

Maurice A. Finocchiaro: Meta-argumentation: An Approach to Logic and Argumentation Theory

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Dale Jacquette

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Among theorists of all kinds, those generally engaged at some level of their work in a dialectical enterprise, and certainly in argumentation theory, much argument concerns, is about or directed toward, other arguments. Arguments about arguments, meta-arguments, including all of the rational inferential underpinnings of argumentation theory, are in several ways and for several reasons worth distinguishing from arguments about things other than arguments, such as the causes of WWI or the periodicity of the tides.

Maurice A. Finocchiaro in this new book offers an interesting contribution to argumentation theory, and in particular to the study of meta-arguments about the logic and critical evaluation of arguments, in both a general sense as argumentation theory, and in specific applications. One of Finocchiaro's preferred subjects of specific application of his approach to meta-argumentation theory is in understanding the fine details of Galileo's arguments and meta-arguments, especially in Galileo's frequently meta-argumentative (1632) *Dialogues Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*. Finocchiaro, in addition to being a recognized meta-argumentation theorist, is a respected Galileo and history of early physics scholar. It is therefore unsurprising to find in the present book that he sometimes weaves together the study of Galileo with argumentation theory, to the philosophical enrichment of both strands, in considering the informal logical properties and rhetorical force of Galileo's arguments and meta-arguments in historical context. Along with selected showcase analyses of meta-argumentation in Galileo, Finocchiaro chooses examples of meta-argumentation for detailed critical evaluation to illustrate the concept and methods of meta-argumentation from among a wide selection of interesting applications in philosophy, science, and practical reasoning broadly conceived.

D. Jacquette (✉)

Abteilung Logik und theoretische Philosophie, Institut für Philosophie, Universität Bern, Unitobler,
Länggassstrasse 49a, 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland
e-mail: dale.jacquette@philo.unibe.ch

There is accordingly much more in Finocchiaro's *Meta-argumentation* than revisiting overlapping main themes that have previously occupied his attention. The present book has a more concentrated focus on the concept of meta-argumentation than is otherwise suggested by the titles of his previous (1980) book, *Galileo on the Art of Reasoning: Rhetorical Foundations of Logic and Scientific Method*, and his (2005) collection, *Arguments About Arguments: Systematic, Critical, and Historical Essays in Logical Theory*. Among other things, Finocchiaro now more explicitly energetically promotes the concept of meta-argument as an interesting subject area in its own right for argumentation research. Part of Finocchiaro's new project seems intended to lead argumentation theory toward a more acute awareness and greater appreciation of the occasions on which arguments are about other arguments, rather than more directly about whatever non-argument ground-level objects that some of the arguments in any meta-argumentation chain finally intend.

Finocchiaro's book is divided into three main parts. Following Acknowledgments and an Introduction: A special class of arguments, there begins Part I: The Meta-Argumentation Approach, contains three chapters. Chapter 1: Methodological Considerations: Toulmin's Applied Logic. Chapter 2: Elementary Principles of Interpretation and Evaluation. Chapter 3: Basic Types of Meta-Argumentation. Part II: Theoretical Meta-Arguments, includes Chapter 4: Dialectical Definitions of Argument. Chapter 5: The Hyper-Dialectical Definition of Argument. Chapter 6: Common Methods of Argument Criticism. Chapter 7: Deep Disagreements, Fierce Standoffs, Etc. Chapter 8: Conductive Arguments, Pro-and-Con Reasoning, Etc. Chapter 9: Self-Referential Arguments. Part III: Famous Meta-Arguments, closes the main part of the book with Chapter 10: Mill on Liberty of Argument. Chapter 11: Mill on Women's Liberation. Chapter 12: Hume on Intelligent Design. Chapter 13: Galileo on the Motion of the Earth. The book ends with a Conclusion: Argumentation Theory as Meta-Argumentation, Bibliography, and Index. The book provides an extended thematic, conceptual and methodological overview, followed by a more thorough elaboration of a choice of subtopics in meta-argumentation theory, and finally a series of four historical applications to meta-arguments by John Stuart Mill, David Hume, and Galileo.

Finocchiaro's exposition not only makes a strong case for the importance of recognizing and being prepared argumentatively to work sometimes with and sometimes against meta-arguments, but further illustrates the importance of meta-argumentation in the annals of philosophical exchange in these venerable cherry-picked texts from Renaissance science through late middle nineteenth century social philosophy. The authors, whether they knew it or not, were engaged in meta-arguments, and hence in meta-argumentation governed by principles of meta-argumentation theory. Finocchiaro explains his purpose, building on argumentation theory precedents of Stephen Toulmins, near the end of Chapter 1:

...theorizing about argumentation is best conceived and practiced as arguing about argumentation. Such meta-argumentation should also strive to be pragmatic, comparative, empirical, historical, and naturalist, as Toulmin recommends in general. I plan to satisfy these requirements while studying a special class of arguments, namely arguments about arguments, i.e., meta-

arguments. Now, there happen to be two domains or contexts that provide excellent material that will be examined in the course of this work. One is arguments advanced by logicians and argumentation theorists to justify their theories and theoretical claims; these might be called theoretical meta-arguments. The other is arguments from the history of thought which for various reasons have acquired classic status; these might be called famous meta-arguments. (16–17)

There are so many worthwhile reflections on the nature of argument and meta-argument in Finocchiaro's study that it is impossible to do them all justice or even to convey a proper sense of the book's full scope and comprehension. For anyone interested in the recent history of argumentation theory and major players, internationally, but radiating primarily from Amsterdam and several locations in Canada, Finocchiaro's book provides an invaluable statement and assessment of many of the current positions in pragma-dialecticism and the informal logic critical reasoning movement in a wide variety of healthy contemporary splinterings.

We can check on the progress of several important trends in argumentation theory in Finocchiaro's pages, including the work of Frans van Eemeren and the International Society for the Study of Argumentation (ISSA), Ralph Johnson, J. Anthony Blair, John Woods, Toulmin again, Michael Scriven, and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., among others too numerous to mention, some of them also directly or indirectly associated with the Canadian Society for the Study of Argumentation (CSSA). Here we find in-depth discussions of important traditional and relatively new topics in argumentation theory, relevant to Finocchiaro's focus on meta-argumentation, such as deep disagreements. The deepest of these Woods calls 'Force 5', by analogy with the hurricane rating system. Finocchiaro himself prefers to describe them as 'fierce standoffs', where dialectical opponents cannot seem to find any common ground of jointly accepted propositions as a starting place from which to pursue constructive argument. The standoffs need not be fierce in the usual sense, however; and hurricanes are rather more one-sided power events than the stalemate that arises when opponents cannot agree on the most fundamental things. For these reasons, I personally prefer to speak less colorfully of argumentatively irresolvable fundamental oppositions, which I consider as the inferential equivalent of and for the same reasons precisely as philosophically instructive as a Kantian antinomy.

Conductive arguments, where several considerations vie against one another for final approval of a conclusion over its competitors, especially in deference to its negation, are examined in detail by Finocchiaro, primarily in the writings of other contemporaries on this recent development in argumentation theory. Finocchiaro's sifting through the literature on conductive argument has notably raised for me the interesting and as yet unanswered question as to whether conductive argument is a species of abductive argument, much as I have often wondered whether abductive reasoning is not ultimately inductive, and inductive inference, as Wilfrid sellers provocatively argued, a species of deductive reasoning involving probability values and the theorems of an appropriately chosen probability calculus. This is nothing

less than the question of the unity or irreducible plurality of the model of correct reasoning, formally or informally considered.

I thought that the topic of Finocchiaro's Chapter 9 should have been much more prominent and its content more thoroughly developed in a general discussion of meta-argumentation. If meta-argumentation concerns arguments about arguments, then the question is unavoidable whether some arguments can be about themselves. Moreover, self-reference and self-application within argument structures pose interesting problems concerning the logical integrity of theories based on or about arguments, again, regardless of whether or not the theories and concept of logical integrity are symbolically formalized or mathematicized or informally understood. Finocchiaro chooses not to enter into these subjects in the chapter whose title indicates more direct dealing with what look to be advertised exactly these logical challenges of self-referential arguments. There are classic paradoxes discussed also in the literature that should undoubtedly be considered meta-argumentational, just as the liar paradox poses a riddle for a general truth-based propositional semantics. Finocchiaro under the heading of self-referential argument might have mentioned and offered his take on the Pseudo-Scotus paradox: This argument is valid; therefore this argument is invalid. Which is valid if and only if it is invalid. Or with respect to a strengthened Soundness paradox, stating: This argument is unsound (inclusively either invalid or containing at least one false assumption), therefore this argument is unsound. Which is surely meta-argumentational, and appears to unhorse the naïve assumption that an argument is either sound or unsound, since it turns out to be sound if and only if it is unsound.

There are questions I do not find adequately addressed in Finocchiaro's book. One concerns the transitivity or intransitivity, wide or narrow scope of intentionality in semantic reference. The distinction is not an accessory, but crucial, I would think, for Finocchiaro's purposes, because it governs the 'aboutness' criterion by which meta-arguments and meta-argumentation are supposed to be distinguished from non-meta-arguments and argumentation. Explaining his qualified agreement with Toulmin's theory of argumentation, Finocchiaro maintains:

Here, meta-arguments are meant to be contrasted to ground-level arguments, which are arguments about topics other than arguments (such as numbers, natural phenomena, historical events, and human actions), or arguments which in a given context are the subject matter of meta-arguments. The methodological claim is that logical theory and argumentation theory are or ought to be instances of meta-argumentation. (15)

Later, Finocchiaro adopts the aboutness criterion more officially but in almost the same words on (34). It remains unclear to me, however, why arguments considered as objects with a certain structure and content like other things we might make the subject matter of arguments are not *also* ground-level or object-level. Some argumentation theorists are sure to come to the table with the concept of an argument as an abstract entity exactly like a number, or, alternatively, an ontology for arguments that emphasizes the speech act aspect of argumentative exchange in real pragmatic contexts, who might regard arguments especially in colloquial expression as themselves also natural phenomena or historical events involving

human ratiocinative and linguistic actions. If J.L. Austin makes us aware of the fact that we can do things with words, then we should certainly be advised as well of the potential for doing things with arguments, inferences. What, then, accounts for the meta-level stratification in the case of arguments about arguments, but not about numbers, natural phenomena, historical events, and human actions? Logically and metaphysically, ontologically, how are arguments supposed to be different than numbers and the rest, such that arguments about arguments are higher-level than arguments about non-arguments?

There is a deeper logical and philosophical semantic dilemma here that I think must have significant implications for Finocchiaro's meta-argumentation project. The question arises when we inquire whether a meta-argument M about an argument A that is about a non-argument object O is or is not itself (M , that is) also about O . I touch deliberately here on the thorny question in intentionality theory as to whether intentionality is or is not wide or transitive. It is the question, highlighted among other discussions of the difference between wide and narrow intending, by Hilary Putnam's famous Twin-Earth object-level referential meaning scenario. We can easily get into trouble trying to say either that wide or narrow intentionality rules where criteriological aboutness distinctions between arguments and meta-arguments are sought.

Wide intentionality, first of all, does not respect the authority of first-person phenomenological testimony as to the limits of referential intendings. If I intend narrowly to refer to Samuel Clemens, and Samuel Clemens is identical to Mark Twain, then I widely intend to refer to Mark Twain, even if I have never heard of his name and would own no thoughts concerning who he is or what he may have done. If I am on Earth, then, similarly, I may intend narrowly to refer to water where water is H_2O , and thereby widely intend to refer to H_2O , even if I am living and thinking before the advent of molecular theory or the discovery of the molecular structure of (Earth) water by Henry Cavendish in the 1780s, and never entertained any conscious thoughts phenomenologically accessible to me as thinker involving the concept of H_2O . If I am transported to Twin-Earth, and think the identical thought, then I may widely intend to refer to water where this substance is XYZ, and thereby widely intend to refer to XYZ, even though as an Earthling I may have no concept and no prior history of contact with any such liquid stuff as molecular XYZ. The counterintuitive reverse ordering of terms in widely intentional referring to H_2O as identical to water also deserves to be mentioned as a criticism of the wide intentionality option for a criteriological aboutness distinction between non-meta- and meta-arguments and -argumentation. If I intend narrowly to refer to H_2O as a particular molecular compound when I write that 'Cavendish discovered that (Earth) water is H_2O ', then my true statement logically implies the false statement, 'Cavendish discovered that (Earth) water is (Earth) water'. Similarly, if we write simply, the true sentence 'Cavendish discovered H_2O ', then we must expect, on the wide intentionality reading of the intentional relation of discovering something, also to imply, 'Cavendish discovered (Earth) water', which again does not have anything like the same ring of truth.

The issue is one of whether intentionality extends only narrowly, intensionally, so far as to encompass what a thinking subject deliberately intends, and of which

relevant intentions the intending subject could in principle give an account relying on a phenomenology of referential meaning. Or whether intentionality should be understood as going beyond the phenomenology or inner experience of intending, to widely, extensionally, intend everything that is further referentially related to what a thinking subject occurrently and deliberately referentially intends. As in any such dialectical opposition, there must predictably be defenders for both sides of such a fundamental dispute. They will be in Force 5 standoff before they know it, and we may wish to sell tickets. If both kinds of intentionality are judged genuine alternative forms of intending, then philosophical conversations about an argument intending an argument, itself or another, will need to be reconsidered, as appropriate, in terms of more explicitly distinguished narrow-aboutness and wide-aboutness. When we make the application to a case of Putnam's Twin-Earth thought experiment, the conclusions Putnam draws from the description of the case in his (1973) 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' can no longer be sustained except as involving terminological equivocations. What happens, then, when the distinction between meta-arguments and ground-level arguments similarly depends on the claim that meta-arguments are arguments that are about other arguments, and not about the objects of ground-level arguments?

If aboutness is transitive, or wide as Putnam supposes, then meta-arguments are also about topics other than arguments. They are also about the topics of the arguments that they are about. The distinction between arguments and meta-arguments would then be blurred right from the outset. This, in fact, is one of the persistent obstacles to my understanding the concept of meta-argumentation in its relation to both logic and non-meta- general argumentation theory. Finocchiaro does not enter into these theoretical disputes, but what he says strongly indicates commitment to a narrow sense of aboutness or a hierarchy of direct and indirect aboutnesses, such that a meta-argument about an argument about an object can be considered to be directly about the argument and indirectly about the object, while the argument is exclusively directly about the object.

Clearly, there are choices for answers to be given here. What I found missing was a better sense of Finocchiaro's views on these kinds of questions. It is hard to see how the problem can be avoided in the long run, if the project of investigating meta-argumentation is to prosper, predicated in the first place on the ability criteriologically to distinguish non-meta- from meta-arguments and meta-argumentation. If we cannot distinguish meta-arguments from other arguments, then, except at the most intuitive and conceptually dangerous level, we can hardly proceed to develop a theory concerning the properties and principles of meta-argumentation if we cannot properly distinguish meta-arguments from non-meta-arguments. Taking sides on the wide or narrow intentionality of reference in deciding which arguments are about ground-level objects rather than other arguments is not an optional exercise for a complete theory of meta-argumentation. What are the possibilities for Finocchiaro to adopt instead narrow intentionality in applying the aboutness criterion to distinguish between non-meta- and meta-arguments?

This option, unfortunately, is also burdened with serious philosophical drawbacks. To mention only a few, we thereby make intending entirely a subjective intensional occurrence, for which there are no accountable external objective

extensionally expressible determinants, possibly falling, therefore, entirely outside the field of a philosophically exact theory of argumentation or meta-argumentation. The targeting of arguments or non-arguments by a potential meta-argument in that case becomes a matter of what different thinkers and language users happen to believe themselves to be intending. The result, if it is to constitute the firm foundation for a good theory of meta-argumentation, requires further finessing and meta-meta-argumentation, in order to make progress toward a proper aboutness criterion for the distinction between non-meta- and meta-argument and meta-argumentation. This is another unanswered question I now have concerning Finocchiaro's concept of meta-argumentation.

If, on the other hand, we give up on Finocchiaro's and by extension Toulmin's aboutness criterion for a distinction between non-meta- and meta-arguments and non-meta- and meta-argumentation theory, in light of the narrow-wide intentionality dilemma, then we can only hope to distinguish meta-arguments from non-meta-arguments to meta-argumentation criteriologically by referencing instead the difference between an argument's intending or referring *directly or indirectly* to another argument or to intended objects other than arguments. It is the intuitive difference between an argument concerning the phases of the moon or the kinematics of a pendulum's motion and an argument concerning an argument about the phases of the moon or the pendulum's oscillation. The appeal to direct versus indirect referential meaning is a deceptively enticing strategem. It seems to agree in the first place with referential practice in some sense and at some level. A book referred to in a review footnote may refer directly to the Crimean War, whereas the footnote refers only indirectly to the Crimean War via the content printed in the book on the specified page.

The fact that there are unproblematic examples to serve as a model or metaphor for the distinction between direct and indirect reference does not mean that the general relation is understood clearly enough to provide guidance in the case of the direct or only indirect reference to another argument or non-argument. An argument's intended object or what it is about, in trying to arrive at a good criterion for exactly marking the difference between non-meta-arguments and meta-arguments and meta-argumentation. We can challenge the sharp definition of any such distinction between argument and meta-argument by posing the old chestnut about one reasoner's *modus ponens* being another reasoner's *modus tollens*. If G argues at time t_1 that if God exists, then the Bible is true, to the conclusion that because God exists therefore the Bible is true, and H , hearing or reading this, responds by arguing at a later time t_2 that if God exists, then the Bible is true, to the conclusion that since the Bible is not true therefore God does not exist, then intuitively H 's argument is *about* G 's argument, to which it may have historically been presented as a deliberate polemical reply among its prime motivations.

Nevertheless, there appears to be nothing structural or in any other way objective about either G 's or H 's argument that makes H 's argument a clearcut meta-argument with G 's argument as its intended object. Given the reliance of a distinction between argument and meta-argument in this scenario on what G and H subjectively intend by their use of opposed *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* inferences, we are free to suppose that H intends the *modus tollens* riposte to G 's

modus ponens as an expression of a meta-argument, directed in particular toward discrediting *G*'s argument by means of an argument that is meant to target another argument, and perhaps further to highlight the circular nature of such reasoning at least on the part of *modus ponens* reasoner *G*. It is not coincidentally a case of precisely the sort that Henry Johnstone seems to have in mind, whereby any argument directed against any other argument always involves a shared assumption, not intended as a logical or rhetorical fallacy, prefigured in the roughly John Locke and Richard Whately sense of the nonabusive *ad hominem*, excluded only in case of the most desperate fundamental oppositions.

What, however, if *H* leads with the *modus tollens* inference, and *G* subsequently counters with the above *modus ponens*? Does that mean that the *G*'s argument (identical in content as previously) is then the meta-argument and *H*'s the ground-level argument? Is it merely a question of who gets where with what first? What if they issue their arguments in anticipated collision with one another at exactly the same time? We might have to say in that case that both arguments are meta-arguments, because one needs to be an argument of some kind, meta-arguments are arguments, and each argument, *G*'s *modus ponens* and *H*'s *modus tollens*, seems to be directed against the other, as in some sense an argument wielded in order to defeat their respective counterpart logical inferences. Would not *both* of the arguments, furthermore, also be about *both* the non-argument objects God and the Bible, and the specified states of affairs in which God exists or fails to exist, and the Bible is factually true or factually false, or even internally logically inconsistent even under the most charitable interpretations? Would not *both* arguments also be about the arguments with which their respective proponents are seeking to uphold the truth of what are collectively logically incompatible propositions? The answer to this question may also have implications for better understanding the relation between meta-argumentation theory and non-meta- general argumentation theory. For anyone who shares a sense of the problem, it should be interesting see how the categories might best be explained.

Naturally, there might be many good answers in reply to these devil's advocate objections. Suppose, then, that someone further asks, why should we recognize a special category of meta-arguments, if the general principles for identifying and critically evaluating meta-arguments are exactly the same as those for object-level arguments, in the most general sense already covered by general argumentation theory? Why not conservatively consider the logical structure of all arguments, including meta-arguments, as governed by a single favored deductive logic, as the stereotypical deductivist is supposed to advocate? Or adopt and adapt a spectrum of classical and nonclassical inferential logical formalisms, alongside or within the most comprehensive deductive structures, as need presents, including whatever inductive logics, and formalisms of abductive and in principle also conductive arguments might be relevant, should these prove to be distinct categories? Or get as informal and art versus science in the evaluation of arguments as you please, call that logic, and ask whether or not meta-argument would not need to be subject to logic in that comprehensive informal sense, so that to describe logic as itself only an episode of meta-argument seems once again not to correctly picture their interrelation. With a realistic selection of logics currently available, the right

choice of logic for a specific analytic task can itself become a matter of dispute and argumentation, which we should nevertheless find ourselves uncomfortable in calling meta-logical reasoning, in a terminology for which there is already an established usage in logical parlance. Such meta-argumentation reasoning, like meta-logical reasoning in the sense of logical metatheory must itself presumably involve inferences governed by, once again, disconcertingly, the right logic.

From a certain perspective, there need be no deep conflict in acknowledging logic as ruling meta-argument and meta-argumentation theory, while meta-arguments and meta-argumentation theory and applications rely on logic and make use of logical concepts and methods. The same is true of any theory that arrives at or presents its results in the form of arguments. Which is to say almost everything except for divine revelation. Finocchiaro does not explicitly endorse such a meta-meta-argument, or, metaphorically speaking, the enveloping of meta-argumentation theory in logic. He seems in fact emphatically to resist any such picture, by insisting on an equivocation between the logic circumscribed in dusty deductive logic textbooks, and a more latitudinarian concept of logic gestured toward in only a general vaguely specified sense, that involves all of the factors entering into evaluating an argument's merits. Finocchiaro explains, in a section on the *Scope of logic*:

...in a sense I agree with [J. Anthony] Blair's key thesis that logic is only a part of the philosophical study of argument. But my inclination is to formulate this claim by saying that formal deductive logic is only a part of logic, thus equating logic in general with what Blair calls the philosophy of argument, and equating his term logic with my phrase formal deductive logic. (163)

The trouble is that as a matter of fact at the present time it is hard to find any mathematical or philosophical symbolic logicians working in the field who would not wholeheartedly agree that formal deductive logic is 'only part of logic'. There lurks in this effort to demarcate the role of logic in meta-argumentation theory a glaring false dichotomy.

The choice for logic and informal argumentation theory is not between the crusty introductory logic systems of the last 50 years in the textbooks of common use that Blair surveys, on the one hand, and an argumentation theory that considers 'full-blooded' arguments. The choice is between an embarrassment of riches among formal logics, including systems designed around finely-nuanced sensitivities to other non-deductive aspects, on the one hand, and, on the other, an argumentation or meta-argumentation theory that subordinates logic to argumentation rather than argumentation to logic. As to non-classical and in many instances non-deductive logics, logical structure can be modelled in more highly nuanced ways than the most basic deductive formalisms in inductive, intensional, non monotonic, dynamic, and modal logics, all of many kinds in many categories. If meta-argumentation is argumentation theory that thrives on meta-argument, as Finocchiaro frequently asserts, and if such meta-arguments as arguments are themselves subject to formal or informal principles of correct logical reasoning, then it is hard to see how logic could fail to subsume argumentation theory, rather than the other way around. If the same logic, construed as generously as Finocchiaro seems to want, as the second

dilemma horn maintains, governs argument and meta-argument with the same subsuming logical principles, then the effect is to deprive meta-argument of any special distinction within the general family of arguments considered by (non-meta-) argumentation theory, especially in case the Toulmin-inspired aboutness criterion for distinguishing non-meta- from meta-arguments and meta-argumentation cannot be repaired.

If our task is to understand argument generally, then it may be considered an open question whether focusing on meta-argument prepares an important piece of the complete puzzle for future integration in the greater whole, or whether working out the principles of meta-argumentation serves potentially instead as a distraction from determining the most general requirements of argumentation theory, by which meta-argument would then necessarily be properly included. The fact is that we cannot rightly judge whether a general theory of argumentation is correct unless or until, among other things, we can see how well the general theory serves the needs of a correct special theory of meta-argumentation, governing the meta-arguments by which a general argumentation theory is discovered or invented and justified. There is no way to know except to see what happens next. Meta-argumentation theory in Finocchiaro's new book is essential reading as much for the questions it raises as for the systematic treatment he offers of meta-argumentation in logic and argumentation theory, for the general study of argument concerning all arguments about arguments.