

Good Argument

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Abstract

According to the common conception of argument, the virtues of arguments turn, in part, on the virtues of assertion of their premises. I suggest that, on plausible Gricean assumptions about cooperative conversation, the common conception yields the claim that it is never appropriate to advance arguments in cooperative conversations. But that claim is absurd! Holding on to the Gricean assumptions, I reject the common conception of argument in favour of an alternative conception, on which all that matters, as far as premises go, for the virtue of arguments, is whether those premises belong to the arguments' targets: interlocutors' beliefs, theories, etc.

Keywords: Absurdity, Argument, Assertion, Consequence, Conversation, Cooperative Principle, Good Argument, Gricean Maxims, Successful Argument, Theories

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投稿：110年8月30日；修訂：111年1月10日；接受刊登：111年8月12日。

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In this paper, I promote a radical alternative to the common or standard conception of argument. The key point of difference between the standard conception and the radical alternative lies in what they say about the assessment of premises. According to the standard conception, in a wide range of cases, the virtues of premises are the virtues of their assertion. According to the radical alternative, the virtues of premises lie merely in their belonging to the targets of arguments: webs of belief of interlocutors, theories, or whatever.

The case against the common conception relies on the observation that the claim that the virtues of premises are the virtues of their assertion, in concert with some further, highly plausible Gricean claims, yields the conclusion that we should never advance arguments when we are engaged in properly cooperative conversation. The conclusion that we should never advance arguments when we are engaged in properly cooperative conversation is absurd. So we need to choose between the Gricean claims and the common conception of argument.

There are many responses that friends of the common conception of argument might make to the claim that we should choose the Gricean claims over the common conception of argument. I consider a wide range of these responses, and find reasons to be dissatisfied with all of them. On the one hand, I consider objections to the claim that we do need to choose between the Gricean claims and the common conception of argument. On the other hand, I consider objections to the alternative conception of argument, with a particular focus on objections that maintain that the alternative conception of argument has absurd consequences.

I close with some very brief discussion of the implications of adoption of the alternative conception of argument for philosophical practice, particularly in philosophy of religion.

1. The Common Conception

According to a common conception—exemplified in Groarke (2021)—the following claims are all true:

1. An argument is a set of propositions.
2. In any given argument, one proposition is the conclusion, and all of the other propositions are the premises.
3. Relative to circumstance, arguments are sorted or ranked according to goodness.

4. The important virtues of good arguments are (a) virtues of connections between premises and conclusions and (b) virtues of premises.
5. There are many circumstances in which good arguments have very great significance.

For those—e.g. Hitchcock (2007)—who prefer to think of an argument as a complex speech act rather than as a complex symbolic structure, this common conception gives us something more like the following:

1. An argument is a set of acts.
2. In any given argument, there is a single act of concluding, and one or more acts of premising.
3. Relative to circumstance, arguments are sorted or ranked according to goodness.
4. The important virtues of good arguments are (a) virtues of concluding and (b) virtues of premising.
5. There are many circumstances in which good arguments have very great significance.

The discussion to follow is framed in terms of complex symbolic structures rather than in terms of complex speech acts. Nothing in the discussion turns on this choice.

The formulation of the common conception is silent on many matters. It says nothing about the kinds of connections that might hold between premises

and conclusion. It says nothing about the kinds of circumstances relative to which arguments might be ranked. It says nothing about the kinds of virtues that premises might have. It says nothing about the kinds of significance that a good argument might have. It says nothing about what propositions might be taken to be.

In my initial discussion, I shall focus on the case in which conclusions are logical consequences of premises. I shall not worry about whether it makes sense to talk about logical consequence in the absence of specification of a particular logic. I shall also not worry about whether there is a single logic, or a single best logic, or the like. Those questions are tangential to the line of inquiry that I wish to pursue. Answers to those questions would, at worst, make the formulations in this paper more complicated. In later discussion, I will have something to say about cases in which conclusions are—or are said to be—non-logical consequences of premises.

At places in the coming discussion, I shall focus on three kinds of circumstances relative to which there can be assessment of the goodness of an argument: (a) one-one face to face conversations; (b) one-many face to face conversations, such as lectures and speeches; and (c) many-many conversations, such as exchanges in professional journal articles. I think that this is a suitably broad range of sets of circumstances; I do not think that the conclusions for which I wish to argue are vulnerable to objections based on appeal to other kinds of circumstances relative to which there can be assessment of the goodness of arguments.

There are many different views that are taken, among those who subscribe to the common conception, about the virtues of premises. Some

suppose that, in good arguments, the premises are certain. Some suppose that, in good arguments, the premises are known. Some suppose that, in good arguments, the premises are true. Some suppose that, in good arguments, the premises are highly probable. Some suppose that, in good arguments, the premises are reasonably believed. No doubt, there are suppositions that are also entertained. I shall not enter into any debates about the merits of these different views.

I shall make some substantive assumptions about the significance of some arguments that I take to be obviously good. I do not think that these assumptions are in any way controversial. I think that it is obvious that Russell had a good argument against Frege's account of the foundations of arithmetic; and I think that it is obvious that Gödel had a good argument against the account of the foundations of mathematics developed by Russell and Whitehead.

I do not think that the coming discussion relies on any substantive assumptions about the nature of propositions. If you prefer to think of the components of arguments as assertions, or statements, or beliefs, or even sentences, you should feel free to read 'proposition' in accordance with your preference. If you want to stick with 'proposition', and you prefer to think of propositions as sets of worlds, or sets of situations, or Russellian structures, or Fregean structures, or *sui generis* entities, or something else again, you should feel free to read 'proposition' in accordance with your preference.

2. Grice on Conversation and Argument

According to Grice (1975), there are various maxims that govern *asserting* in all of the kinds of circumstances in which we are interested. Roughly following Grice, we might give these maxims the following form.

Maxim of quantity: Do not assert too much information. Do not assert too little information. Do assert an appropriate amount of information.

Maxim of quality: Do not *lie* when you assert. (Roughly: If you believe that p, do not assert that not p.) Do not *dissemble* when you have the opportunity to assert. (Roughly: If you believe that p, and it is otherwise appropriate for you to assert that p, then assert that p.) Do not *bullshit* when you assert. (Roughly: If you do not believe that p and you do not believe that not p, then do not assert that p.) Do not *bluster* when you assert. (Roughly: If you believe that p is controversial, then do not assert that p unless you are able to advance considerations that other participants will agree resolve controversy whether that p.)

Maxim of relation: Do not make irrelevant assertions. Do make assertions that advance the common purpose of the exchange.

Maxim of manner: Make your assertion clear. Make your assertion orderly. Make your assertion as brief as it can be consistent with satisfying all other maxims. Do not indulge in obscure assertion. Avoid ambiguous assertion.

According to Grice, these maxims apply whenever the following *cooperative principle* is in play: any assertion that you make is admissible, at

the stage at which it is made, given the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged.

If we follow Grice in supposing that there are these kinds of maxims governing the presentation of assertions, then we should also suppose that there are very similar kinds of maxims that govern the presentation of arguments.

Maxim of quantity: Do not provide an argument when an argument is not required. Do provide an argument when an argument is required (if you can).

Maxim of quality: Do not *lie* when you argue. (Roughly: if you believe that an argument is not good, then do not advance that argument.) Do not *dissemble* when you have the opportunity to argue. (Roughly: if you believe that an argument is good, and it is otherwise appropriate for you to advance that argument, then do advance that argument.) Do not *bullshit* when you argue. (Roughly: If you believe neither that an argument is good nor that that argument is not good, then do not advance that argument.) Do not *bluster* when you argue. (Roughly: If you believe that an argument is controversial, then do not advance that argument unless you are able to provide sufficient support for it.)

Maxim of relation: Do not make irrelevant arguments. Do make arguments that advance the common purpose of the exchange.

Maxim of manner: Make your argument clear. Make your argument orderly. Make your argument as brief as it can be consistent with satisfying all of the other maxims. Do not indulge in obscure arguments. Do not indulge in ambiguous arguments.

But, if we accept the common conception of argument, there is more. Given the common conception of arguments, it is very plausible that, when you advance an argument, you assert the premises of that argument. However, if you do assert the premises of arguments that you advance, then your assertion of the premises in the argument is also governed by the Gricean maxims for assertion. While this point appears to have no significant consequences for the maxims of quantity, relation and manner that govern the presentation of arguments, it is clear that this point does have significant consequences for the maxim of quality that governs the presentation of arguments. In particular, considerations about not lying, bullshitting or blustering apply to each of the premises in any argument that you advance.

Given the maxims that govern asserting and arguing, and given that we assume that on the common conception of arguments, advancement of arguments requires assertion of the premises of those arguments, we plausibly have the following Gricean constraint on the advancement of arguments:

Gricean Constraint: If you suppose that it is insufficient for your conversational purposes with respect to C to assert that C , then you should also suppose that it is insufficient for your conversational purposes with respect to C to present an argument with premises P_i and conclusion C if you think that it would be similarly insufficient for your conversational purposes with respect to at least one of the P_i to assert that P_i .

How might we suppose that the Gricean maxims support the Gricean Constraint? Roughly as follows. If it would be bluster to assert one or more of the P_i , then it would be bluster to present the argument with premises P_i and conclusion C .

3. A Surprising Consequence of the Common Conception

Given that we assume the common conception of argument, and the Gricean account of conversation, and the further claim that when we advance an argument we assert the premises of that argument, it seems that we can reach the conclusion that it is never appropriate to advance an argument when we are engaged in properly cooperative conversation. The discussion proceeds by cases: (i) your conversational goal for C will be advanced merely by assertion of C; (ii) your conversational goal for C will not be advanced merely by assertion of C and at least one of the P_i is such that your conversational goal for it will not be advanced by assertion of it; and (iii) your conversational goal for C will not be advanced by assertion of C, but your conversational goals for at least one of the P_i will be advanced by assertion of it.

Assume that you are engaged in a properly cooperative conversation. Assume that the Gricean maxims governing assertion and argument are in play; in particular, assume that the Gricean maxims of quantity and quality are in play. Finally, assume the common conception of argument together with the further assumption that, when you present an argument, you assert the premises of that argument.

If your conversational goal for C will be advanced merely by the assertion of C, then, by the maxim of quantity, you should not give an

argument with premises P_i for conclusion C , since no such argument is needed in order to advance your conversational goal for C .

If your conversational goal for C will not be advanced merely by the assertion of C , and if at least one of the P_i is such that your conversational goal for it will not be advanced with respect to mere assertion of it, then—on the assumption that advancement of arguments requires assertion of premises—your conversational goals will not be advanced by the mere presentation of an argument with premises P_i and conclusion C . By the maxim of quality, if you believe that your conversational goals will be advanced neither by the mere assertion of C nor by the mere assertion of one or more of the P_i , then you should not give an argument with premises P_i for C . (An alternative route to the same conclusion goes directly by way of the Gricean Constraint.)

If your conversational goal for C will not be advanced by the mere assertion of C , but your conversational goals for one or more of the P_i , will be advanced by mere assertion of it or them then, by the maxim of quality, assuming that all other maxims are satisfied, you should assert the relevant P_i . However, by the maxim of quantity, you should not present an argument with premises P_i and conclusion C , since presentation of that argument is not required to advance your conversational goal for the relevant P_i and will not help you advance *further* in your conversational goal for C .

The division into cases is exhaustive. So we can conclude that, given the common conception of argument, and the Gricean account of conversation, and the claim that premises are asserted, and the assumption that you are engaged in a properly cooperative conversation, there is no case in which you are permitted to advance arguments.

4. Against the Surprising Consequence

The claim, that we should never advance arguments when we are engaged in properly cooperative conversation, is absurd. It is undeniable that pointing to hitherto unnoticed logical consequences of sets of claims can be highly valuable in properly cooperative conversation. The discipline of mathematics is based on doing exactly this; so, too, any other disciplines in which formal proof is important. In most other areas, there is an important role for *reductio* arguments: arguments that show that particular sets of claims have absurdity as logical consequence. More generally, in most other areas, there is a role for showing that particular claims have hitherto unnoticed logical consequences, even in cases where those logical consequences are not absurd.

In properly cooperative one-one conversation, if one participant cannot see that their view has absurd consequences—e.g. vicious contradiction—then the other participant can help them out by giving them an argument that brings the contradiction into clear view.

In properly cooperative one-many conversation, those among the many who cannot see that their view has absurd consequences will be assisted by arguments that bring the absurdity to light. But, unlike in properly cooperative one-one conversation, it is questionable whether there are—or are likely to be—many occasions on which one person is well placed to provide this service to many.

Similarly, in properly cooperative many-many conversations conducted through journals, other contributors to journals may be assisted by having absurdities in their views brought to light by way of exposure to appropriate arguments. But, even more so than in the case of properly cooperative one-many conversation, it is questionable whether there are—or are likely to be—many occasions in which some authors are well placed to provide this service to others.

From a classical standpoint, an argument $P_1, \dots, P_n, \vdash C$ is valid iff the argument $P_1, \dots, P_n, \sim C \vdash \perp$ is valid. However, when we are pointing out an absurdity in someone's view, we should prefer to represent the argument in the form $A_1, \dots, A_n \vdash \perp$. After all, from the standpoint of the person in question, there is initially no distinguished claim among the A_i : all of the claims are equal contributors to the absurdity. The proper role for the argument that we are giving them is merely establishing that there is a contradiction. It is a distinct question—best addressed separately—whether we think that we have good advice to give them about how they should set about resolving the contradiction.

From the standpoint of assessment of the common conception of argumentation, the important observation to make here is that the undeniably useful provision of arguments in pointing out hitherto unnoticed consequences of sets of propositions is not one that is well-explained by the common view of argument. The only things that matter for *reductio* arguments are (a) that the collection of claims really is absurd and (b) the collection of claims all belong to, or are all accepted by, the target of the *reductio*. While there is attention to be paid to the virtue of the connection between the claims, there is no attention to be paid to the virtues of the individual claims.

The observation that has just been made does not depend upon any assumption of the correctness of classical logic. It is a very weak assumption that *absurdity* is not something to be either embraced or tolerated. So long as we can make arguments of the form $A_1, \dots, A_n \vdash \perp$, we can make *reductio* arguments that enable us to improve one another's views.

5. An Alternative Conception of Arguments

Here is an alternative to the common conception of arguments:

1. An argument is a set of propositions.
2. In any given argument, one proposition is the conclusion, and all of the other propositions are the premises.
3. Relative to circumstances, arguments are sorted or ranked according to goodness.
4. The important virtues of good arguments are (a) virtues of connection between premises and conclusions and (b) accuracy in identification and attribution of premises.
5. There are many circumstances in which good arguments have very great significance.

The difference between this conception of arguments and the common conception of arguments lies in 4(b). Where the common conception would have us think about the virtues of premises—whether they are certain, known, true, highly probable, reasonably believed, or whatever—this alternative conception suggests that we need not think at all about these kinds of virtues of premises, but rather only about whether the premises have been properly

identified or attributed. In order to argue that your view has consequences that you have not noticed, I must take claims that belong to your view as premises. In order to argue that theories have hitherto unnoticed consequences, I must take claims that belong to those theories as premises. In order to argue for novel mathematical—or other formal—claims, I must begin with established mathematical—or other formal—premises. And so on.

One way that we might seek to defend this conception of arguments is by appealing to the observation, that the common conception of argument—together with claims that are plausibly required by the common conception of argument—yields the claim that we should never advance arguments when engaged in properly cooperative conversation, in concert with the further observation that it is absurd to suppose that we should never advance arguments when engaged in properly cooperative conversation. How might someone who wishes to defend the common conception of argument respond?

6. Replies to Objections on Behalf of the Common Conception

(A). Some may wish to reject the Gricean account of conversation, or, at any rate, one or more of the elements of the Gricean account of conversation that are called upon in the preceding discussion. That course seems unattractive to me. Any satisfying account of *good* argument will be yoked to a satisfying account of *cooperative* conversation. Any satisfying account of good argument, like any satisfying account of cooperative conversation, will be normative: it will appeal to norms that are widely exploited and violated in practice. The

Gricean account of conversation plausibly provides a modest core for theorising about cooperative conversation. If we wish, we can take the Gricean maxims—or some suitable elaboration thereof—to be an implicit definition of cooperative conversation; and we can then recognise that, for smaller and greater periods of time, there actually are conversational exchanges—one-one, one-many, and many-many—that are properly classified as cooperative conversations under the Gricean account.

(B). Some may wish to reject the claim that the standard conception of arguments brings with it a commitment to the further claim that, when arguments are presented, the premises of those arguments are asserted. One obvious reason why one might wish to reject this claim is that, in the case of a *reductio* argument, it is clear that the premises of that argument are not asserted. However, as I have already suggested, I take this to be part of an objection to the standard conception of arguments. Perhaps the standard conception can handle *reductio* arguments by treating them as a special case; but it is central to the standard conception that, in other cases, the virtues of an argument depend upon the virtues of the premises. And, everywhere in the argumentation literature, those virtues are taken to be assertoric virtues. What follows from this, I think, is that it is pretty clearly true that, on the standard conception, one who presents an argument is required to suppose that the premises of the argument are assertible: the one in question would be fully justified in asserting those premises in the very context in which they are presenting the argument. While this much is enough for the purposes of the case against the standard conception, it seems to me that it would be very odd to suppose that, in any given case in which an argument is presented, the

presenter is required to be such that they are fully justified in asserting the premises and yet do not actually assert the premises. It is very natural to think that, in what the standard view takes to be the central case, a presenter of an argument asserts the premises of that argument.

(C). Some may wish to object to the discussion of cases. Since it is clear that the division into cases is exhaustive, someone who wishes to object to the discussion of cases is required to object to the discussion of one or more of the cases. Perhaps it might be thought that the discussion of the final case is questionable. In this case, we supposed that the conversational goal for C would not be advanced by assertion of C, but the conversational goal for at least one of the P_i would be advanced by assertion of it. What would be wrong with advancing the argument with premises P_i and conclusion C in this circumstance, given that asserting one of the P_i will advance your conversational goals for it? I have already answered this question: the wrong would be that you are violating the maxim of quantity. The conversationally appropriate thing to do is to assert the relevant P_i and see what kind of response it produces in your interlocutor (s). If, for example, they come back to you with: ‘Oh, I see I was mistaken in previously accepting P_j , $j \neq i$ ’, then it would now be utterly inept for you to present them with the argument with premises P_i and conclusion C. The point of giving an argument—as opposed to merely asserting all of the premises and the conclusion—is to draw attention to the (perhaps merely alleged) logical relationship between the premises and the conclusion. If making assertions will advance your conversational goals, then you do not need to present arguments, and your doing so will violate Gricean maxims. If drawing attention to the (perhaps merely alleged)

logical relationship between premises and conclusion will not advance your conversational goal, then you do not need to advance an argument with those premises and that conclusion, and your doing so will violate Gricean maxims.

A referee objected at this point as follows. Suppose you are in a properly cooperative conversation and your interlocutor is sceptical about *C*. You want to convince your interlocutor to accept *C*, so you decide to construct an argument to show that *C* is true, with premises P_i . Clearly, proposing an argument can be an appropriate means to satisfy the goal of convincing your audience, But, if your goal is to propose an argument with premises P_i , your goal will be advanced by assertion of the P_i . Sp the discussion of the final case is flawed.

Reply: Although the referee insists that it is ‘innocent’, it is clear that the assumption, that proposing an argument can be an appropriate means to satisfy the goal of convincing your audience, is precisely the claim that I am putting in question. If you are properly cooperating, you cannot suppose that any old argument with conclusion *C* and premises P_i is appropriately put forward. You cannot properly have the mere goal of putting forward an argument with conclusion *C* and premises P_i ; your goal has to be framed in the light of your recognition of what moves it is proper for you to make at this point in the conversation. As noted above, the right thing to do is to assert the relevant P_i and then to wait to see how your interlocutor responds.

(D). Some may wish to claim that the discussion does not pay proper attention to the difference between, on the one hand, one-one conversations, and, on the other hand, one-many and many-many conversations. Consider the case of one-many conversations. If you have a large enough audience, it

may be that, with respect to some audience members, your goals will be achieved by asserting C ; and with respect to other audience members, your goals will be achieved by asserting one or more of the P_i ; and with respect to yet other audience members, your goals will be achieved by presenting them with the argument with premises P_i and conclusion C . If, in giving an argument with premises P_i and conclusion C , you assert all of the P_i and C , why not think that presenting the argument is a maximally efficient way of achieving all of your conversational goals with respect to the P_i and C ?

Reply: The maximally efficient way to achieve your conversational goals will be to assert C and then to assert the (relevant) P_i . After you have done this, the only remaining people in the audience with respect to whom you have conversational goals that you would like to achieve are those who do not accept both C and all of the P_i and who you know will not be persuaded to change their minds about these matters if you assert C and the P_i . Among those, the only ones to whom it would be appropriate for you to give an argument are those who accept all of the P_i but who do not accept C . And, for those people, it would not be appropriate for you to give them an argument with premises P_i and conclusion C ; rather, for them, it would be appropriate for you to give them a *reductio* argument from the premises P_i and $\sim C$. Whether, in given circumstances, you should give the *reductio* argument clearly depends upon how likely it is that there are enough people in the audience who cannot see that there is an inconsistency in their beliefs and who will be helped by having the inconsistency made clear to them. But—and this is the important point—*reductio* arguments simply do not conform to the common conception. Thinking about efficiency in one-many

conversations does not point towards a role for arguments that conform to the common conception.

(E). Some may wish to claim that the alternative view has absurd consequences. After all, it is clear that we can discuss the soundness of arguments and that we can disagree about which arguments are sound. On the assumption that sound arguments are good arguments, it seems that the standard view is inescapable, and that the alternative view is manifestly mistaken.

Reply: Consider any consistent theory T of reasonable axiomatic complexity that is closed under logical consequence. The truth of T determines the soundness of infinitely many arguments with premises and conclusions drawn from T . Moreover, for any claim C that belongs to T , the truth of T determines the soundness of infinitely many arguments with conclusion C and premises drawn from T . Suppose that L is the language of T . Suppose that A is any sentence that is expressible in the language of L . Then, relative to the truth of T , the argument $C \vdash AvC$ is sound. Suppose that B is any sentence that belongs to T . Then, relative to the truth of T , the argument $B \& C \vdash C$ is sound. Pick any valid argument form F in which the conclusion has the same logical form as C . Then, relative to the truth of T , there are infinitely many sound arguments of form F . There is no interesting notion of goodness of argument on which all of the arguments that are sound if T is true are good arguments. It is obviously not true that sound arguments are good arguments. (Of course, it is also obviously not true that good arguments are sound arguments: there are good *reductio* arguments, but no *reductio* arguments are sound.)

The considerations advanced in the previous paragraph point to a general lesson: on the standard conception of argument, goodness of theory is determined prior to goodness of argument. Whether a valid argument is good on the standard conception of argument is determined entirely by the goodness of the theory from which the premises of the argument are drawn. While it is true, for example that we can discuss the soundness of arguments, and that we can disagree about which arguments are sound, on the standard conception of argument, this discussion and disagreement is an unhappy substitute for direct discussion of the truth of the theories from which the claims that figure in the arguments are drawn. Why unhappy? For at least this reason: that discussion of the truth of theories is completely unconcerned with allegations of circularity, begging the question, entanglement in non-formal fallacies, and so forth. Moreover, while, in principle, the true theory is recoverable from a sufficiently large selection of sound arguments, there is no serious prospect of conducting inquiry according to an argument-first methodology. While there have been philosophers who have claimed that good beliefs must be based in good arguments, those philosophers have inverted the correct conception of the relative priority of beliefs and argument. Or so the standard conception of argument would have us say.

On the alternative conception of argument, matters are more complicated. Once it is recognised that the important role of argument lies in drawing out hitherto unnoticed consequences of theories, we see that there is a central role for argument in theory-building. Sometimes, an argument will tell us that a theory is inconsistent. Sometimes, an argument will tell us that a theory has unexpected but non-absurd commitments. On the alternative

conception of argument, in contrast to the standard conception of argument, there is an important role for argument in theory construction. But, on the alternative conception of argument, there is no significant role for arguments when it comes to the evaluation of completed consistent theories.

(F). Some may wish to claim that, whatever you think about the standards of the case that has been made to this point, the case clearly only applies if we suppose that the link between premises and conclusions in arguments are links of logical consequence. But it is just a mistake to suppose that the only kinds of links that there can be between premises and conclusions in arguments are links of logical consequence. Alongside ‘deductive’ arguments, there are also ‘inductive’ arguments, and ‘probabilistic’ arguments and ‘inference to the best explanation’ arguments, and so forth. When we consider ‘ampliative’—‘non-deductive’—arguments, the standard view of arguments seems much more plausible than it does when we only consider deductive arguments.

Reply: There is nothing in the argument that I have given that relies on the assumption that the consequence relation is a relation of logical consequence. (It was taken for granted in the discussion of sound arguments that we were there taking the consequence relation to be logical. But that assumption was built into the objection to be addressed; it was not assumed as part of the theory being defended.) If we think that there are non-deductive arguments, then we should suppose that there are non-logical consequence relations and related notions of non-logical consistency—probabilistic consistency, inductive consistency, explanatory consistency, and so on—and non-logical absurdity—probabilistic absurdity, inductive absurdity, explanatory absurdity, and so

forth. I see no reason for me to take a stand here about whether there are ‘ampliative’ or ‘non-deductive’ arguments.

(G). Some may wish to claim that it is impossible to square the alternative theory with philosophical practice. In particular, some may wish to claim that the methods that we use when we attempt to draw out arguments that we take to be implicit in philosophical texts rely straightforwardly on the adoption of something like the standard conception of argument. I doubt that is so. A great deal of philosophy is concerned with working out the hitherto unnoticed consequences of adopting particular claims or sets of claims. If a philosopher is developing a textual argument, it is very likely that they will be drawing attention to hitherto unnoticed consequences of adopting particular claims or sets of claims. When we scrutinise arguments that we take to be implicit in philosophical texts, we are often trying to determine whether the arguments developed in those texts do establish interesting but previously unnoticed consequence relations among claims. This is not just a matter of looking to consequence relations. Often enough, we need to identify claims that are merely implicit in the text, but that play an important role in the textual argument.

There are other ways in which some may suppose that it is impossible to square the alternative theory with philosophical practice. In particular, it might be thought that rejection of the standard theory will go along with an automatic rejection of the use of formal methods in philosophy. But this is also clearly not the case. Here, it is perhaps useful to consider an example. According to Weatherson (2014)—who claims to be following Hudson

(2001)—a representative example of ‘the problem of the many’ is that the following set of sentences are (classically) jointly logically inconsistent:

1. There are several distinct sets of water droplets S_k such that for each set it is not clear whether the water droplets in S_k form a cloud.
2. There is a cloud in the sky.
3. There is at most one cloud in the sky.
4. For each set S_k there is an object O_k that the water droplets in S_k compose.
5. If the water droplets in S_i compose O_i , and the objects in S_j compose O_j , and the sets S_i and S_j are not identical, then the objects O_i and O_j are not identical.
6. If O_i is a cloud in the sky, and O_j is a cloud in the sky, and O_i is not identical to O_j , then there are two clouds in the sky.
7. If any of the sets S_k is such that its members compose a cloud then for any other of the sets S_k , if its members compose an object O_k , then O_k is a cloud.
8. Any cloud is composed of a set of water droplets.

Solutions to ‘the problem of the many’ either reject at least one of 1-8, or reject the reasoning that leads to the conclusion that this set of sentences is

jointly logically inconsistent, or claim that the inconsistency is one with which we can learn to live. As Weatherson goes on to show, proposed solutions to ‘the problem of the many’ fit neatly into the framework that this setting up of the discussion establishes. In my view, this framing of discussion of ‘the problem of the many’ is a paradigm for the use of argument in formal philosophy. It is true that, at least from a classical standpoint, we can turn this into a ‘standard’ argument for the negation of any one of 1-8 from all of the rest of 1-8. But, given the background discussion in which rejection of each one of 2-8 has its proponents, it would be a violation of Gricean maxims to advance any of these ‘standard’ arguments. Instead, it is obvious that our attention should turn to the virtues of the theories in which the negations of 2-8 can be embedded.

(H). Some may wish to claim that the response that I made to the previous objection turns on a canny selection of the central example. Surely there are other cases where philosophers have advanced arguments, in accordance with the common conception, in ways that are utterly unproblematic. Consider, for example, Chalmers (2014: 7), where the following argument is presented:

1. *Empirical Premise*: There has been less collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of science.
2. *Bridging Premise*: If there has been less collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of philosophy than there has

been collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of science, then there has been less collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of science.

3. *Conclusion*: There has been less collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of science.

Isn't Chalmers' presentation of this argument on all fours with his making something like the following assertion: there has been less collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of science *because* there has been less collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of science? Do I really want to say that it would be problematic for Chalmers to make that assertion?

In order to answer this question, I think that we should ask ourselves: is it plausible that the claim that there has been less collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of science is a *hitherto unnoticed consequence* of the claim that there has been less collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of science? If we think that this is plausible, then the alternative conception finds no fault with the setting out of this argument. I do think that this is plausible; I think

that Chalmers is probably the first person to have entertained his precisely formulated thought that there has been less collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of philosophy than there has been collective convergence on dominant answers to the big questions of science.

It may be worth noting that Chalmers does not expect his readers to be persuaded of the truth of the empirical premise merely by his presentation of the argument set out above; he has an extensive subsequent discussion that takes on this persuasive task. Given the novelty of the claims that he is entertaining, it is reasonable to think that some readers might miss the conclusion that he wishes them to draw if all he does is to attempt to persuade them of the truth of the empirical premise. We can take Chalmers' setting out of his argument to be in conformity with the alternative conception of argument rather than in conformity with the common conception of argument.

7. Concluding Remarks

I have suggested that we should reject the common conception of argument in favour of an alternative conception of argument; and I have responded to a range of objections to this suggestion and to the alternative conception of arguments. I shall conclude this discussion with some observations about the significance for philosophical practice of the rejection of the common conception of argument in favour of the alternative conception of argument.

In some parts of philosophy, among some groups of philosophers, there is widespread agreement that there is a significant body of arguments—construed in line with the common conception of argument—that constitutes a centrally important focus for attention and discussion in those parts of philosophy. Perhaps the most important case—and certainly the one in which I have the greatest interest—is arguments about the existence of God in philosophy of religion. But there are similar cases scattered across metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, ethics, aesthetics, and so on.

These arguments do not satisfy the requirements that the alternative conception imposes on good arguments. Because they are endlessly redeployed, these arguments do not draw out hitherto unnoticed consequences of the views of those who embrace all of their premises. Because they are endlessly redeployed, there are no informed people who embrace all of their premises. Because they are endlessly redeployed, it is common knowledge, among informed people, that there are no informed people who embrace all of the premises of these arguments.

Moreover, new arguments in the image of these arguments also do not satisfy the requirements that the alternative conception imposes on good arguments. Without fail, these new arguments do not draw out hitherto unnoticed consequences of the views of those who embrace all of their premises. Without fail, there are no informed people who both reject the conclusion and embrace all of the premises of these arguments. Without fail, it is common knowledge, among informed people, that there are no informed

people who both reject the conclusion and embrace all of the premises of these arguments.

Despite all of this—and despite all of this being common knowledge—these arguments, new and old, are fetishized by apologists and proselytisers of all conceivable stripes in awful parodies of what proper public philosophy might be. No doubt, the apologists and proselytisers see enough of what they take to be successes—just as they do when they engage in outrageous, ungrounded assertion—to encourage them to continue in their malpractice. But we all can and should do better.

In particular, in philosophy of religion, we can and should do better. In philosophy of religion, there is a deeply entrenched practice of *defending* arguments for or against the existence of God. A defender of a given, well-established argument proceeds in the following way. First, they make some kind of nod to the argument that they are discussing. In best cases, they give a standard representation of the argument, drawn from the existing literature; in worst cases, they just talk airily about ‘the such-and-such argument’. Second, they give informal accounts of their own reasons for accepting (what they claim are) the premises of the argument. Third, they give informal accounts of their own responses to what they take to be pressing objections to the argument, often drawing on existing criticisms of members of a wider family of arguments to which the argument in question belongs. Finally, they conclude that the examination of the argument that they have just conducted establishes that the argument has some significant virtue that justifies, not only the claim that it is a good argument, but also the publication of their defence of the argument in a professional journal.

There is so much that is wrong with this kind of practice that it is hard to know where to begin to criticise it. Even in the very best case, the most that can be gleaned from this kind of defence of an argument is that the defender thinks that the argument is sound. But, as we noted in our discussion, arguments, for which no more can be said than that they are reasonably taken to be sound by those who already accept their conclusions, are a dime a dozen, and do no useful philosophical work. Worse, energy expended on consideration of arguments, for which it is already recognised that no more can be said than that they are reasonably taken to be sound by those who already accept their conclusions, is energy wasted. The proper focus of attention, in cases where there is philosophical disagreement, should be on the relative merits of the theories to which the disputed claims belong, not on arguments in which those claims feature as premises or conclusions. And a necessary first step in focussing attention on the relative merits of theories to which disputed claims belong is to give careful, detailed exposition of those theories.

I am tempted by the thought that the very widespread pursuit of defences of arguments for and against the existence of God serves, on both sides, as a kind of intellectual smokescreen. If our focus is on arguments rather than theories, it is easier for us to persuade ourselves that there is some genuine interest that attaches to carefully selected sub-theories of our global theories. In particular, it is worth bearing in mind that the logical closure of the premises of an argument is typically a much richer theory than the logical closure of the conclusion of that argument. If we can keep attention here, on the parts of our theories where we feel entirely comfortable, then we are

spared making declarations about the parts of our theories where we feel nowhere near as comfortable. While this might serve the interests of apologists and proselytisers, it is not the true method of philosophy.

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