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Jun 6th, 8:01 AM - 9:00 AM

Comments on Wagemans' "Argument levers"

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Comment on Wagemans' "Evaluating Arguments by Their Levers"

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Jean Wagemans has a different story to tell about argumentation discourse than the one with which many of us are familiar. It begins with a criticism of argument-scheme theory, proceeds to argue for the minimalist conception of argument, and then introduces a three-dimensional classification of arguments. This is all in the projected service of better reconstructions, analyses and evaluations of actual (natural) arguments.

1. The criticism of scheme-theory

Wagemans finds scheme theory objectionable for two reasons. First, since schemes are patterns of ideal kinds of arguments (from sign, from analogy, from consequences, etc.), when they are used to guide reconstruction they may well lead to distortions of the natural argument that was actually made. The second criticism of scheme theory is that there may be some arguments that are not associated with any recognized scheme and so the theory leaves us mute about them.

     I think these are relevant criticisms of scheme theory, or the use of argument schemes. However, Wagemans is here taking the view that all schemes are ideals of argument types. I am not sure that is the case. There could be a scheme theory consisting of descriptive schemes that only identified an argument as belonging to some kind or other without deeming it a good or bad instance of that argument kind (see my "Scheme theory" ECA, 2019). Kind membership and instance quality are different questions and Wagemans is right that some scheme theorists have not distinguished them. But they could distinguish them and then Wagemans' first complaint about schemes would dissipate. Nevertheless, even once we separate these questions the problem will still remain as to whether or not we have a complete list of all possible argument kinds to use when we approach a slab of argumentation discourse. How do we know that there are not some argument kinds without schemes? That would leave us with nothing to say about them. One response to this problem, I think, is to take the method of argument schemes as one's main instrument and have other fall-back methods that can supplement it: the method of warrants, the method of logical analogies, and the method of deductivist reconstruction, etc. But this answer, it appears, will not satisfy Jean Wagemans: he wants one theory that will encompass all possible arguments. Let's consider it.

2. The minimalist conception of argument

Arguments on Wagemans' view are limited to one premise and one conclusion. I am not sure there is a lot of historical support for this view. A related question is whether each conclusion of an argument is supported by exactly *one reason*. Dealing with that question would lead us to say

something about the relationship between reasons and premises. But leave that problem for a rainy day. Wagemans has two relevant arguments for his minimalist conception of arguments.

Argument 1 :

> P1: If the link between a premise and the conclusion is itself conceptualized as a premise, then the link between the expanded premise set and the conclusion will also have to be included as a premise, and so on *ad infinitum*.
> P2: Infinite regresses are to be avoided.
> C1: Therefore, the link between a single premise and a conclusion should not be included as a premise.

This is an old problem nicely dramatized by Lewis Carrol in "What the tortoise said to Achilles" (1895). Another session at this conference (Wein & Woods) takes a new look at the problem. But is it a problem for argumentation workers (people who deal in arguments, giving, taking, and judging them)? I don't think so. It is a problem in the foundations of justification theory that might sway us to adopt a coherentist rather than a foundationalist theory of inferential justification. On the empirical side, the coherentist urges that there are no foundations for our perceptual judgments. But that does not keep us from confidently, and with justification, believing there are brick houses on Elm Street, or that global warming is on. Similarly, it should not keep us from making defensible judgments about the strength of arguments, minimalist or not. I do not think the regress problem should trouble argumentation workers and dealers.

Argument 2:

> P1 : If an argumentation worker adds a linking premise in an argument text then there is a risk that they may let their own subjective ideas about arguments colour the reconstruction, analysis and evaluation of the argument.
> P2: If [P1] then the reconstruction, analysis and evaluation, would be subjective and not methodologically correct.
> P3: But reconstruction, analysis and evaluation should be methodologically correct.
> C1: Therefore, argument workers should not insert linking or connecting premises in arguments
> C2: Therefore, the minimal conception of an argument is the best.

Let us consider the problem of argument reconstruction. One possibility is that the argumentation worker acts arbitrarily: as analyst s/he inserts whatever premises they (subjectively) feel are appropriate. We can agree that this method is not optimal. Another possibility is a method that explicitly lays down directions and gives a set of steps to follow, such as the ATIP method promoted by Wagemans in this essay. It is not subjective, because there is little room for the argumentation worker's own ideas and preferences. These, however, are not the only two possibilities. There could be a reconstruction theory that guides the workers in filling in inferential gaps: they could be guided and constrained by context, by the principle of charity, by their studied understanding of argument goodness, and by open discussion with other argumentation workers.

Their judgments and opinions might be 'subjective'—what judgments aren't?—but they would be neither arbitrary nor capricious. What's my point? I am uneasy with the premises of Argument 2. It assumes a false dichotomy between two kinds of reconstruction methodology, ignoring other plausible approaches.

3. The three dimensions of argument kinds

On the minimalist conception, an argument consists of (a) two statements (one premise/ argument, one conclusion), both in subject-predicate form and (b) exactly three terms. It follows that the two sentences of an argument will have exactly one term in common. The common term, according to Wagemans will either be the subject of both sentences or the predicate of both sentences. If the common term is the subject of both sentences, then it is called a predicate argument; if the common term is the predicate of both sentences, then it is called a subject argument.

We may pause to ask, why cannot the common term be the predicate of one sentence and the subject of another sentence, as in

(1)   [All dogs] (are animals)
        So, [some animals] (are dogs)

I think the answer will be that there are only two terms here, and so (1) does not fit the df of a minimalist argument. How, then, about,

(2)   [All dogs] (are mammals)
        So, [some animals] (are dogs)?

Here the reply might be that this is not really a counter-example because the conclusion is logically equal to the subject-predicate sentence '[Some animals] (are dogs)'; so the argument can be seen as also having the subject term 'dog' as it fulcrum. (I like the fulcrum and lever terminology.) [Note: I don't know how Wagemans' theory deals with quantifiers.] Other questions arise. How about this argument:

(3)   Crows are black
        So, some things with hollow bones cannot be seen at night?

Here is a strong argument with four terms and none of them occurring more than once. (Does it need two levers?) A couple of linking premises would really help. And what about this old chestnut,

(4)   All crows are black
        No crows are black
        So, Amsterdam is the most exciting city in Europe.

Here we have four terms. Take away either premise and there are still four terms with no common subject and no common predicate. But the argument is valid and, even though it is an *ex falso*

quodlibit, it may have a legitimate use in refutation. Question now is, are arguments with no common subject and no common predicate not (minimalist) arguments at all, or are they bad (minimalist) arguments? (A similar question has arisen for scheme theory.)

One last question on this conception of arguments. Remember this one:

(5a)   All men are mortal
        Socrates is a man
        So, Socrates is mortal?

From it we can figure two minimalist arguments:

(5b)   Socrates is a man
        So, Socrates is mortal

which is a predicate argument with withdrawn connecting premise, "all men are mortal" and

(5c)   All men are mortal
        So, Socrates is mortal

which is a subject argument with withdrawn connecting premise "Socrates is a man." Here is the question: *Is there for every subject minimalist argument a corresponding predicate minimalist argument, and vice versa?*

[Also, not for public discussion but for my personal information: (1) when you say that 'missing premise' and 'connecting premise' are traditional concepts, I would like to know where they are used in the traditional literature; and (2) where does the phrase 'law of the common term' come from? I call it inferential connectivism, but that is not a good name b/c of the use of 'connectivism' in philosophy of mind.]

4. Propositions and assertions

Wagemans' system depends on a distinction between propositions—e.g., it is raining—and assertions—e.g., Tom believes it is raining. The former is a simple proposition the latter is a compound proposition, here called an assertion. Compound, but not truth-functionally compound. Assertions are here explained as propositions in the scope of a doxastic attitude marker (operator). This distinction between propositions and assertions when combined with the minimalist conception of arguments yields a distinction between first and second order arguments.

(6a)   [The ground] (is being affected by rain)
        So, [the ground] (is wet)

(6b)   [It is raining] (is believed by Tom)
        So, [it is raining] (is true)

6a is a first-order predicate argument with the common term 'the ground'. 6b is a second-order predicate argument with a proposition, "it is raining," serving as a common term. "is true," although not predicated of the premise, is predicated of the conclusion. So, going back to the original view that propositions consist of a subject and a predicate term, 'term' is now extended to include propositions. In 6b, the proposition, 'it is raining,' is the subject term of both statements. One can imagine more complicated cases:

(6c)   [That it is raining is believed by Tom] (is reported by Joan)
       So, [that it is raining is believed by Tom] (is true)

I am not sure whether 'is reported by' will count as a doxastic operator. I think maybe doxastic operators are sub-species of intentional (non-truth-functional) operators. Why wouldn't Wagemans choose the wider category of operators and so have greater scope for his logical system? He could go even further, following Pinto (2001, ch. 2), and include non-doxastic operators like 'hopes' and 'fears'. For illustration,

(7)   [That COVID-19 will soon be eliminated] (is hoped by WHO)
       So, [that COVID-19 will soon be eliminated] (is desirable).

5. Types of statements

The third distinction Wagemans introduces, and that is needed to build his periodic table of argument kinds, is between three kinds of statements: Statements of facts, of value, and of policy.
       That *Andorra is smaller than France* is a statement of fact; that *honesty is the best policy* is a statement of value; and that *you must keep a distance of 2 metres from other people* is a statement of policy. These three categories of statements are meant to be exhaustive and therefore the two statements constituting a minimal argument will consist of any of the nine possible combinations of two statement types. Revisiting our last example (7), the premise is a factual statement and the conclusion is a value statement. We cannot help but note that the three-fold division of statements is hazy at the borders: there might be disagreements about which category to place particular statements in. Moral realists think that "murder is wrong" is both a fact and a value judgment.

With these three distinctions in hand, Jean Wagemans thinks he has enough to make a comprehensive classification of the possible minimalist arguments there could be; moreover, he thinks that his inventory of arguments will be better than that provided by the scheme theorists.

6. The fulcrum / lever analogy with inferential support

The lever of an argument is an expression of its underlying mechanism, which explains how a statement can establish or increase the acceptability of another statement. As such the word 'lever' is taken from the same source domain as the word 'fulcrum.' While the fulcrum is defined as the term—i.e., the subject or predicate—that the conclusion and the argument have in common, the

lever is defined as the relationship between the non-common terms.

The lever is an expression, which is defined as the relationship between the non-common terms in a minimal argument. In the case of the argument from *Metaphysics* (980a, pp. 21-27), Wagemans construes it as,

(8a)   [All human beings] (have a liking for the senses)
       So, [all human beings] (desire to know by nature).

Since this is a predicate argument (common subject term, different predicate terms) the argument lever is a relationship between these two predicates,

(8b)   "having a liking for the senses" is related to "desiring to know by nature".

But what kind of a relationship? Because both the statements in 8a are factual the predicates stand for properties (in this case psychological properties), and Aristotle's own words (translated) indicate that the relation of the two empirical properties is that the former is sign of the latter.

(8c)   "having a liking for the senses" is a sign of "desiring to know by nature".

Now, to evaluate the argument in 8a we must evaluate the lever in 8c. How does one do that? We are to ask: To what extent is the one property a sign of the presence of the other? What form will such a question take? Perhaps, "Is having a liking for the senses a reliable sign of having a desire to know by nature?" How do we answer such an empirical question other than to consider whether the generalization,

(8d)   For any x, if x has a liking for the senses that is a sign that x desires to know by nature

is true, or acceptable? This test for the acceptability of the lever turns into a question about the acceptability of a proposition. The proposition, if found acceptable, can be added to the two statements in argument 8a turning it into the non-minimalist argument

(8e)   [All human beings] (have a liking for the senses)
       *If anyone has a liking for the senses then [that is a sign that] they desire to know by nature
       So, [all human beings] (desire to know by nature).

The inserted *premise is what Wagemans earlier referred to as a "connecting premise", and he said they should not really be considered as parts of arguments because when we inserted them we were prone to distorting the argument in the original text, and also inserting them would lead us to an infinite regress. But I am not overly troubled by either of those arguments, and although they are dialectically relevant, they do not sufficiently incline me towards the minimalist conception of arguments.

How can we talk about the relationship between two predicates other than to ask if the one is predicated of something the other must be (or probably be or plausibly be) predicated of the same thing? The answer will be a general or universal proposition. Maybe in formulating it we are

influenced by dialectical, pragmatic, rhetorical, or scientific considerations, but generalizations they will be. Levers, then, for predicate arguments must be general propositions and, if they are, they are suitable candidates for premises in expansions of minimalist arguments as in 8e. If Wagemans wants to stick with the minimalist conception of arguments, he can do that by pulling a Mill/Peirce/Toulmin move, and letting the lever (formulated as a generalization) serve as a warrant. It can be held in abeyance, apart from the two-premise arguments.

The same strategy may not work for subject arguments. Consider,

(9a)   [Cicero] (is a Roman orator)
        So, [Tully] (is a Roman orator).

This time we have a subject argument with the common predicate "Roman orator." The argument lever will be a relationship between the two subjects,

(9b)   Cicero is related to Tully

What kind of relationship is this? The two subjects could be father and son, or cousins, or fellow members of Rome's senate. But in fact, history informs us that the relationship is one of identity.

(9c)   Cicero = Tully

In this case, the lever is not a generalization unless we want to stretch thinking to include identity statements under generalizations, e.g., $(\forall x)[(x = t)$ iff $(x = c)]$. It is hard to see the proposition 9c as a warrant, but not hard to see it as a premise that would explain why someone might utter 9a.

7. Ending

This is my first introduction to Jean Wagemans' extremely interesting work on argument analysis and evaluation. It is stimulating to see such a well worked-out alternative theory. In my response to the essay I have expressed some reservations about the criticism of scheme theory and also about the minimalist conception of argument. In addition I have wondered whether the formulation of argument levers may not lead us back to a non-minimalist conception of argument. I fully expect that Jean Wagemans will respond by correcting my misinterpretations and clarifying his own view. I will want to follow further developments in his theory.

A final comment: I wonder whether the defence of the minimalist conception of argument and the construction of the periodic table of arguments are not separate projects. Could they not be? The PTA would still be worth pursuing even if the minimalist conception of argument turns out to be too troublesome.

References

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