Ifs and buts: Anca Gheaus's flawed argument construction

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Abstract. This is my response to a premise-by-premise argument in Anca Gheaus's "Biological Parenthood: Gestational, Not Genetic."

A rose by the gate

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I went to the website of the academic Anca Gheaus, whom I once saw speak. There I found an article published in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. And I clicked on it. I clicked on it because I associate that journal with good quality controls and reliability and I just wanted to read something which I knew in advance would have been carefully checked. But my jaw dropped when I found this: "I argue as follows," says Gheaus,

> P1. Any account of how we acquire the moral right to parent must be centred, partially or exclusively, in the interest of the child.
>
> P2. A gestational relationship with a child is a better indicator that the interest of the child will be served than is a genetic relationship with the child.
>
> C. Therefore, more moral relevance should be attached to the gestational, than to the genetic, connection when deciding who has the right to parent a biologically related newborn." (Gheaus, 2018: 226)

Should there not be some premise like the one below in order for the conclusion to follow?

If a gestational relationship with a child is a better indicator that the interest of

the child will be served than is a genetic relationship with the child, then more

moral relevance should be attached to the gestational, than to the genetic,

connection…

I would have that as premise 1 instead. (By the way, being self-evident is not an excuse for omitting a premise in logic; and anyway this premise is not self-evident. Here is a tennis analogy by a possible opponent: "There needs to be a 2 point gap between the gestational and the genetic as indicators in order for there to be a moral winner. With a 1 point gap, we say equal moral relevance still." It would not be surprising if a point scoring system was introduced.)

The tradition of analytic philosophy has a reputation for being logical, but I am worried that there are places where one can get past adequate checks on logical capacities within the tradition. One can somehow get past the competition, for jobs and for publications, without having the relevant capacities, even when producing premise-by-premise reconstructions. Of course everyone makes mistakes, but there are a number now in the literature, sometimes much worse than above. That looks dodgy.

Here is what I know or some of it, in case that is helpful. There are valid logical forms and if you use one of those forms in reconstructing your own argument or that of others, then the argument is valid (leaving aside some smoky exceptions). By "valid," I mean that granting the premises the conclusion must be true. That is how we use "valid" in logic. The conclusion follows. The premises themselves may be objectionable.

I shall only present one valid form here. This is the modus ponens form – the

form has a Latin name, which I fear is off-putting for some:

Premise 1: If A, then B.

Premise 2: A.

Therefore:

Conclusion: B.

You can replace A and B with numerous propositions, and given the premises the conclusion follows. It is like filling in a form, though that is probably not why it is called an argument form. I shall use an example with A as "The rose is overgrown" and B as "The rose must be left by the gate." Wherever A occurs in the form specified above, you replace it with "The rose is overgrown" and wherever B occurs, you replace it with "The rose must be left by the gate," perhaps removing the capital letter at the beginning to improve grammar. Thus we get:

Premise 1: If the rose is overgrown, then the rose must be left by the gate.

Premise 2: The rose is overgrown.

Therefore:

Conclusion: The rose must be left by the gate.

Of course, one of the premises may be false, but given the premises the conclusion follows. To repeat: that is what we mean by "valid" in logic.

Now in conversation someone might remark, "The rose must be left by the gate, because it is overgrown." If you try to turn this into an argument manifesting the modus ponens form, which seems a sensible move in various contexts, you are probably going to have to realize certain things. (i) In the conversational remark, the conclusion comes first and the argument for it later, whereas in the modus ponens reconstruction the conclusion comes at the end. The order of conversation is not

necessarily the order of logic. (ii) And you need to add a premise for the argument to take the modus ponens form. Premise 1 above is not stated. In conversation and much writing too, we do not spell out everything. But for various purposes, it seems pointless reconstructing an argument invalidly when it can be changed slightly to make it valid. Just work with a valid version and concentrate on other problems, if they exist. (iii) And a speaker who makes the conversational remark above may be neutral on whether *anything* that is overgrown should be left by the gate, or even opposed to such a rule! The speaker's argument specifically concerns some rose, which they refer to as "the rose."

If you are producing a premise-by-premise reconstruction I recommend learning to ask and answer, "What is the logical form of this argument?" or "What is the inferential rule by which that conclusion follows from that premise, or those premises?" though I have not always kept to this recommendation. I once used an argument reconstruction which seems rather risky to me, but there is a case for learning the basics first.

Reference

Gheaus, A. 2018. Biological Parenthood: Gestational, Not Genetic. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2): 225-240.