

# Argument Evaluation: If your Snark be a Boojum... An Essay in Three Fits

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Article abstract

In this essay, I make a plea for a wide-ranging, open perspective on the evaluation of arguments. This involves a more flexible understanding of what fallacies are and for what arguments may be used. I acknowledge the great wealth of argumentation theory, but bemoan the lack of systematic, repeatable, and explainable evaluation procedures. I then go on to introduce the works which contribute to this special issue and explain how they assist in the fulfilment of my hopes.

# Argument Evaluation: If your Snark be a Boojum...An Essay in Three Fits

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I make a plea for a wide-ranging, open perspective on the evaluation of arguments. This involves a more flexible understanding of what fallacies are and for what arguments may be used. I acknowledge the great wealth of argumentation theory, but bemoan the lack of systematic, repeatable, and explainable evaluation procedures. I then go on to introduce the works which contribute to this special issue and explain how they assist in the fulfilment of my hopes.

**Résumé:** Dans cet essai, je plaide en faveur d'une perspective large et ouverte sur l'évaluation des arguments. Cela implique une compréhension plus flexible de ce que sont les sophismes et des arguments qui peuvent être utilisés. Je reconnais la grande richesse de la théorie de l'argumentation, mais je déplore le manque de procédures d'évaluation systématiques, reproductibles et explicables. Je présente ensuite les travaux qui contribuent à ce numéro spécial et explique comment ils contribuent à la réalisation de mes espoirs.

***Fit the first.*** (By way of introduction)

Argument evaluation is a fundamental activity for every thinking human, not just for theorists of argument. We all do it, we are actually rather good at it, most of the time (when we are not simply out to confirm our own biases, agree with our friends, or thoughtlessly disparage the views of people we don't like, of course).

The more technical evaluation of arguments is traditionally centred around the hunt for fallacies. These fallacies, I shall claim, are the Snarks of the philosophical world. Could we not comfortably exchange the two words in Carroll's description?

*For the Snark's a peculiar creature, that won't*

*Be caught in a commonplace way.*

*Do all that you know, and try all that you don't:*

*Not a chance must be wasted to-day!*<sup>1</sup>

A peculiar creature indeed! Do we know yet how to catch one? That's a good question, to which we shall return. Have we done all that we know and tried all that we don't? I think perhaps we have, especially the latter. Yet, still, the very nature of our prey remains uncertain. Is a fallacy a logical error, a dialectical impropriety, an unpersuasive argument, an erroneous way of thinking? Is it all of these at once? After all, some Snarks are Boojums, so, presumably, others are not. All Snarks, one assumes, must have something in common, some shared snarkiness, which marks them out as Snarks rather than any other creature. What though could be the quality which links the variety of objects of investigation to which the name fallacy has been applied?

I shall suggest that we can frame the notion of fallacy in such a way that a thread of unification stitches together these very different kinds into the fabric of a useable concept, and I do so by defining them thus: all fallacies are negative evaluations. By thus applying the word, the fallacy is no longer an argument, not a form of argument, nor the breaking of a rule, it is not an unacceptable move in a dialogue; it is rather the negative evaluation of any of these things. There are, then, as many ways to hunt a fallacy as there are ways to evaluate: we may seek it with thimbles or seek it with care, pursue it with forks and hope<sup>2</sup>, but however we proceed, we have found it when once we determine to evaluate an argument in a negative way. Such an evaluation can only rest on some manner of flaw, and it can only come about through our searching for it. Fallaciousness, then, is a sort of Schrödinger's Snark: it is there or it is not by the very act of seeking it out. An argument is neither fair nor foul, neither fallacious nor fallacy-free until we carry out an observation.

This leads to three important questions. Firstly, what is it that we are to evaluate? Secondly, how are we to do so? And finally, why are we doing it at all? The remainder of this fit will expand a little on

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<sup>1</sup> All mentions of Snarks refer to Lewis Carroll's poem 'The Hunting of the Snark' (1974). This stanza is from fit the fourth (p. 68). Readers unfamiliar with this work of genius are strongly recommended to attend to that oversight at once.

<sup>2</sup> Methods of Snark hunting first listed in fit the third (p.64) and oft-repeated thereafter.

these questions and show how the asking of them itself may lead to some interesting conclusions. Might it be that we learn more about our Snarks by contemplating our hunt for them than we ever would by carrying it out, even to a successful conclusion? The painted scene of the hunt, with hounds, horses, and a madding crowd, is, after all, a more pleasing decoration than the head of the prey, framed, mounted, and hung above the fireplace in the lodge.

Naturally, a fallacy cannot be just any negative evaluation. One might be tempted to respond to a negative evaluation at work with the statement: “that’s a fallacy!”, but that isn’t quite what we want to get at here. Within the world of research into arguing and arguments, a fallacy must be a negative evaluation of a piece of argumentation. This just shifts the question to: what is argumentation? This shift, however, is very useful. Now we have arrived at the point where we can answer: “whatever you want it to be”. Whether we consider argumentation to be the general practice of offering reasons, or a more closely defined activity with a set goal; whether we count individual argument structures or more extended chunks of discourse as argumentations, we can all agree that when once we evaluate one of them negatively, we have found ourselves a fallacy. A fallacy then is a negative evaluation of argumentation, whatever we believe that to be.

One objection to this might be: “but then we should all mean something different from each other when we talk of fallacies.” That would actually represent an improvement on the present situation though – currently, we do all mean something different from each other when we talk of “fallacies”, only we don’t realise that, or don’t wish to acknowledge it, and so discuss at cross-purposes hour after hour, conference after conference. At least, under this proposal we might be made more aware of the differences. More importantly, it would also stop one person meaning very different things from himself when using the word at different times.

This proposal is not entirely novel, of course. The pragma-dialectical conception of the fallacy is anything which breaks the established rules of discourse for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004). Thus, when a negative evaluation of a piece of argumentation takes place, it is because it violates those rules, and is, therefore, by definition, fallacious. This approach is not

universally embraced because pragma-dialectics is not universally embraced, and it seems to suggest that other descriptions of fallacy are mistaken: its authors have been accused of “solving an honourable and difficult problem by changing the subject” (Woods 2007, p. 88). That is at least in part because such a conception seems to rule out the “traditional” fallacies – what Woods refers to as the “Gang of Eighteen”. It is fair to point out, however, that Woods himself has no better answer to the question of what fallacies are than to suggest that there may not be any. The proposal to apply the term fallacy to any negative evaluation, howsoever it be made, has the advantage of retaining all the terms used traditionally, and much-beloved of informal logicians. Not only them: students and teachers alike seem particularly attached to the idea of recognisable, named fallacy types; easily-taught and easily-remembered. Let them cling on happily, so only they can show how they have achieved the negative evaluation a fallacy represents.

This second question is perhaps more difficult. How should the evaluation be conducted? Perhaps the reason that the Bellman and his crew had such an eclectic and surprising list of methods for catching their prey was that they knew so little of its nature, and perhaps they all imagined it rather differently. Certainly, they set off in differing directions to look for the Snark, competitors rather than crewmates once the hunt had begun. Is this also true of the fallacy seekers?

I shall say more on this in the fit that follows and have already said a good deal more than most scholars have wished to hear in my own works (e.g. Hinton 2020, 2021; Hinton & Wagemans 2022). For sure, there are many methods and many directions whither the evaluator may direct his footsteps, but just as we all head North, South, East or West depending on our errands and the day, and no-one thinks it right to keep only to one point of the compass for all occasions, I shall suggest that all ways are good be they chosen to match the matter we study. Fallacies, that is to say, lie in all directions, let us only remember our purpose in seeking them.

Lastly, then, and this is very much related to the previous questions, comes the why. To even begin to answer this question would be to take a plunge into the cold and cloudy waters of human motivation, with no better device for floatation than the burden-shifting

“why not?”. No reason is given for the quest for a Snark beyond the Bellman’s insistence that “T’is your glorious duty to seek it”<sup>3</sup>, and perhaps argumentation theorists are similarly compelled. It would be better to state, rather, that the range of possible reasons is magnificently broad, and the methods used must strive to be equal to it. To be clearer, we may want to evaluate arguments because they are used against our own position, or because they are used in favour of it; we may want to know if they assist in delivering the desired outcome of the discourse type, or only if they can contribute to the formation of true beliefs; just as we may be assessing an individual, a group, an epoch or a genre; a single line from which an implication can be inferred, or a rambling text from which the sense must be distilled. We may be motivated by the desire to support, to disprove, to discredit, or to learn; we may be striving for justice or for power. What is vital is that our choice of method fit well to our purpose, that we take the appropriate tool for the job; and remember that while hammers may sometimes hit nails upon the head, they can also be made to force round pegs into square holes.

***Fit the second.*** (By way of elaboration)

What then of the theories and methods that we have? I maintain that real procedures for evaluation, as opposed to theoretical principles upon which they might be based, are very scarce indeed. The most commonly advised method appears to be “apply the principles”.

The principles themselves, it has to be said, are mostly excellent. Whilst problems may arise in their application and combination, and debates may ferment around their relative importance and internal coherence, the various approaches to the assessment and analysis of argumentation cover a great expanse of intellectual space and can be said to provide something for everyone. The recent collaborative paper on norms for public argument (Zenker et al. 2024) makes clear this wealth of theoretical possibility. Within it, standards for arguments founded in norms of linguistics, logic, epistemology, dialectic, and rhetoric are discussed, to say nothing of the consideration given to rules which are based on particular contexts, such as politics and

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<sup>3</sup> A duty set out in fit the fourth (p.68), along with the reminder that “England expects” – doubtless Canada and the Netherlands do too, among other states.

the law. It has long been my position that elements can be taken from each of the aforementioned and used to create a multi-functional tool, a veritable Swiss Army knife for the discerning analyst.

For instance, who would not agree with Johnson & Blair (2006) that premises ought to be relevant, acceptable, and sufficient? Who would deny that breaking the rules of pragma-dialectics will make it harder to resolve disputes? The linguistic normative model (LNMA) of Lilian Bermejo-Luque (2011) is a very fine, and perhaps insufficiently recognised, piece of scholarship aiding the appraisal of argumentation. I could go on. I shall not.

That we have the theoretical resources is not in doubt; but are we able to utilise them fully? Are we able to conduct evaluations that are systematic, repeatable, transparent and explainable; evaluations the every step of which can be identified and assessed in its turn? The mighty work on argument schemes of Walton, Reed & Macagno (2008) is never entirely clear on how, exactly, the analyst is to identify with which of the many schemes he is faced in the argument before him.

In her thorough and rigorous practical guide, Trudy Govier gives the following advice:

You first put the argument into a standard form so that you can see exactly what its premises and conclusion are. Then you explore whether its premises are acceptable. [...] Ask yourself whether the premises are relevant to the conclusion. [...] Ask yourself whether the premises, taken together, provide good and sufficient grounds for the conclusion. (2010, pp. 94–95)

This is certainly a method, but it is not yet a clearly-defined, step-by-step procedure. It would be possible to reach very different evaluations without being exactly sure why.

An example of what I mean by a precisely-described, repeatable procedure can be found in Jean Wagemans's Argument Type Identification Procedure (2023). It has the advantage of being largely neutral as to what arguments are for or why one might want to identify the type of one, and fits quite comfortably with various approaches to argumentation. It is, however, rather more complicated than simply looking at an argument and deciding for oneself which pattern it best reflects, and it does only identify types – but still, I believe it to be a good start.

So, the appeal I make here is for the embracing of all these approaches and perspectives, each valued according to the specifications of the task before the evaluator; but also for the development of procedures which allow the evaluations so made to be fully explainable.

The biggest obstacle to this, I believe, is in the differing views on what arguments are and wherefore they are. In pragma-dialectics, argumentation serves within a critical discussion to resolve a dispute, and where, in fact, it does just that, pragma-dialectics provides excellent tools; but it ought to be obvious that that is not all for which arguments are used. Equally, though arguments may be intended to increase knowledge, they are not always so intended, and in such cases judging them by the standards of epistemic norms, while still possible, is somewhat missing the point. My appeal, then, includes an implicit plea for a wider and more forgiving view of argument function.

Clearly, one cannot discover how well something works if one doesn't know what it is supposed to do. There have been various suggestions as to what the functions and purposes of an argument might be (e.g. Asen 2005), as well as studies into how less obvious ones might look (e.g. Hample & Irions 2015), but there are clear advantages for scholars who choose to focus on one. The best arguments in favour of the multi-functionality of argumentation, however, come, somewhat surprisingly for those who haven't read it, from Jean Goodwin's magnificently incisive paper 'Argument Has no Function' (2007). In it, she explains that the title refers to a particular conception of function: that claimed as arising from the context of the shared goals of participants in certain types of dialogue. Goodwin does state that "Argument is functional, but in odd ways" (2007, p. 76), and mentions the possibility of argument as an activity serving to maintain relationships, for example, rather than resolve disputes. This is of great encouragement to those of us attracted to oddity, for whom a full characterisation of the eccentric functionality of arguments is long overdue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The reader may be aware that such a thing was presented at OSSA in May, 2024.



Now, supporters of frameworks of argumentation theory which rely on an acknowledged function of arguments of the type Goodwin criticises may well reply that they are not interested in the use of arguments solely to maintain relationships, and, thus, their evaluative tools do not account for them and do not need to do so. They might also reply that using arguments in such a way is merely to catch a ride along with the justificatory-persuasive mainstream, and define instances of it as “incidental uses” (Blair 2005, p. 146). That is all well and good. It does not mean, however, that others should not wish to study and perhaps evaluate those uses. Neither does it mean that those others must accept that claimed primacy of the dialogical function and bend their own analyses to the rules of its teleology. Indeed, there is a certain circularity in basing the function upon the discourse type in that way, hinted at by Goodwin when she notes that taking the context of the argumentation directly from the conception of the activity is “suspiciously like assuming the conclusion” (2007, p. 74).

The purpose of this essay, however, is not to criticise or condemn any conception of argument, nor to praise or promote any other. Rather, it is to encourage a broad view of what arguments are, why they are, and how they might be evaluated; it is to call for continued work on evaluation and deny that the current state of affairs is sufficient for our purposes; it is to urge scholars from all traditions to see the value in other perspectives and seek to incorporate insights drawn thence into their own thinking; and it is, primarily, indeed, to introduce the collection of papers which make up this special issue. Let us remember, then, that while they began in a state of mutual suspicion: “Such friends, as the Beaver and Butcher became, / Have seldom if ever been known”<sup>5</sup> and seek to emulate them, lest we follow the fate of the Baker, who “had softly and suddenly vanished away - / For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A happy state reached after their fright at the sound of the Jubjub in fit the fifth (p.82).

<sup>6</sup> This sad acknowledgement is the last line of the poem and confirms the reader’s worst suspicion about the Baker’s end (p.96).

***Fit the third.*** (By way of exemplification)

The papers which make up this thematic issue consider the evaluation of arguments in rather different ways. That is not to say that they have different methods of evaluation, although that too is the case, but that they are concerned with the evaluation of different things and for different purposes. There are contributions which study arguments made in a certain form, or with a certain purpose; there are others which address a particular aspect of arguing; and still others which analyse arguments of a particular type. Indeed, several of the articles described below combine interests in more than one of these elements. This variety, I suggest, lends support to the preceding claims. Argumentation and the many arguments which go to make it up are, like the arguers who use them, complex, diverse, and many-splendored. Approaches to the evaluation of an activity which is the very essence of what it is to be human ought to be catholic, open-ended, and flexible; for only then can they be truly brought to focus on what is of greatest moment. If we are to encompass all the answers to the question of why evaluate, we must allow that there are many possibilities as to the how, and many too when it comes to the what.

The first article in the issue, “As Syllable from Sound: Evaluating Auditory Arguments”, by Gabrijela Kišiček and Martin Hinton, explores the possibilities for the evaluation of non-verbal arguments. The authors seek to show that sounds can be analysed evaluatively without simply being propositionalised. They provide a typology of sounds which may feature in argumentative contexts and discuss how the Comprehensive Assessment Procedure for Natural Argumentation (CAPNA) (Hinton 2021), an evaluation tool designed to be applied to linguistic input, can be adapted for other modes, specifically the auditory. An updated version of the CAPNA with such a capacity is then applied to three example auditory arguments and the resulting assessments are discussed.

Marcin Bedkowski and Kinga Rogowska in “Systemic means of persuasion and argument evaluation: Insights from the corpus of competitive debates” use evidence from corpora to illustrate the role of systemic means of persuasion in the process of argument evaluation. In particular, this means a focus on what they refer to as “regress

stoppers”, moves designed to prevent a slide into an infinite regress of justification for claims. The four key categories of strategy studied are those used for assuring, guarding, discounting, and evaluating. The authors consider how such means of persuasion are related to the Toulmin argument structure and to the heuristics of real world argument evaluation. Their detailed study of corpus data leads them to conclusions emphasising the importance of both phrasing and linguistic framing in determining the acceptability of arguments.

In their work “When Meaning Becomes Controversial: Critical Questions for Assessing Semantic Arguments”, Jakub Pruš and Fabrizio Macagno develop criteria for the assessment of classificatory, semantic arguments. Using insights from both the ancient tradition of dialectic and modern research, the authors formulate eight criteria which can be expressed as critical questions. These criteria are illustrated and tested on examples of semantic controversy involving the definitions of such diverse words as ‘racism’, ‘peace’, ‘golf’, ‘feminism’, and ‘vehicle’, each of which represents a different set of problems in semantic interpretation. The authors see the critical questions as providing an evaluation strategy for semantic arguments, thus showing the necessity for detailed procedures tailored to particular kinds of argumentation.

Francesca Ervas & Oriana Mosca in “An Experimental Study on the Evaluation of Metaphorical *Ad Hominem* Arguments” take a very different approach by conducting empirical research into the way that recipients of arguments actually evaluate them. Using a selection of arguments containing a metaphorical *ad hominem*, they test the responses of participants concerning understandability, convincingness, emotional appeal, logical relation, and ambiguity, and whether they believed in the conclusions of the given arguments. The results show that novel metaphors are more likely to lead to an argument’s being assessed as fallacious than conventional ones, and also that positive metaphors – *ad hominem* supports rather than attacks – make an argument more likely to be considered sound than negative ones.

Finally, in “Sincere and insincere arguing”, Davide Dalla Rosa and Filippo Mancini use the concept of the complex speech act, as put forward in the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, and its associated felicity conditions to draw a distinction between

acts of arguing which are sincere and those which are insincere. This division can be “explained in terms of the correspondence between the beliefs and commitments of the speaker, or in terms of the outcome of her argument evaluation.” The authors examine, in particular, the discourse type they call “cooperative inquiry,” where they claim that arguments are employed in speech acts other than arguing, and explore the impact of a speaker’s argument evaluation on the sincere/insincere division.

These works provide a broad view of how argumentation theorists go about the assessment of arguments and the types of tools which they use to do so. Theoretical inspiration is taken from classical logic, argument scheme theory, Toulmin’s analysis of argument structure, speech act theory, pragma-dialectics, and beyond to yield a comprehensive, varied, and vibrant landscape of argument evaluation techniques. The reader is invited to compare, to contrast, and, ultimately, to contribute to the multifarious strands of this fascinating conversation.

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