Professor Fisher on Suppositions*

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ABSTRACT: I first support Alec Fisher's thesis that premises and conclusions in arguments can be unasserted first by arguing in its favor that only it preserves our intuition that it is at least possible that two arguments share the same premises and the same conclusion although not everything that is asserted in the one is also asserted in the other and second by answering two objections that might be raised against it. I then draw from Professor Fisher's thesis the consequence that in suppositional arguments the falsity (or unacceptability) of a supposition does not tell unfavorably in the evaluation of the argument, because the falsity (or unacceptability) of a (nonredundant) premise counts against an argument if and only if that premise is asserted. Finally, I observe that, despite the fact that they are neither expressed nor even alluded to, implicit assumptions in arguments are always asserted, unless the conclusion, but none of the explicit premises, is unasserted. Hence, apart from an exceptional case of the kind just mentioned, the falsity (or unacceptability) of implicit assumptions always counts against an argument.

KEY WORDS: Fisher, supposition, assertion, argument, premise, conclusion, evaluation, implicit assumption, reasoning.

> ... each constituent proposition is asserted in (an) argument: either as one of the premises or as the conclusion (Copi and Cohen, 1990, p. 27).

> ... a person who puts forward an argument asserts both the premises and the conclusion... (Hitchcock, 1983, p. 33).

> In a genuine inference, the premise(s) and conclusion are actually asserted. That is, they all are claimed to be true (Nolt, 1984, p. 30).

> What we are saying here essentially is that every argument actually makes two claims: (1) that if certain statements or premises are true, then a certain conclusion is justified; and (2) that the statements or premises are indeed true and that, therefore, the conclusion is justified (Manicas and Kruger, 1976, p. 48).

What is the difference between "If A, then B" and "A, therefore B"? In the second, the argument, don't we claim that the premise A and the conclusion B are both true? We assert both A and B, besides claiming that since A is true, so also is B (Freeman, 1988, p. 24).

> What we shall mean by an *argument* (or reasoning, or inference, or proof) involves two essential features. In the first place, the person who presents the

argument must be claiming that if certain things (the premises) are true, then something else (the conclusion) should be true also. That is, the person is claiming that the premises would support the conclusion, would indicate that it is true. In the second place, the person must be claiming that the premises are indeed true (perhaps the person does not *explicitly* make this claim about each of the premises, for some of them may be assumed but left unstated; but at any rate the person is *committed* to the claim that each premise is true). ... (Barker, 1989, p. 6).

These quotations must suffice to suggest that logicians are in general agreement that the premises and conclusions of arguments must be asserted. In opposition to them, Alec Fisher (Fisher, 1989) argues for the thesis that some premises and conclusions of arguments are unasserted. Although I shall express minor disagreements with Professor Fisher, my main purposes in this paper are to offer additional defense of his thesis and to draw consequences from it.

I. CAN THERE BE UNASSERTED PREMISES AND CONCLUSIONS?

According to Professor Fisher, a supposition is an unasserted premise: "it is put forward for consideration, so that we may draw out its implications, usually with a view to accepting or rejecting it after some argumentation" (Fisher, 1989, p. 403). Although this may create the impression that, within an argument, it is only premises that may be unasserted, what Professor Fisher says later about 'therefore's loss, in suppositional contexts, of its usual assertive force (Fisher, 1989, pp. 408–409), makes it clear that his thesis is that conclusions as well as premises may be unasserted.

The following argument supports this thesis. Intuitively, it seems that it is at least possible that two arguments may share all the same premises and the same conclusion although a premise or conclusion that is asserted in one is not in the other. For example, consider these two texts:

Text 1:   All turkeys have backbones, so your grandmother has a backbone, since she is a turkey.

Text 2:   All turkeys have backbones, so your grandmother has a backbone, on the supposition that she is a turkey.

In Text 1 the premises, 'All turkeys have backbones' and 'She (your grandmother) is a turkey', and the conclusion, 'Your grandmother has a backbone', are all asserted; in Text 2 only the premise 'All turkeys have backbones' is asserted. Intuitively, it seems at least possible that Texts 1 and 2 express two arguments that share the same two premises and the same conclusion and differ only in that the conclusion and the premise 'She (your grandmother) is a turkey' are asserted in the argument expressed in Text 1 but not in that expressed in Text 2.

This intuition is preserved on Professor Fisher's hypothesis that premises and

conclusions can be unasserted, but not on its denial. If premises and conclusions can be unasserted, then it is at least possible that two arguments may share the same premises and the same conclusion although not everything that is asserted in the one argument is also asserted in the other. For instance, it is, on Professor Fisher's hypothesis, at least possible that Texts 1 and 2 both express arguments correctly analyzable thus:

Premise 1.   All turkeys have backbones.
Premise 2.   She (your grandmother) is a turkey.
Conclusion.   Your grandmother has a backbone.

By contrast, this same intuition is violated on the hypothesis that premises and/or conclusions must be asserted. For in that case, if assertion is removed from a premise, it cannot remain a premise, since premises must be asserted. And if assertion is removed from a conclusion, it can no longer be a conclusion, since conclusions must be asserted. For example, on the hypothesis that premises and/or conclusions must be asserted, Text 1 would still express the argument analyzed above, but Text 2 could not. If premises must be asserted, 'She (your grandmother) is a turkey' can no longer be a premise, because it is unasserted in Text 2. If conclusions must be asserted, 'Your grandmother has a backbone' can no longer be the conclusion, because it too is unasserted inText 2. To avoid either an unasserted premise or an unasserted conclusion, the two unasserted propositions must be joined to create the more complex, asserted proposition 'Your grandmother has a backbone, on the supposition that she is a turkey', which becomes the new conclusion. Text 2, then, expresses the argument

Premise.   All turkeys have backbones.
Conclusion.   Your grandmother has a backbone, on the supposition that she
               is a turkey.

Clearly, the argument expressed by Text 2 now differs from that expressed by Text 1: one of the old premises is missing, and the conclusion is now a more complex proposition. So, on the hypothesis that premises and/or conclusions must be asserted, Texts 1 and 2 cannot possibly express arguments that share the same premises and the same conclusion.

So, our intuition that it is at least possible that two arguments (like those in Texts 1 and 2) have the same premises and the same conclusion even though not everything that is asserted in the one argument is also asserted in the other is preserved on Professor Fisher's hypothesis but not on its denial.

I turn now to two objections that might be made to Professor Fisher's thesis.

Objection 1. There can be no such thing as reasoning either from unasserted premises or to an unasserted conclusion. For in reasoning, the conclusion and all the premises must be asserted.

Reply. There can be reasoning from unasserted premises to unasserted

conclusions. My reasons are two: (1) If there cannot be reasoning from unasserted premises to unasserted conclusions, how are we to understand the illatives that are used to connect unasserted propositions in some texts? For instance, consider Example 3 on p. 409 (Fisher, 1989):

Suppose (as Aristotle believed) that the heavier a body is, the faster it falls to the ground and suppose that we have two bodies, a heavy one called $\boxed{M}$ and a light one called $\boxed{m}$. Now suppose that $\boxed{M}$ and $\boxed{m}$ are joined together $\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$. Now what happens? Well, $\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$ is heavier than $\boxed{M}$ alone, so by our initial assumption it should fall faster than $\boxed{M}$ alone. But in the joined body $\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$, $\boxed{m}$ and $\boxed{M}$ will each tend to fall just as fast as before they were joined, so $\boxed{m}$ will act as a 'brake' on $\boxed{M}$ and $\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$ will fall slower than $\boxed{M}$ alone. Hence it follows from our initial assumption that $\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$ will fall both *faster* and *slower* than $\boxed{M}$ alone. Since this is absurd our initial assumption must be *false.*

The illative 'so' occurs in the fourth sentence, linking the unasserted propositions '$\boxed{\frac{m}{M}}$ is heavier than $\boxed{M}$ alone' and 'It should fall faster than $\boxed{M}$ alone'. Ordinarily, 'so' would tell us that what precedes it is a premise and that what follows it is a conclusion. Does it tell us the same thing here, or does the fact that the propositions on either side of it are unasserted make a difference? If the latter, what does 'so' tell us? 'So' recurs in the next sentence, linking two more unasserted propositions. If it does not tell us that the one preceding it is a premise and the one following it a conclusion, what does it tell us? The illative 'Hence it follows ... that' appears in the next sentence, linking two unasserted propositions. Ordinarily, it would tell us that what precedes it is a premise and that what succeeds it is a conclusion. If premises and conclusions must be asserted, it cannot tell us that here. So, what does it tell us?

It seems obvious that these illatives are not meaningless in this text: they tell us something about how the propositions preceding them are related to those following them. More specifically, they tell us that the propositions preceding them are related to those following them as premises are related to conclusions. In other words, these illatives identify premises and conclusions in this text just as they would elsewhere: 'so' and 'Hence it follows ... that' tell us that the unasserted propositions preceding them are premises and that the unasserted propositions following them are conclusions. If so, then, because there is reasoning wherever there is a premise and a conclusion, 'so' and 'Hence it follows ... that' here indicate the presence of reasoning, even though the

premises and conclusions they indicate are all unasserted.

(2) The authors of some texts explicitly identify some unasserted propositions as conclusions drawn from other unasserted propositions. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from one of Alexander Hamilton's contributions to *The Federalist Papers*:

> The improbability of the existence of a force equal to that object (namely, the object of the national rulers' subduing the resistance of the great body of the people) has been discussed and demonstrated in different parts of these papers; but that the futility of the objection under consideration (namely, the objection that, by giving the Union the power to regulate the time and manner of elections of Congressmen and Senators, the Constitution will enable the national government to secure a monopoly of the federal administration to the landed class) may appear in the strongest light, it shall be conceded for a moment that such a force might exist and the national government shall be supposed to be in the actual possession of it. What will be the conclusion? With a disposition to invade the essential rights of the community and with the means of gratifying that disposition, is it presumable that the persons who were actuated by it would amuse themselves in the ridiculous task of fabricating election laws for securing a preference to a favorite class of men? Would they not be likely to prefer a conduct better adapted to their own immediate aggrandizement? Would they not rather boldly resolve to perpetuate themselves in office by one decisive act of usurpation, than to trust to precarious expedients which, in spite of all the precautions that might accompany them, might terminate in the dismission, disgrace, and ruin of their author? Would they not fear that citizens, not less tenacious than conscious of their rights, would flock from the remotest extremes of their respective States to the places of election, to overthrow their tyrants and to substitute men who would be disposed to avenge the violated majesty of the people? (Hamilton, 1961, pp. 371–372)

Having supposed that the national government possesses sufficient force to subdue the resistance of the majority of the people, Hamilton asks to what conclusion this supposition leads ("What is the conclusion?") and then, in reply, specifies (by means of a series of rhetorical questions) the conclusions that follow. He thus explicitly identifies at least one unasserted proposition as a conclusion drawn from at least one other unasserted proposition. So, on the assumption that where a conclusion is drawn there is reasoning, Hamilton has explicitly informed us that he is reasoning from and to unasserted propositions.

For these two reasons, then, I conclude that there can be reasoning from unasserted premises to unasserted conclusions.

Objection 2. There can be no such thing as an argument whose premises or conclusion is unasserted, because whenever someone argues from one or more premises to a conclusion, he infers his conclusion from his premises; and he can infer a conclusion from premises only if he asserts both.[1]

Reply. In reply to the preceding objection, I argued that there can be reasoning from unasserted premises to unasserted conclusions. Now, there are important similarities between reasoning in which the premises and conclusions are, and reasoning in which they are not, all asserted: both are instances of reasoning from one or more premises to a conclusion; both can be indicated by illatives, like 'so' and 'Hence it follows ... that'; both can be deductive or inductive; and both can be evaluated with respect to the logical relation between the premises

and conclusion. These similarities are important enough to deserve recognition by means of a common designation. But there is no English noun that fits both kinds of reasoning as well as do 'argument' and 'inference'. So, if 'argument' and 'inference' do not presently fit both kinds of reasoning, their meanings should be broadened so that they do.[2] We can then distinguish those arguments in which the premises and conclusion are all asserted from those in which they are not. Thus, more is to be gained in simplicity and economy that lost in distinctions by having a convenient noun like 'argument' or 'inference' designate the smallest unit of reasoning, whether its component propositions are asserted or not (see Fisher, 1988, p. 86).

II. WHAT FOLLOWS IF PREMISES AND CONCLUSIONS CAN BE UNASSERTED?

Assuming that an adequate defense has been given of Professor Fisher's thesis that arguments' premises and conclusions can be unasserted, the next question is: What follows from it? I wish to consider first what difference Professor Fisher's thesis makes to the evaluation of arguments and then what further difference that makes to whether implicit assumptions are asserted.

A. The evaluation of arguments

There are at least two ways in which a logician evaluates an argument: with respect to the truth (or acceptability) of its (nonredundant) premises, and with respect to the logical relation between its premises and conclusion. The first of these is affected by the truth of Professor Fisher's thesis. For if it is true, as he claims, that premises and conclusions can be unasserted, then the question arises how an argument is to be evaluated with respect to the truth (or acceptability) of its premises, if at least some of them are unasserted. Given that the falsity (or unacceptability) of a (nonredundant) premise would detract from an argument's worth if that premise were asserted, would it have the same effect if the premise were unasserted?

The answer to this question seems to be that the falsity (or unacceptability) of a (nonredundant) premise counts against the argument if and only if the premise is asserted. Consider again Texts 1 and 2. Intuitively, it seems that the argument as given in Text 1 is bad in a way in which that given in Text 2 is not. What accounts for the difference? Although the premise 'She (your grandmother) is a turkey' is false in both instances, its falsity counts against the argument when, as in Text 1, it is asserted, but not when, as in Text 2, it is unasserted. Similarly, the argument expressed in Text 3

Text 3.   Since $3 > 7$ and $2 > 3$, $2 > 7$,

is bad, although that expressed in Text 4

Text 4.   Suppose 3 > 7 and 2 > 3. Then 2 > 7.

is not, even though the two arguments have the same false premises and the
same conclusion. The difference is that in Text 3 the false premises are asserted,
whereas in Text 4 they are not. The falsity of the premises counts against the
argument when, but only when, they are asserted. From these and similar cases
we may generalize that the falsity (or unacceptability) of a (nonredundant)
premise counts unfavorably in the evaluation of an argument when that premise
is asserted; as long as a premise is entertained hypothetically, or as a supposi-
tion, its falsity (or unacceptability) does not constitute a defect in the argument.

B. The assertion of implicit assumptions

This leads to a further consequence, about which I disagree with Professor
Fisher. He denies that implicit assumptions are ever asserted:

> Argumentation often contains *implicit assumptions*: these are propositions which are
> *taken for granted as true* by a participant (or possibly several) but which are not
> actually mentioned at all. Such an implicit assumption is not asserted (because it is not
> mentioned at all) but the participant who assumes it would be prepared to assert it, or
> would have to, if it were drawn to this (or her) attention. (Fisher, 1989, p. 406; see
> also Fisher, 1988, p. 83)

I assume that in the argument expressed in

Text 5.   On the supposition that all pigs have wings, some winged
                 things are bipeds.

'Some pigs are bipeds' is what Professor Fisher calls an 'implicit assumption' –
i.e., it is a premise that, because it is neither expressed nor even alluded to, is not
mentioned in the text. Because it is not mentioned, Professor Fisher concludes
that it is not asserted.

This is a sensible conclusion to draw as long as one assumes that any asserted
proposition must be expressed, or at least alluded to. But is this assumption true?
If it were, then 'Some pigs are bipeds' would be unasserted in Text 5. And if it
were unasserted, then, because – as we concluded in the preceding section – a
(nonredundant) premise's falsity (or unacceptability) counts against an argument
only if that premise is asserted, the falsity (or unacceptability) of 'Some pigs are
bipeds' would not count against the argument. Is this consequence of Professor
Fisher's assumption true? To ascertain whether it is, let us compare the effect
the falsity of the argument's two premises would have on its value. First, what if
the argument's explicit supposition, 'All pigs have wings', were false? The
argument's value in that case would be unaffected, since the supposition is
unasserted, and so its falsity would not count against the argument. Now, what if
the argument's implicit assumption, 'Some pigs are bipeds', were false? Would
the argument's value still be unaffected? If it were false that some pigs are
bipeds, then no pigs would be bipeds; and if no pigs were bipeds, then the

argument's conclusion, 'Some winged things are bipeds', would no longer follow from its supposition, 'All pigs have wings'. The argument's value, then, would be adversely affected by the falsity of its implicit assumption. So, Professor Fisher's assumption that any asserted proposition must be mentioned – i.e., expressed, or at least alluded to – leads to the consequence that the falsity of the implicit assumption 'Some pigs are bipeds' would have no effect on the value of the argument in Text 5; but that consequence is false; and hence so is Professor Fisher's assumption. A proposition may be asserted although it is neither expressed nor even alluded to. Let me reinforce this point by contrasting Text 5 with

> Text 6.   On the supposition that all pigs have wings, some winged things are mammals.

This text's argument is free of the defect in Text 5's. Its implicit assumption is 'Some pigs are mammals'. Had that assumption been false, that would have counted against the argument; but it is true, and that is why the argument in Text 6 is not defective in the same way as the argument in Text 5. This contrast between Texts 5 and 6 obtains if, and only if, the argument's implicit assumptions are asserted.

These and many similar cases tempt one to generalize that implicit assumptions are always asserted. For, it seems, in order to be unasserted, a proposition would have to be at least alluded to as unasserted; and in that case it would not be implicit. For example, when the assumption 'Some pigs are bipeds' is implicit, as in Text 5, it is asserted. But when it is unasserted, it is explicit, either because it is alluded to as unasserted, as in

> Text 7.   On the supposition that all pigs have wings, some winged things are bipeds, provided we make one further supposition.

where the phrase 'one further supposition' alludes (obliquely) to the assumption as unasserted; or because it is expressed and at the same time said to be unasserted, as in

> Text 8.   On the supposition that all pigs have wings, some winged things are bipeds, provided some pigs are bipeds.

where the assumption is expressed by the final clause and marked as unexpressed by the conjunction 'provided'.

This generalization, however, would be false; for in arguments whose conclusions are unasserted and all of whose explicit premises are asserted, some implicit assumptions may be unasserted. For instance, in

> Text 9.   All turkeys have backbones, so your grandmother would have a backbone.

the modal auxiliary 'would' tells us that the conclusion 'Your grandmother has a backbone' is unasserted. Hence, at least one of the argument's premises must be unasserted also. So, since the one explicit premise, 'All turkeys have backbones', is asserted, the remaining premise, the implicit assumption 'Your grandmother is a turkey', is unasserted. Confirmation that it is unasserted is that its falsity does not count against the argument.

From this we may conclude that all implicit assumptions are asserted, unless the conclusion, but none of the explicit premises, is unasserted. We may, then, distinguish implicit from explicit assertions (as Professor Fisher does interrogatively on p. 409: "Someone who asserts this [namely, 'Jim is aware of the fact that his wife is unfaithful'] asserts both that 'Jim is convinced that his wife is unfaithful' and (implicitly?) that 'Jim's wife is unfaithful'").

Even with such qualifications, however, the most we should say of implicit assumptions is that they are asserted. Professor Fisher says, "Implcit assumptions *are believed* by the participant who makes them..." (p. 406), but this is contradicted by the case of someone who does not believe an implicit assumption and yet wishes to create the impression that he does. Suppose, for instance, that someone who does not believe that you are wise, but who wishes to seem to think so, says, "You are sceptical, because whoever is wise is so." His implicit assumption (perhaps better called his 'unexpressed premise', since in this case the arguer does not really assume it) is that you are wise. He asserts it (by leaving it unexpressed); but he does not believe it.

III. CONCLUSION

In this paper I first supported Professor Fisher's thesis that premises and conclusions in arguments can be unasserted, first by arguing in its favor that only it preserves our intuition that it is at least possible that two arguments share the same premises and the same conclusion although not everything that is asserted in the one is also asserted in the other and second by answering two objections that might be raised against it. Having defended Professor Fisher's thesis, I then drew from it the consequence that in suppositional arguments the falsity (or unacceptability) of a supposition does not tell unfavorably in the evaluation of the argument, because the falsity (or unacceptability) of a (nonredundant) premise counts against an argument if and only if that premise is asserted. Finally, I observed that, despite the fact that they are neither expressed nor even alluded to, implicit assumptions in arguments are always asserted, unless the conclusion, but none of the explicit premises, is unasserted. Hence, apart from an exceptional case of the kind just mentioned, the falsity (or unacceptability) of implicit assumptions always counts against an argument.

NOTES

[1] See, for instance, Murray (1933), p. 256, 'infer', *3* and p. 257, 'inference', *1*; and Gove (1966), p. 1158, 'inference', *1*.

[2] The objection and this much of the reply are condensed from Bowles and Gilbert (1979), pp. 62–70.

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