

Meta-Arguments, Para-Arguments, and Intentionally Bad Arguments

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Abstract: Sometimes we argue about cats or about whether there is a largest prime number. Other times we argue about arguments. When we do this, we engage in meta-argument. Most accounts of meta-argument in the literature view it retrospectively: we meta-argue about arguments that have already been made. In so doing, we may find meta-reasons for rejecting an otherwise good argument, among other things. This paper considers meta-argument in the other direction, that is, prospectively. To illustrate this concept, we explore cases where one has meta-reasons for intentionally making bad arguments or where one argues not by offering an argument, but by communicating in a non-argumentative fashion that supports other arguments. We call these later cases para-argument.

Résumé: Parfois, nous discutons à propos de chats ou de l'existence d'un plus grand nombre premier. D'autres fois, nous discutons d'arguments. Dans ce cas, nous nous engageons dans une méta-argumentation. La plupart des descriptions de méta-argumentation dans la littérature l'abordent rétrospectivement: nous méta-argumentons sur des arguments déjà avancés. Ce faisant, nous pouvons trouver des méta-raisons de rejeter un argument par ailleurs valable, entre autres. Cet article aborde la méta-argumentation dans l'autre sens, c'est-à-dire de manière prospective. Pour illustrer ce concept, nous explorons des cas où l'on a des méta-raisons de formuler intentionnellement de mauvais arguments, ou, dans d'autres cas, où l'on argumente sans argumenter du tout, mais en communiquant de manière non argumentative pour étayer d'autres arguments. Nous appelons ces derniers cas des para-arguments.

Keywords: meta-argument, para-argument, signaling, ad baculum arguments

Introduction

Sometimes we argue about cats or about whether there is a largest prime number. We argue about things that aren't arguments. But it also often happens that in making progress on how many cats to adopt or how it would even be for there to be highest prime, we have to settle questions about *how* we're settling questions. We might argue about who has the burden of proof or whether someone has committed, say, a fallacy of appeal to unqualified authority. To use the concept of the burden of proof or to invoke the language of fallacies is to engage in meta-argument—argument about arguments. It's very alarming, but perhaps not surprising, how much of our everyday arguing is such arguing about arguing. Argument is, after all, constitutively normative: an argument is an argument to the extent that it follows, or purports to follow, a particular set of norms or rules (Bermejo-Luque 2019, p. 665). It's not just a bunch of sentences with an illative word; it's a claim that a norm of some kind applies, a norm that requires the addressee to do something (and that the speaker implicates the addressee to follow). To this extent, argument is meta-argumentative, in that arguments must be implicitly reflexive given that they must call attention to themselves as arguments (Aikin and Casey 2022b; McKeon 2021; Wohlrapp 2014).

Argumentation is reflexive because arguers must have recourse to argument norms to achieve their goals as arguers. In the presence of an array of arguments pro- and con- on an issue, we might draw conclusions about the uncertainty of some conclusion or other. For example, when many people are arguing about something, we may assume that the conclusion must be unknown, difficult to know, or may lie somewhere between the debate extremes. This is a kind of meta-arguing that comes in the wake of other arguments. In this case, one reasons from the variety of conflicting arguments to the conclusion that the issue is not merely *debatable*, but *obscure* in a way that explains the discrepancy. But we may also make inferences from consistently bad arguments coming from one side of one debate or from one side simply not being allowed to argue. The key is that we make inferences about the evidential lay of the land not only from the content of the arguments given, but from the fact of whether arguments are given

or not. Call these *retrospective meta-arguments*, in that they are arguments we make in light of arguments that have been given. We intend to argue here, however, that one might also meta-argue *prospectively*. One could, for example, meta-argue by making manifestly good and overtly bad arguments, or, relatedly, by making no arguments at all.

Our purpose in this essay is to investigate some cases of *meta-arguments for making bad arguments*, which we will call, after Cohen's (2001) innovative naming structure for meta-arguments, MAMBA. The paper proceeds as follows. We first go over some of the basics of meta-argument in the literature to get the appropriate concepts on the table, such as retrospective and prospective meta-arguments, which are our focus. We then introduce and discuss MAMBA, drawing a distinction between strong and weak versions. Weak MAMBA is when we make an argument we know is bad for the sake of drawing our intellectual opponents into an exchange that we know we will win on other merits. Strong MAMBA is when we introduce *para-argumentative* contributions to the argument (things alongside of, but not, arguments that nevertheless supplement or highlight the argument) to move our case forward or inhibit the opponent from making their case. We conclude with some brief remarks on the normative question for such arguments.

Meta-argument conceived

Despite the centrality of meta-arguing to the concept of argument, there is a notable dearth of literature on the general concept. Exceptions to this are Finocchiaro, Cohen, Wohlrapp, Breakey, and Aikin and Casey. The accounts of meta-argument in this literature vary with the shifting meanings of the prefix *meta*. The term *meta* is a relational preposition (notoriously and hilariously ambiguous at times). Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was so named because it dealt with matters *above* physical things, because it handled questions *in the wake of* physical things, and, more prosaically, because it was a series of books placed on the shelf *after* the books on physical things (the *Physics*).

For Finocchiaro (2013, see also 2005, 2007 for extended discussions), to meta-argue is just to argue *about* arguing. This means to argue about argument as a *topic* of argument (2013, p. 1). There's clearly more to meta-arguing than this, for, as in the examples just given, we argue about arguing in order to clarify something in the first order (e.g., as above, to settle who has the burden of proof or whether a fallacy was committed). To argue about arguing involves more than just arguing about argument as an item for consideration (Aikin and Casey 2022b). Meta-arguing, should it have any bearing *on* other arguments, ought to be something *relationally normative*.

The relationally normative sense of meta-argument can be found in Cohen (2001), Wohlrapp (2014), Breakey (2021) and Aikin and Casey (2022a; 2022b; 2023a; 2022c). Severally, they maintain that meta-arguments are particular kinds of arguments, namely those that come *in the wake* of prior arguments and, most importantly, have a unique kind of *bearing on them*. This bearing is, in some sense we'll define, *evaluative*. Wohlrapp takes argument to have a consistently reflexive feature in that argumentation, in proceeding, posits its own objects for evaluation. So, there are things we reason about, but then there are the mechanics of our shared rationality and the moves we make with it. There are inferences, evidence, and sufficiency of reasons, and then there are evaluations of how the argument has gone and whether it is over and whether we have addressed all the standing objections. Wohlrapp holds, then, "the practice of argumentation has a special, self-referential relationship with its own theory" (2014, pp. 374–75). At any point in a conversation, requests for clarification can be made or objections posed, which can take the discussants "up to the meta-level of argumentative *theory*" (p. 374).

A useful analogy, especially to highlight the relational normativity of reflexive meta-argument, can be drawn to evaluative reflection and explicitation in meta-theater. This is more than just theater *about* theater, plays about actors, directors, and such; it's theater that makes a commentary on theater. "Breaking the fourth wall," where actors in a play address the audience and comment on the action, has a similar role. And in these reflexive moments,

we may collectively ask how well things have gone on both the first- and second-order.

For Breakey (2021), a meta-argument consists in critiquing a ground-level argument not by questioning the truth of premises or their logical connection to the conclusion, as is the practice taught in many informal logic textbooks, but rather by directing “attention to other properties of the target argument, such as its effects in a given context” (2021, p. 390 fn. 1). Certain kinds of arguments, for example, may cause offense to a particular audience or may cater to the prejudices of the audience. To critique an argument on these grounds, regardless of whether the argument qua argument is any good, is to bring meta-argumentative considerations to bear on its evaluation, in that we ask how the argument, as argument, improves or degrades a broader interpersonal interchange.

It is sometimes said that arguing is what we do when the way forward is blocked by disagreement; I see it one way, you see it another, so we work it out. It often happens that in the course of working it out, we disagree about who, say, has the burden of proof, so we turn to meta-argument. You may identify the more costly error and assign the burden of proof accordingly or I may claim that common sense is on my side, so you must shoulder the burden. We may also shift to meta-argument when something seems off about our arguments. We may ask if we took a wrong turn, or we may agree to raise the degree of scrutiny for evidence. Or, we may deliberate about whether the phrasing or emotional delivery of arguments has negative effects on further exchange. While we turn to arguments to satisfy the principles of rationality, in argument we must satisfy a principle of meta-rationality, which is to say that to reason rationally is to rationally hold that one has reasoned rationally (as noted by Cohen, 2001, p. 78). And what goes for reasoning goes for arguments: to argue rationally is to argue *about arguing* rationally (Aikin and Casey 2024a). This is all to say: we do not just apply reason to criteria for sufficiency and rules of exchange, but we also reason about and endorse those criteria and norms. It is in this regard that Wohlrapp holds that argumentative validity is reflexive—we not only have answered critical questions and objections about first-order issues, but about our criteria and procedures too (Wohlrapp 2014).

Cohen (2001) describes four symmetrical meta-argumentative scenarios, all centered on the general sense that something is either right or wrong with our arguments. The first of these is called the meta-argument for *resisting* good arguments (MARGA). It goes something like this. Say you're presented with an argument with an improbable or untenable conclusion that otherwise seems, by all accounts, faultless. But, you meta-reason, there can't be a reasonable argument for an untenable conclusion, so you conclude the argument is somehow mistaken. Along similar lines, in addition to MARGA, there is MAABA, the meta-argument for *accepting* bad arguments (MAABA); a meta-argument for *accepting* good arguments (MAAGA); and finally, Meta-argument for *rejecting* bad arguments (MARBA).

A few things are worth remarking on here. In the first place, Cohen's meta-arguments are *retrospective*, coming *after* or on the heels of first-order arguments. Second, though they come in the wake of first-order arguments, these meta-arguments *regard* them as arguments. That is, they don't simply have them as contents, but they are about these arguments as items of reflection and evaluation according to norms of argument. Third, they further (or frustrate) the purposes of the first-order argument. They're not merely evaluative, but prescriptive, too. One identifies what one should do in light of the evaluation of the argument, and one resolves to do it.

Let's take MARGA as a test case. A classic example, cited by Cohen (2001, p. 79), is the argument that $1 = 0$ that one encounters on social media every now and then (with the warning: *only for geniuses!*). In this case, the steps seem individually logical, but then one ends up at the surprising (and profoundly implausible) conclusion. MARGA has it that regardless of the apparent soundness of the steps (and so the argument) to prove it, the conclusion that $1 = 0$ can't possibly be true. So, it ought to be rejected. As a result, one resists what otherwise seems to be a good argument. MARGA-like reasoning is possible in any case where someone rejects an argument because the conclusion fails to pass the smell test, which is itself taken as evidence that something has gone wrong with the argument. Though we cannot say *where* the error is, the conclusion's manifest falsity bespeaks that a yet unnamed

error has been made. What might look like a pure case of irrationality is, in the meta-argumentative interpretation, a case of meta-rationality. If one ends up with unacceptable conclusions and thus reasons about their reasoning, one should withhold assent to the conclusion and thereby endorsement of the reasoning leading to it. Given this result, there must be an error in the first-order reasons getting us to the conclusion—a fallacy, false premise, or misstated commitment.

Just as first-order arguments can be fallacious or not, so can second-order arguments. When they're fallacious, they're fallacious in their own peculiar way. Fallacious versions of MARGA can come in a variety of forms. One form is *bothsiderism* (Aikin and Casey 2022a). As the name suggests, bothsiderism happens when, upon hearing multiple arguments on a disputed issue, an addressee invokes a deficient principle of meta-rationality to claim that the existence of different perspectives entails splitting the difference (or epistemic moderation or skepticism). Bothsiderism is a retrospective meta-argumentative move because it comes in the wake of arguing, and it is a relational evaluative judgment *about* the first order arguments without assessing their relative quality. One judges an argument to be deficient merely because there's another argument that says something different. Further, *whataboutism* is a similar retrospective meta-argumentative scheme (Aikin and Casey 2024b). Again, one judges that an argument is not effective not because of something on the first order, but because there are *different arguments* about *more important issues* outside of the argument that merit consideration first. For example, in response to an argument about deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement in the United States, a whataboutist might ask *what about Black-on-Black crime?* Here, the whataboutist has not only changed the subject but has impugned the agenda of the initial critical questions. The thought of the whataboutist is that the fact the one offers arguments *at all* on some topic is meta-argumentatively salient, and, again, is criticized by the challenge of *what about* something else.

The take-away from this brief review of the standing literature and takes on meta-argument is that meta-arguments are not only about arguments (in that they take arguments as their intentional

objects), but they regard arguments *as arguments*, and so hold them to rational and communicative standards. And further, with meta-argumentation one considers and deliberates about arguments in light of these norms and objectives. We've called this constellation of intentional comportments a *normative relation*, as meta-arguments prompt evaluative reflection of the arguments they take as objects. It seems clear that resolutions to prospectively *accept good* arguments and *reject bad* arguments are plausible, and the same presumably goes for *giving* arguments—give good ones, refuse to give bad ones. The question, then, is how one might refuse to give or accept good arguments or resolve to give bad ones. We will focus only on the latter here, as it occasions the primary cases of curious meta- (and para-) argumentation.

MAMBA

The retrospective feature of meta-arguing is central for good reason; a great deal of argumentative work focuses on arguments that have already been given. As we've seen, some of the retrospective work occurs on the first order, and some of it is on the second order. So far, the focus of accounts of retrospective meta-argument is on how *addressees* take up arguments advanced by others. But we think that the principles at work here also work prospectively, in other words, that there might be meta-argumentative principles for making certain kinds of arguments, rather than merely in accepting, rejecting, or interpreting them.

What's required at this stage, then, is to sketch a concept of and pose some examples of meta-argumentation that parallel Cohen's MARGA, the meta-argument for resisting good arguments, but it is about intentionally *making a bad argument*. We'll call this parallel MAMBA: a *meta-argument for making a bad argument*. This is not, we should caution, another way of tailoring one's argument to an audience—that is, making an argument one knows to have failed a standard because the target audience can't tell the difference and will buy it on that account. What's important in the cases of MAMBA we'll discuss is that the arguer intends the argument to be bad *and* for it to be recognized as such. MAMBA reasoning has various versions, but we identify two: strong and

weak. Strong MAMBA consists in one making what we will call para-argument, or non-argumentative communicative acts relevant to the argument because they play meta-argumentative roles, calling attention to who should do what and what the consequences are. Weak MAMBA consists in making merely bad arguments. Examples of para-argumentative communication of strong MAMBA include sarcastic abuse, ridicule, ad baculum threats. Examples of weak MAMBA include merely fallacious (e.g., straw man or slippery slope) or weak arguments directed at certain addressees, again, for other than rhetorical effect. In addition to identifying the forms, we assess the costs and opportunities of employing MAMBA reasoning. As we conclude, the various forms of meta-argument make sense, again, around the distinction between the first and the second order. We close with some thoughts on this, namely that meta-argumentative moves are legitimate to the extent that they allow us to make progress in the first order.

Now for some cases. One type of prospective meta-argumentative case is the straw man argument. One thing that makes straw men peculiar as fallacious arguments is that, on one level, there's nothing wrong with them; critiquing bad arguments is good, isn't it (Aikin and Casey 2022c)? This is especially the case when the argument being critiqued is a real one that is actually bad, as in the case of weak man arguments (otherwise known as "selectional straw man arguments," wherein one has selected versions of an opposing view that are more amenable for critique). Interestingly, as there are cases where critiquing bad arguments from real arguers is bad, there are cases where making bad arguments on purpose is good, as in the case of pedagogical straw men (Ribeiro 2008).

What makes straw man arguments pernicious is how they are deployed meta-argumentatively. An account of their meta-argumentative deployment holds that they are fallacious when one not only mis-portrays the opposition's views as weaker than they actually are, but on the basis of this representation takes the discussion to be *thereby closed* (Aikin and Casey 2022c). Socrates, in his famous exchange with Thrasymachus in book I of the *Republic* (340d) exemplifies the meta-argumentative deployment of the straw man. Socrates constructs a view of a happy life with virtue

and justice being the crowning excellences of the soul as a reply to Thrasymachus, who holds that justice is for suckers. This picture of the good life should not move Thrasymachus at all, but somehow it does—he performs inexplicably badly in the exchange in defense of his immoralism. Arguably, Socrates makes the bad (dialectical) argument not to refute Thrasymachus’s position, but to simply challenge Thrasymachus as someone who can’t keep his own commitments straight. The lesson, then, is not one about justice, but about who is a competent teacher and reasoner to start with. Thrasymachus fails the test, but, famously, Glaucon and Adiemantus pick up the charge to ask not whether Thrasymachus can be defeated, but whether his viewpoint could be better defended, and so better criticized, too. The point is that a bad argument, by hypothesis, had a positive dialectical role to play. But it is still a bad argument. Plato even draws attention to it, having Socrates twice accused of being a “false witness” in argument (for a discussion of this exchange, see Aikin and Anderson 2006). But the point, again, is that Socrates can intentionally give a bad argument, but for good (overall) argumentative purposes. He’s arrived at it (and we can think it through) as a meta-argument for giving a bad argument.

Once we have a grasp on the meta-argumentative stakes involved in making bad arguments on purpose, other cases of MAMBA come into view. One particular case comes from conservative American political commentator Ben Shapiro, who is known for his aggressive argumentative style and frequent use of meta-argument (see, for instance, his employment of the free speech fallacy, discussed in Aikin and Casey 2023a). In a 2020 discussion of a New York law banning the sale of Nazi or Confederate flags on state property, he stressed that he is not a defender of the Confederate flag, conceding that it “in fact was a symbol of slavery.” He was quick to point out, however, that some people see it as central to their vision of their Southern heritage, and so he held that laws restricting the sale or display of the Confederate flag are unjustified. He then made the following argument relevant to our purposes:

It is an aspect of free speech in America that, (1) you can fly the Confederate flag and (2) It's just an aspect of a free speech culture that if somebody's flying a Confederate flag you probably shouldn't make the assumption that they're a baseline rote racist.¹

It's worth noting that Donald Trump offered a similar kind of reply when pressed about his views on the Confederate flag.² In fact, it's not all that uncommon of a meta-level argument on controversial symbols such as this. It runs, in essence: *Sure, we oppose X's first-order meaning and implication (or X may be false), but because we champion freedom of speech, we champion displays of X.* And so it goes with X being replaced with Confederate flags, anti-Semitic propaganda, rumors about immigrants eating pets, and so on. Now, it might seem, however, that there already is an account of arguments such as this: the *red herring*. They're red herrings because they seem to be distractions from the original question, which was whether someone found the symbol, like the Confederate flag, acceptable. Rather than reply straightforwardly that it's not, the arguer instead, as in the Shapiro case, layers on another argument, which we've presented as having the following reasoning:

I don't fly the Confederate flag because I endorse its racist agenda, but rather I fly the Confederate flag because I favor free speech. Since this is speech that is challenged, my argument, layered on top of this very bad argument, is all the more forceful. I embody in my own person and in my own argument the thought that I may not like someone's speech but I'll defend their right to do it till the end.

¹The video can be found here:

<https://twitter.com/jasonscampbell/status/1339301383619702785>

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZfMWRDlrBw>. Students at a high school in Michigan were even more explicit, holding that the Confederate flag is a symbol of free speech: <https://www.fox17online.com/2015/09/21/students-parents-show-up-in-support-of-confederate-flag-in-hastings-schools>

The structure of the Confederate flag argument is complex: one advances, self-consciously, a bad argument or deeply implausible view (that one does not in fact hold) as a means of making another, more plausible argument, dependent on the uptake of the first argument. In the current case, the bad argument is the one embodied in the Confederate flag, which, as Shapiro himself notes, is an unquestionably racist symbol. Under this banner, one thereby advances another argument, that those who attempt to restrict this speech—if only by moral disapprobation—are the real villains. Now, it's entirely possible for both arguments to be bad (which we think is the case in the Shapiro example here), but the issue then is that there can be good reasons for giving bad arguments (as with Socrates above) and bad reasons for giving bad arguments (as with Shapiro here), and the question then is what makes the two different. It can't be that the first-order argument is good or bad since in both cases, it's bad. So, what makes the difference?

Some might recognize Shapiro's argument pattern from recent American politics as the "own the libs" strategy, popular with President Trump and his followers. To "own the libs" is to make some purposely wrong claim or bad argument to provoke a negative reaction and then trade on that reaction. Relatedly, in the run-up to the 2016 United States presidential election and afterwards, journalists struggled to understand then-candidate Trump's uniquely bombastic argumentative style. He would stake positions that were manifestly false only to then claim them true in some other sense. For example, after the election, Trump claimed that the Obama administration had surveilled his campaign headquarters, which was false, but members of the Trump election team were people of interest to the intelligence agencies for collaborations with foreign powers. When corrected on the first claim, Trump defenders then point to how it really means the second, and that we would not be talking about *this* second fact unless Trump had not invoked the first. This led some journalists to claim that Trump ought to be taken "seriously" but not "literally" (Zito 2016). Hugely exaggerated statistics, like the claim that 3,000 people were killed in one year in Chicago shootings, convey the seriousness of the problem, but, again, refuting the false claim then gives Trump defenders the opportunity to highlight the fact that

the number is still considerably greater than zero. The objective, then, of the strategy is to make a manifestly bad contribution to a deliberative exchange with the objective of being challenged on it, but then turn to argue that the contribution was supposed to mean another more plausible thing. In so doing, one gets one's commitments out for consideration and also portrays one's intellectual opponents as unserious or incapable of responsible interpretation.

The main thought behind our interpretive approach to MAMBA is that meta-arguments are fundamentally normatively relational. Some meta-arguments handle normative questions in ground-level arguments—in those, we ask whether the arguments are good or bad and can be improved. Other meta-arguments under our consideration of MAMBA are instances in which a bad or insincere argument is offered for some longer-term argumentative purpose. The question now is what this purpose is and how we can evaluate it. On one view, owning the libs seems to be an immature strategy, meant merely to rile up or “trigger” some target audience. The aim is to get a rise out of them, you know, for the lulz (where lulz is *schadenfreude* at the frustration or argumentative disorientation you have caused). This is not much of an argumentative purpose: no claims are being advanced or defended, no clarity is provided on the first or even the second order. It's pure immaturity. And, further, given the objective of enticing first-order argument for the sake of second-order correction, the picture of those who react as irrational or not understanding or valuing the second-order good is magnified by stereotypes of the targeted groups. And, importantly, these portrayals are not simply for those in the opposition, but they are better seen as targeting audiences who are already sympathetic with their cause. So, with the Shapiro Confederate flag case, the ‘freedom’ meta-argument is not for those who oppose the flags but for those on the right who will eagerly interpret a minority opposing racist symbols as over-reacting and not appreciating the niceties of freedom of speech. Or consider the Socrates case—the audience for the bad argument given to Thrasymachus isn't Thrasymachus, but the promising young men who are more interested in philosophical exchange—Glaucon and Adiemantus.

One model for understanding the MAMBA strategy draws an analogy to medieval European fortresses: the motte and bailey

castle (Boudry and Braeckman 2011; Shackel 2005). These castles consisted of a central stone or timber bailey on raised ground, which made them easily defensible, and they were surrounded by a motte—a series of earthworks and ditches. One may occupy the lightly-defended area of the motte, but as attackers arrive, one retreats to the bailey, where attacks are more easily repelled. Further, the ease of taking the motte gives attackers reason to think they can also easily take the bailey, which is an illusion. They attack the bailey, to their ruin. So, bringing the analogy back, in the case of Shapiro defending the Confederate flag flyers, the motte is approval of a symbol being displayed, but the bailey is support for the principle of free speech in the right to fly the flag. So, as opponents attack the display of the flag (on moral or political ground, or merely on grounds of good taste in flag design), they find themselves rebutted with a second-order argument about free speech. Further, the motte-and-bailey case is not merely about winning this particular argumentative exchange (in the trap-to-checkmate move), but to have one's opponent appear a certain way. Instead of them taking a stand against a racist symbol, the strategy now has them appearing as enemies of free speech.

To be sure, the idea of making arguments for some *other* purpose is not an entirely new one. To accuse another of virtue signaling, for example, is to make the charge that one is making some assertion, or some argument (Alsip Vollbrecht forthcoming), not in order to advance its claims as arguments should—you know, facts and logic—but rather to signal that the speaker is on the side of the angels (Levy 2021; Tosi and Warmke 2020). The speaker is therefore engaged in a kind of meta-argument, where the premises are their utterances and the conclusion is an ethotic one: viz., that they are virtuous and on the side of the right and good. Along similar lines, Goodwin and Innocenti describe cases where the point of making an argument isn't to establish some conclusion by rational means but rather to show something else, such as one's capacity for making an argument (2019, p. 674). Closer to the idea we're getting at here is the phenomenon of *vice-signaling*, where one purposely and overtly fails to meet and thereby repudiate some normative standard (Taiwo 2022). Even though the vice is meant to be a kind of virtue for the right audience, the point is that

one does the bad thing on purpose for some other end. This is even clearer in cases where one may take a stand on some issue in order to signal one's adherence to a certain set of norms or beliefs. Bergamaschi Ganapini (2021) argues that the widely criticized but also widely practiced phenomenon of sharing fake stories on social media is best explained by its potential for signaling group membership and to display one's party or preference. Mercier holds that taking on extreme positions "burns bridges" with the opposition and thereby cements one's membership in a group (2022, pp. 192-197). Interestingly, sharing what one knows or suspects to be fake news with others who have a similar view is a meta-argumentative deployment of a bad view. The sharing demonstrates solidarity both to compatriots and opponents. Like the "own the libs" strategy or the Confederate flag case, it may also demonstrate to opponents that arguing will be difficult, costly, or impossible. MAMBA is like that, but the aim of MAMBA is not merely something reflexive about the speaker (that they're virtuous, rational, or vicious, etc.) but rather to achieve some further argumentative objective of portraying the opposition in a particular way and to reframe the debate accordingly. Of course, the further second-order objective is (purportedly) good, but it's important to stress that for MAMBA to work as it should, the first-order arguments and claims need to be bad and obviously so.

So far, we've outlined a case for what we call weak MAMBA. We call it "weak," because even though one is making a bad argument, one is still operating within the purview of argument; the reasons are bad, but they're still *reasons*. Once it is clear that argument might not be subject to the constraint that you can't do it badly on purpose, then it could be the case that not even offering reasons at all could be seen to be a form of arguing, but these actions still play a role in the argumentative exchange. Call this *para-argument*.

Para-argument and strong MAMBA

Paralegals are legal workers who work alongside lawyers but are not lawyers themselves. They're good up to a point, in other words, for legal purposes but they are playing a supplementary

role. The same goes for other para-modified terms (-military, -normal, -noia); the items in the para-domain do something alongside those in the target noun's domain, often similar to but also substantively different from them, but defined as being something, well, *parallel* to them. Similarly, para-argumentative moves are communicative acts that occur alongside arguments for argumentative effect, though they themselves are not arguments (Aikin and Casey 2023b). For example, one can highlight the social costs of rejecting one's argument by *laughing at* how ridiculous it would be to reject the conclusion. Or one can call attention to how much one appreciates an insight and finds it exciting by praising those who make the argument and agree. Or one can make a deep noise of approval to show that one has agreed and wants to hear more of a case. One makes that sound that is heard from the audience when something interesting has been said. (It's like "hmmhmmhmm!") These contributions are not argument proper, but something that comes *alongside* it (and other communication) as a supplement or commentary. In this regard, the concept of para-argument should be familiar to those who know the function of *ad baculum* arguments. Standardly, in the *ad baculum* argument, one threatens an interlocutor in order to secure assent to some proposition. In such cases, no one would be so daft as to confuse the para-argumentative threats for reasons to assent to the truth of some proposition; they're merely incentives to verbally agree or, what is more likely, to *not disagree* (Casey 2022). With *ad baculum* arguments, the objective isn't to change the other's mind, but to change their behavior. We can make the same case for bribes or other incentives, where one uses some non-argumentative inducement to encourage another to adopt a standpoint.

Ad baculum type appeals are typically considered fallacious because one tries to accomplish an argumentative objective by force (or bribery). It's clear, however, that not all cases of *ad baculum* are fallacious: threatening to cut someone's microphone should they continue to interrupt could well be a case of justified pressure on a disruptive interlocutor. The same could be said for laughing at someone's lapse in logic, acting bored during their talk, or shouting at them afterwards. Naturally, laughing, acting bored, shouting, and other such acts are not reasons, and so re-

course to them, like recourse to *ad baculum*, is superficially a kind of bad arguing. It's at least true that it's often considered as such. Yet, it seems that such para-argumentative moves have their place in a well-functioning argumentative space. This is especially true when they're deployed to enforce the norms of a well-run exchange. Consider the following simple case. Duns Scotus, in his *de Metaphysica* holds that para-argument is the only response available when confronted with those who deny (apparently) self-evident logical principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction. Such people, he argues, ought to “be beaten or exposed to fire until they concede that to burn and not to burn, or to be beaten and not to be beaten, are not identical” (1987, p. 9). The strategy, of course, is not to threaten skeptics to verbally assent, but to make it clear to them what the stakes of their claims (and denials) are. Relatedly, Erik Krabbe has argued that people who abuse meta-discussions—those who filibuster with endless points of order, who make specious accusations of fallacy, or who otherwise use meta-argument to stand in the way of argument—ought to be *assessed a penalty* (2003, p. 89). Following Krabbe, Innocenti (2022) describes a case where para-argumentative sanction would seem to be permissible with those who make inappropriately legalistic objections of procedure in discussions of racial injustice. One, on Innocenti's reasoning, not only may, but seemingly must, confront meta-argumentative dithering on matters of import with abuse. The point is that the para-argumentative sanction, though not really arguing, conveys something about the norms of arguing. The background assumption is that para-argumentative sanction (and benefit) should be used to enforce and encourage norm-adherence.

The *ad hominem* abusive is a multiplicitous argument (and fallacy) form. On one model, it is not even an argument, but simple abuse posed for the sake of chasing an interlocutor out of the exchange. That is, few instances of name-calling in argument take premise-conclusion forms, but only foreground what might be taken as the premise—that the opponent is vicious and contemptible in some way—for the audience. But especially when deployed in the second person (to *you*, as opposed about *him* or *them*) to the opponent, it's clear that this approach has no first-order implica-

tion for the conclusion—how might I expect you to see that your views on taxation, say, are wrong on the basis of your halitosis? Rather, the abuse is not playing a first-order role in the argument at all, but is instead playing a para-argumentative role of communicating that continuing the critical exchange will result in more emotionally taxing attacks on the speaker's face, which may not be a cost worth paying given the first-order matter at issue. So, targets of *ad hominem* abuse must calculate: *Is it worth it to me to be insulted while trying to also stay focused on the point that needs to be made? Maybe it's just better for me to back out of this exchange.*

Notice that those who argue and insult benefit from these extra calculations by their interlocutors because some (if not most) will retreat from the critical exchange because they do not wish to pay the costs. And those who do persist must also expend extra energy managing their emotions in the midst of a cognitively costly exchange. As a result, those who deploy the *ad hominem* get to then argue (or merely assert) unopposed, have their insults and insinuations stand unopposed, and their claims are vindicated because there is no one left to object. Again, no reflective person thinks that insults are evidence, so they themselves must (at least implicitly) see the arguments (or, as we are saying, *para-arguments*) as bad (or at least not optimal), but they nevertheless deploy them for the sake of a broader goal—that of clearing the decks of opposition to views they hold as true. So, they have meta-argumentative reasons for giving bad arguments, or better put, abusive *para-arguments*.

The same might go for use of humor in the midst of an argument. One instance is the strategy of the *ad ridiculum*—to highlight that one's opponent's position yields a result that is laughable. Take, for example, the case of the Presocratic philosopher Xenophanes's famous observation that *were horses able to draw, they'd draw their gods as horses*. The strategy is to show that something ridiculous happens when we allow animals to have gods in their own form. The same, by analogy, goes for humans, but the force of the conclusion and the argument overall comes from the fact that we are *laughing at* those who accept the conclusion.

The discussion so far might suggest that para-argument is hyper-adversarial, along the lines of Govier's conception of ancillary adversariality (Govier 2000; 2021), that is, all of the adversarial non-arguing (gesticulating, yelling, finger-pointing, derision, and so on) that at times accompanies argument. Certainly, para-argument comes about often in those cases where argument alone seems to have failed to do its job, as in argumentative abuses of argument, and so something a little more aggressive is in order. Argument, however, need not always concern disagreements, and so it would seem that para-argument need not serve an exclusively punitive function. There can be cases of para-argumentative reward, where clapping, nodding, snapping of fingers, shouting, or gesticulations serve as rewards for conclusions well drawn or exchanges excellently performed.

Conclusion

As we've noted, it's common to think of meta-argument as something that only comes in the wake of some first-order argument. As Cohen (2001) observed, when a conclusion from an apparently blameless argument seems paradoxical, we may pause to consider whether the reasons presented really are as good as they seem (and thus make a meta-argument to resist apparently good arguments). In this sense, meta-arguments are *retrospective*. We've argued here, however, that one can employ meta-arguments *prospectively*. This is easiest to see in cases where one offers a manifestly obnoxious (as in the Confederate flag case), exaggerated (as in the Trump case), or otherwise bad (as in the Socratic cases) argument in order to direct attention to another point. In this sense, prospective meta-arguments are layered structures. The manifest badness of the argument calls attention to itself and therefore to the norms the arguer means to bring into relief. Along similar lines, para-argument is sometimes deployed as a result of meta-argumentative reasoning and often as an adversarial move that draws attention to failures of parties to abide by argumentative norms. In this sense, it too is meta-argumentative, even if it is not a first order argument at all. We see this not only with *ad baculum* threats and *ad hominem* abuse, but with overt acts of dismissing interlocutors from an

exchange—as in the case of *ad ridiculum*. The objective, consistently, is that the failure to rise to the level of argument underscores para-argument's function as norm-enforcement. Alternately, overt acts of inclusion, promotion, and praise also function as para-argumentative endorsements of elements of arguments that have been meta-argumentatively assessed as exemplary.

The looming question, so far only indirectly addressed here, is what the norms of meta-argument bearing on intentionally making bad arguments might be. For, it might have seemed something of a truism that one ought to defend their standpoint, and the meta-arguments for bad arguments (and para-arguments, in particular) seem to violate that. We haven't the space for a full discussion of these questions here. We can say, however, that since meta-argument and para-argument often concern and are reasons for giving bad arguments *about* arguments, and that those bad arguments arise as a consequence, it is likely that the norms of first order argument are not up to the task to explain these strategies. What is necessary, we think, is a *meta-argumentative turn* in argumentation theory, if we are to accurately theorize these phenomena.

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