether historical association is of moral significance to her in such contexts? and if so, what is its *comparative* significance? (does it, say, over-ride other factors?); and if some principle of historical association is a general one, then how would it apply to other countries? (perhaps embarrassing analogies will occur); and so on. In exploring such issues June has moved beyond any mere issue of what Horace meant and how she assesses his specific argument. She will end up generating and considering arguments whose only connections with Horace's thought are that they concern the possible moral significance of historical association, in some sense, with land and sovereignty over it. Note also that this goes beyond the normal reconstruction of "Horace's argument" into the soundest possible argument(s) compatible with the text.[9]

The second goal of argument analysis, accurate mental biography, is understood by me to be much as Berg outlines it (or roughly so: I have difficulties with the idea of trying to determine the intentions of a non-actual author).[10]

One can, of course, carry out either of these exercises and each is warrantable given certain motivating aims. The question for us is, "Which type of exercise is most apt for the sorts of units that most of us teach?". Clearly the question can only be answered by looking at our educational aims, at what we take the point of the skills, attitudes etc., which we hope to impart, to be.

Berg is alert to this point and, in support of his claim that what I've called "biographical analysis" is most apt, he refers us to the arguments contained in two of Trudy Govier's papers.[11] The crucial passage of Govier's seems to me to be this one:

> There are many different purposes which we may have in evaluating argumentative discourse. Sometimes our purpose is to reply as cogently and briefly as we can to an opponent. Sometimes it is to check the strength of reasons offered in support of something we already believe. Sometimes it is to check the legitimacy of our beliefs by examining grounds offered for competing beliefs. Sometimes it is to find the underlying assumptions and world view of a great thinker. Sometimes it is to evaluate the truth of a single crucial statement, identified as the conclusion.[12]

Govier asserts that, of these five possible purposes, only for the last is an answer-oriented interpretive approach apt. [13] She doesn't further examine the first four purposes and I'd like to do this now.

Consider the first—replying congently and briefly to an opponent. First, note that "reply" is not terribly precise in its reference here. One might, I suppose, if one was terribly rushed, or wishing to score points off one's opponent[14], be content with some sort of brief response: "you commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent", or whatever, but I would have thought that, in a richer dialogue, one would be sharing with one's opponent (or colleague!) a concern for the merits of the answer to some

question that has been offered by him/her. So, on our Palestinian question from earlier, June might cogently (if not briefly) reply that maybe something along those lines could be made valid but, it would appear, at the expense of introducing a rather implausibly strongly worded premise; specifically... . If briefness were mandatory, then the rather long remarks in the "specifically..." clause could be dropped or summarised. Without this, one is left with a merely destructive "chop job".[15] In short, if cogent and brief replies are not to be offered in the spirit of answer-oriented discussion, then what is the point such that that point should motivate our teaching aims?

The second stated purpose is that of checking our own reasons in support of some accepted belief (or moral stance, etc.). But isn't this centrally within the answer-orientated approach? Presumably our deeper motivation here is to want our beliefs (etc.) to be as well-founded as possible. Why then, would we restrict our efforts to the extant argument and not play around with variations?

The third motivation was to check the legitimacy of our beliefs by looking at the cases in favour of its rivals. Clearly, that task is incomplete if we restrict our attention to extant cases and don't attempt to redraft a line of argument into its best version. It is false security to bask in your own views' comparative argumentative merits when those may be based on the incompetence of rival views' advocates. Again, this motivation seems centrally in the spirit of an answer-oriented approach to others' argumentative offerings.

The fourth purpose *does* strike me as a clear case of biography; but is it *warranted* biography? Clearly it might well be, if it occurs in the context of some pursuit such as the history of ideas, for instance. But for most of us, I would surmise, having students comprehend the thoughts of famous thinkers is not a major aim. Rather, we expect our critical reasoning units to assist students in their dialogue with lesser and more obscure minds. As I said earlier, I do consider fidelity of interpretation to be of worth to one's own thinking (that is, to be of *answer-oriented worth*) when the work being interpreted is that of a mind greatly superior to one's own, such that, even with a rough idea of the printed word as one's starting point, the range of argument variations that one could oneself generate would not include the original (and, given its likely worth, that would be a pity).[16] But for lesser minds one is more likely to spend one's time profitably (answer wise) by conjuring up, and playing with, variations upon the printed argument(s).

I suspect that Govier would accuse me of advocating that students take a condescending attitude to others' thoughts. In a passage following the above quotation Govier urges that:

> It is in the interest of self-development and human understanding that we seek to understand other people's ideas as they put these ideas forward. To the extent that we are interested in how other people actually think and what they have to say [answer-oriented][17] interpretation will not serve us well ... (it) is a licence for projecting one's own mind into the discourse of other minds ... (and) ... will frequently be manipulative and condescending.[18]

I take this to be a sixth purpose, or, if you will, an extension of the biographical spirit of the fourth purpose from the famous to the non-famous.

I am not quite sure what's going on here but following my self-advised non-biographical interpretive strategy I will conjure with ideas suggested by Govier's prose. Obviously, in an immediate sense, human understanding will likely be aided by attempts by one lot of humans (readers) to understand another lot (authors). I can see the danger of *mis*understanding in a context where, say, people are supposedly doing biography but bungling it through incompetence or ill-will. Clearly, before one says "*your* view is ... " some careful interpretation might have to go on. But is the goal of attempting such understanding sup-

posed to be intrinsically meritorious or, more plausibly, is it to be instrumentally warranted? Perhaps in exploration of this latter option we ought consider the purposes of the author. I suppose that writing (or, more plausibly, speaking) might be serving some psychologically therapeutic function which would be interfered with if the reader (or hearer) didn't faithfully capture the signal sent.[19] Fine, but I doubt that this is often the case, especially for *written* work, and even in those cases where it is I don't see a critical reasoning course as appropriate psychotherapist training. Indeed, for such a psychologically fragile author the next move of argument *criticism* seems fraught with danger!

Alternatively, I would take it that most authors are putatively proffering their remarks in an answer-oriented context and the approach to interpretation that I advocated above is directly tailored to this.[20] That is, it's a service to all concerned to have a range of variations on the original line of reasoning articulated and critically explored. As a passing *ad hominem* against Govier it strikes me as most "condescending" to Smith to be appraising his argument about nuclear arms with the preconception that, as he is not "pretty special" his contribution to the debate is not worth considering as a contribution to an answer-oriented investigation but is only of biographical interest.[21] This, it seems to me, is to say to the author, "I know that you meant to be offering me a contribution to the debate but I'm not interested in it in this way but only as evidence for understanding your mind." Such biographical curiosity (or human understanding) is a motivation that is distinct from the issue of the intellectual worth of the author's points. Further, why proceed to *criticise* once the author is correctly interpreted? Presumably to find out if his/her views are sound, but why bother with this? One possibility, presumably, is because one is interested in the topic of the argument—but this becomes answer-oriented immediately.

Another possibility is that one is performing an intellectual service to the author ("here is just how your argument goes awry..."). But why would the author be interested in hearing that? Presumably because s/he is answer-oriented and, by indicating his/her error, one is thus assisting his/her chances of getting the best answer. But, to *this* end, a *better* service would be provided by an answer-oriented response, of which the author can note: "Yes, I see that version 3 is more or less what I was saying and it's unsound, moreover versions 1 and 2 won't help as 1 is invalid and 2 has a premise I can't accept, however if I soften the conclusion as in version 4 then that seems better"—or whatever.

Of course all of this consideration of what the author might or might not get out of our interpretive response is mostly beside the point, for rarely will s/he be even aware of our response.

Govier suggests self-development as a possible motive for faithful interpretation but I fail to see upon what parameter this development is supposed to occur. How is it of merit *to the reader* to have got Smith straight if this is admittedly irrelevant to advancing one's understanding of the issues Smith raises?

So, it seems to me that our students ought to be taught answer-oriented skills of "interpretation" and critical thought as a first priority. At least none of what Govier, Berg and others have written or said suggests to me any argument that persuades me that biographical skills are more important.

Before I close I would like to make one comment on Berg's first-order suggestions. On page 18 he suggests that generally accepted implicit premises in an author's argument are not worth writing in. I would suggest contrarily that these might prove *just* the ones that it's worth having explicitly portrayed when it comes time for premise-assessment. The history of ideas seems to me to be full of assumptions that were not subjected to critical scrutiny but ought to have been.

## Notes

[1] Jonathan Berg, "Interpreting Arguments", *Informal Logic*, 9, (1987).

[2] The "Shudder Quotes" are because, in a sense, what I propose is not aptly thought of as argument analysis at all.

[3] The adjective strikes me as more apt than "textual", for what we seek here is an accurate piece of psychological biography. Our interpretive hypotheses are mentalistic and the text merely provides the data to be explained by our hypotheses.

[4] I'm loath to add to the proliferation of terminology but the idea here is not the same as that of reconstruction to obtain the best argument *compatible with the text.*

[5] I find the aim of Stephen Thomas " ... to find the truth through reasoning" rather too restrictive. As a metaethical non-objectivist I don't consider value-judgmental claims to be candidates for truth/falsity at all. (See S.F. Thomas, *Practical Reasoning in Natural Language*, 3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986 p. 19; quoted by Berg in his fn. 3.)

[6] At least her interest whilst wearing this hat; as we shall later explore, one can have other motivations for looking at someone's remarks, including biographical motivations.

[7] The extent to which June should bother with a high fidelity rendering of Horace's thoughts seems to me to depend on how she rates him as a contributor to the debate. If she rates him highly then a good deal of interpretive effort might be warranted to ensure that she doesn't miss some subtle and worthy point that she wouldn't be likely to construct herself from a rough reading. If she doesn't rate him as highly (or rates herself highly) then she might skip such biographical efforts confident that she'll have his argument as one of the set of versions which she concocts from the passage. See below.

[8] Incidentally, it's not implausible that such a bungle is going on. I have found over the years that undergraduates are weak concerning the conventionally correct employment of sentences to express necessary and sufficient condition relations and they often prove not to have meant what they said.

[9] A point Berg is aware of, see p. 18 column 1.

[10] See p. 14 of Berg's paper.

[11] See: Trudy Govier, "Uncharitable Thoughts About Charity", *Informal Logic Newsletter*, 4 (1981), 5-6; and Trudy Govier, "On Adler On Charity", *Informal Logic Newsletter*, 4 (1982), 10-11.

[12] See Govier (1982), p. 11.

[13] Strictly speaking she doesn't *assert* this though it is entailed *a fortiori* by what she does assert. Her target is the approach of finding the best argument compatible with the passage, a sort of motivationally muddled middle approach between the two I outline.

[14] A word rather too adversarial for my taste. I like the Philosophy for Children movement's notion of a community of inquiry and, in its spirit, tend to employ the word "colleague" in its place.

[15] Assuming unsoundness of Horace's remarks. Were the author's/speaker's argument (in the biographically accurate sense) to be sound then nothing is lost, it seems to me, by adopting the answer-oriented approach. At worst, one will cop a slightly peeved, "But that's what I said, or, at least, meant!"

[16] See my note 7 above.

[17] Not Govier's term, but see my note 10 above.

[18] Govier (1982), p. 11.

[19] Or *seem* to. Plausibly a Rogerian therapist can get away with responses that are as obscure and ill-understood by him/her as the original, yet persuade the speaker that s/he's communicated successfully.

[20] I suppose that the real motivation will in many cases be one of "point scoring", posturing and so forth but I fail to see why a reader should agree to play those sorts of games or be trained to pander to them.

[21] See Govier (1982), p. 11.

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