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# ARGUMENT CRITICISM AND WILLARDIAN SKEPTICISM

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In a number of works, but particularly *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* (1983), Charles Willard has critically examined the practice of argument criticism, found it wanting, and suggested a new direction for the enterprise. One line of argument in Willard's analysis seems to be this: there are no indubitable (skeptic-proof) foundations for the evaluation of argument, and thus warranted evaluation of argument is not possible; hence argument critics should take up a different task, that of (broadly put) describing arguments. In this essay I want, first, to show that Willard does in fact advance such an argument, and, second, to suggest that to make such claims a coherent whole requires dubious premises which are neither clearly articulated by Willard nor defended by him. A third section considers a possible objection to my analysis, and a fourth offers some conclusions.

## I

One who would describe what Willard believes is at some peril. Willard usually does not attempt to offer anything like definitive formulations of his views, but prefers instead to have a given point receive varied expression in numerous concrete particulars. Hence I purposefully aim here at capturing the gist of a portion of Willard's analysis of argument criticism, without (I hope) becoming too caught up in the specific wording Willard might employ in any given instance. And

notice: a *portion* of Willard's analysis. I do not pretend to be representing everything Willard has to say about argument criticism, but only sketching one (especially noteworthy, I think) line of argument that Willard advances.

Willard claims that "we may avoid a morass of intractable problems by abandoning the notion of critical *evaluation*" (p. 235). He believes that "critics must earn the right to evaluate and must convincingly prove that they have done so," but argues that "argument critics lack the theoretic resources for discharging this burden" (p. 16). Somewhat more specifically, Willard writes that "evaluation presupposes the critics can *justify* their judgments, that is, can defeat specific skeptical objections" (p. 255). Or, again: "the evaluationist line requires untenable assumptions about the objects of criticism and about the privileges of the critical stance. The standard skeptical objections arise respecting these; and the usual result ensues" (p. 253).

The nature of these skeptical objections to critical evaluation can perhaps be brought out by considering what Willard terms "interfield disputes," that is, disputes between two fields (intellectual traditions, theories, disciplines, points of view, etc.). An evaluationist critic, Willard suggests, will face a difficult choice about how to proceed.

If we think like justificationists, we are tempted to try to referee the disputes between the fields; but what principle might we use to decide which is the superior theory? We doubtless can conjure up principles that can overarch the two fields, but by what principle could we prove that our grand principle takes precedence over the assumptions of each field? (p. 101)

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And if the critic does side with one field's standards, the occupants of the other view can "trot out the tu quoque and the usual skeptical challenges" (p. 101).

Or: "critics will get nowhere trying to *settle* these [interfield] disputes. With what field will they take sides? In each case, the critic cannot take sides with one field versus the other; the guarantors of the critic's claims would *be* the favored field's standards" (p. 242). And if the critic were to attempt to offer "judgmental and veridical standards" to "arbitrate the dispute at hand," then "pervasive skepticism . . . would arise again (at full power), just as it has done with respect to every absolutistic system." Hence "no critic could prove his bona fides for settling an interfield dispute of the sort we have described sans a full-dress philosophical development and defense of a successful universal" (p. 242).

So an interfield dispute "poses the problem of critical evaluation in a blunt way. Critical evaluation is suspect in the senses we have specified; taking sides in interfield disputes places the critic on argumentative ground he cannot justify; thus it is appropriate to ask whether critical evaluation can in any sense be justified" (pp. 242–243). Willard's answer is that it cannot.

That critical evaluation cannot in any sense be justified, for Willard, can be brought out plainly by noting Willard's belief that "criticism is itself an argument field" (p. 244). This means that each instance of critical evaluation is an instance of interfield evaluation; "critical judgments are interfield disputes" (p. 87). And "if the critic's standards differ from a field's, the critic has no grounds for proving their superiority" (p. 244), or at least no grounds that can withstand skeptical objections: "If critics claim to traffic in principles which overarch the procedures and practices of other fields (and thereby authorize evaluations of these procedures and practices), they are describing the

critical field in the same terms the absolutist philosophers used to define philosophy . . . They thereby incur the same burdens. Arrayed against them are the skeptical doctrine (in full bloom), case-specific skeptical demands, and the tu quoque. The outcome is a foregone conclusions" (pp. 244–245).

So Willard holds that warranted critical evaluation of argument must be capable of turning back skeptical objections: "evaluation presupposes the critics can *justify* their judgments, that is, can defeat specific skeptical objections" (p. 255). If such objections cannot be overcome, critical evaluation cannot be warranted. And what the skeptic will want are indubitable foundations for such evaluation (in the form, say, of standards for evaluation that have indubitably been shown to be universal and field-invariant). And the trouble, of course, is that no such indubitable foundations have yet been located, and hence each instance of critical evaluation encounters skeptical demands it cannot possibly satisfy.

But "what does a critic do when he is no longer busy with justification? If he abandons his aim of saying things are 'correct,' 'right,' or 'good,' what is it that he *does* do?" (p. 136). In place of evaluation, Willard would have argument critics turn to a descriptive task; he wishes to replace evaluation with "description and explication" (p. 17) as the primary undertakings of the critic. Hence in his view "argumentation should be the study of how actors pass muster on ideas. . . . Its core question is not 'what shall be the guarantors of our knowledge?' but 'how do circumstanced actors objectify their thinking?'" (p. 21). This same descriptive emphasis appears in many guises:

*How* consensual legitimation occurs is thus an organizing question for criticism; and how disputes among different consensual traditions [fields] are to be looked at becomes the organizing problematic of critical epistemology. (p. 226)

Field theory [Willard's own view] proposes an empirical project of understanding how field actors pass muster on knowledge and why particular substantive domains take different things as facts. (p. 227)

Our aim is to understand how people express and ameliorate their doubts; the empirical focus which serves this aim is upon argument interactions and the things said in them. (p. 235)

Field theory assigns greater urgency to descriptive work aimed at understanding argument fields and allows us to bracket universal evaluations. (p. 251)

Criticism . . . is the study of interpretation and of the communal objectifying practices by which interpretations are legitimated. (p. 268)

The place of criticism . . . is to assess the general conditions of certainty and doubt and to study the disputational processes by which these are achieved. (p. 279)

So, briefly put: "Criticism, we may say, is the study of valuing (and the alternative forms of valuing) but is not itself devoted to evaluation" (p. 263).

## II

The portion of Willard's views that has been sketched in the preceding section may perhaps be cast baldly as three claims:

- (1) There are no indubitable (skeptical-proof) foundations for the evaluation of argument.
- (2) Hence warranted evaluation of argument is not possible.
- (3) So argument critics should take up a different task, that of describing arguments.

What I now want to consider is what sort of additional beliefs one must hold to make these three claims cohere.

I first want to take up the matter of the relation of (1) and (2). Willard clearly offers the absence of indubitable (skeptical-proof) foundations as a reason for rejecting the possibility of warranted argument evaluation, since he repeatedly threatens the evaluative critic with skeptical objections. But there is an unexpressed premise that connects (1) and (2), and it is something like this:

- (P1) Warranted evaluations of argument must rest on indubitable (skeptical-proof) foundations.

Without such a premise, Willard could not threaten the evaluative critic with skeptical challenges, and so I take it that Willard is committed to something like this premise.

Now so far as I can discern, Willard makes no positive argument to support (P1). He does not provide any reason to believe that skeptic-proof foundations are necessary for warranted evaluation, even though he raises the spectre of skeptical arguments against any critic who would presume to evaluate arguments. So at a minimum one would have to say that Willard has not yet done enough to justify his use of skeptical objections against critical evaluation, since he has not shown that skeptic-proof foundations are required.

Moreover, one would have to wonder whether Willard would *want* to show that skeptic-proof foundations are required. After all, the requirement that a warranted enterprise must enjoy skeptic-proof foundations is a key element in justificationist schemes, and Willard generally has a thoroughly unfavorable opinion of justificationism. Thus, for instance, Willard believes that his viewpoint "poses problems for justificationist schemes and any variants of criticism that defend evaluation" (p. 11); he emphasizes that Willardian argument critics "are no longer in the justification business" (p. 135); he wishes to make it clear that "there are nonjustificational ways of looking at" interfield disputes (p. 101); he criticizes an imagined interlocutor for "still thinking like a justificationist" (p. 228); and so on.

Yet despite his negative appraisal of justificationism, Willard seems committed to a decidedly justificationist tenet in (P1). A justificationist evaluative critic would presumably assert that warranted evaluation requires skeptic-proof foundations, and so would proceed to identify (and base critical evaluations on) whatever is taken to provide those indubitable foundations (intuition, raw sense data, what-

ever). Willard will similarly assert that warranted evaluation requires indubitable foundations, but will argue that the lack of such foundations means that warranted evaluation is not possible. The two differ over whether indubitable foundations for argument evaluation are available (or possible), but they share a commitment to a belief that such foundations are required for warranted evaluation.

So an argument critic who rejects justificationism more thoroughly than Willard does—who rejects Willard’s justificationist (P1) premise—need have nothing to fear from Willard’s brandishing of skeptical objections. Such objections cut no ice unless one grants something like (P1).

In sum, then, Willard’s claims (1) and (2), in order to cohere, require a premise such as (P1); this premise is not explicitly supported by Willard, does not appear to be consistent with the entirety of Willard’s program, and would have a questionable status given some thoroughgoing rejection of justificationism.

I now turn to (3), Willard’s claim that argument critics should take up the task of describing arguments. By suggesting this alternative enterprise, Willard has, I believe, taken on difficult commitments. To bring these out, consider the consequences of a skeptic’s challenging Willard’s descriptions of argument. Suppose the skeptic says “Willard, justify your descriptions—and do not do so by reference to the conventions or practices of any particular field unless you can show that that field’s standards for descriptions transcend all others. What I wish to see are the indubitable foundations for the descriptions you provide.” Another way of expressing this challenge is to carry over the sort of characterization that Willard gives of the presuppositions required of warranted evaluation: just as Willard says “evaluation presupposes the critics can *justify* their judgments, that is, can defeat specific skeptical objections” (p. 255), so one might say to Willard “description

presupposes the critics can justify their descriptions, that is, can defeat specific skeptical objections.”

One can imagine two sorts of answers that Willard might make to such a challenge. The first would be to point to the indubitable foundations that warrant an argument critic’s descriptions. But this sort of answer would be awfully justificationist, and in any case Willard has not yet (so far as I know) claimed to have found the true foundations of apodictic knowledge that have escaped philosophers for so many years.

The other sort of answer is more likely, namely, that the skeptic’s demand is inappropriate because (one supposes) warranted description does not require indubitable (skeptic-proof) foundations. This presumably is why Willard feels free to brandish skeptical demands in the face of the evaluative critic but does not feel compelled to himself satisfy such demands as a prerequisite to warranted argument description. But notice the commitment Willard will (*ex hypothesi*) have taken on here:

(P2) Warranted description does not require indubitable (skeptic-proof) foundations.

And what is striking, of course, is the contrast with Willard’s implicit belief in (P1), his belief that warranted *evaluation* does require such foundations. Why is it that warranted evaluation requires indubitable foundations, but warranted description does not?

I do want to pause to notice that Willard is pretty much committed to this discrepancy. If he instead believes that warranted evaluation does *not* require indubitable foundations, then he could not have made his skeptical objections to critical evaluation. Or if he instead asserts that *both* description and evaluation require indubitable foundations, then he must (if his call for argument critics to take up descriptive tasks is to have any merit at all) identify those indubitable, skeptic-

proof foundations that make warranted description possible *and* he must show that those same foundations will *not* serve to underwrite warranted evaluation; since he nowhere (so far as I can tell) tries to take on such tasks (and since these tasks look to be rather formidable if not impossible), it is unlikely that Willard believes that both description and evaluation require indubitable foundations. Hence Willard appears to be committed to both (P1) and (P2): he believes that warranted evaluation requires, but warranted description does not require, indubitable (skeptic-proof) foundations.

This commitment by Willard places a heavy burden on a distinction between evaluation and description. If Willard cannot draw a reasonably firm line to distinguish evaluation and description, his project for argument criticism will be on shakier ground than San Francisco. After all, without such a firm distinction, Willard could not insulate a given instance of Willardian argument description from skeptical attack, because he would be unable to show convincingly that it was genuinely description as opposed to evaluation.

Though Willard needs a firm distinction between evaluation and description, it is not clear that he offers one. So far as I can make out, Willard has not attempted to provide anything like a definitive distinction between evaluation and description. This failing might not be so worrisome were such a distinction not so critical to Willard's program. Since Willard's new project for argument criticism will appear plausible only if he can reasonably sharply distinguish description and evaluation, the lack of explicit efforts at carefully formulating such a distinction is all the more striking.

And, unhappily, it is not clear that such a firm distinction can be found elsewhere. To be clear: My claim is not that there is no difference whatever between descrip-

tion and evaluation, nor that there is no possible distinction between them. One can certainly draw distinctions between these, distinctions that will serve quite nicely for various purposes. What I am doubting is that a distinction can be maintained that is sufficiently sharp for the purposes Willard requires. Willard needs a distinction so sharp-edged that whenever his proffered argument characterizations encounter skeptical objections he can turn those objections away by definitively showing that his characterizations are purely descriptive and not at all tainted by (skeptic-vulnerable) evaluation. I will not spend time here showing how various ways one might attempt to draw the distinction will turn out to be inadequate to such ends. But I do want to suggest that drawing a distinction that is sufficiently firm and unambiguous for Willard's purposes may well be a difficult matter. Consider, for instance, a characterization of someone's proffered argument as "lacking an explicit warrant." Surely one would not want to be in the position of having to classify this definitively as either argument description or argument evaluation—and yet it seems that Willard's arguments put him in a position of having to do just that.

So Willard's call for description as the new focus of argument criticism, if it is to avoid the skeptical objections Willard deploys against critical evaluation, appears to require an improbably sharp distinction between description and evaluation—a distinction not yet supplied by Willard and arguably not likely to be obtained soon.

### III

I want to consider a possible objection to my analysis. The objection runs somewhat as follows:

You misunderstand Willard's position, and specifically you fail to grasp Willard's use of "skepticism."

Willard does not in fact invoke some doctrine of philosophical skepticism in support of his views; when Willard talks of "skepticism," he does not refer to some general philosophical viewpoint; and by "skeptical" Willard does not mean "philosophical skeptic." What Willard means to point to, in talking of skeptics and skepticism, is the situated arguer ("field actor," in Willard's terms) who is unconvinced by—or, colloquially, "skeptical of"—the argument evaluations offered by an argument critic. And the point Willard is concerned to make is that, since criticism is inevitably an interfield dispute, the argument critic has no good answer to an arguer who skeptically (in the colloquial, not philosophical, sense) shrugs off the critic's evaluation. The critic has no good answer, because the critic has no grounds for proving the superiority of the critic's standards over those of the arguer's field. And the critic's lack of a good answer here, Willard argues, undermines the critic's argument evaluation.

Hence, since Willard does not invoke philosophical skepticism to underwrite his attack on critical evaluation, Willard is not committed to anything like the (P1) premise you attribute to him: Willard is not saying that warranted evaluations of arguments must rest on premises that are apodictic and indubitable and so immune to attack by a philosophical skeptic. And, correspondingly, your allegation that Willard needs a sharp distinction between evaluation and description is unfounded. That allegation rests on a contrast between two beliefs that Willard is supposed to hold, namely, (P1) and (P2), but in fact Willard does not hold both those beliefs; Willard is not committed to (P1), does not believe (P1), and hence does not need the sharp distinction between evaluation and description that you say he does.

I am not convinced that this objection can be sustained, and I do not believe that it rescues Willard's views from the problems I have argued they have. First, the objection is difficult to reconcile with what Willard has written. For example, Willard argues that if a critic attempted to offer judgmental standards to arbitrate an interfield dispute, "pervasive skepticism . . . would arise again (at full power), just as it has done with respect to every absolutistic system," and hence "no critic could prove his bona fides for settling an interfield dispute . . . sans a full-dress philosophical development and defense of a successful universal" (p. 242). Surely what is being invoked here (to support

Willard's attack on argument evaluation) is something like philosophical skepticism, not merely the doubting attitude of a situated arguer. Or: "If critics claim to traffic in principles which overarch the procedures and practices of other fields (and thereby authorize evaluations of these procedures and practices), they are describing the critical field in the same terms the absolutist philosophers used to define philosophy. . . . They thereby incur the same burdens. Arrayed against them are the skeptical doctrine (in full bloom), case-specific skeptical demands, and the *tu quoque*" (pp. 244–245). It is implausible to propose that when Willard invokes "the skeptical doctrine" here to attack critical evaluation, he is not invoking the doctrine of philosophical skepticism, but only referring to a situated arguer's shrugging off the critic's evaluation. When Willard writes of "the usual skeptical challenges" (p. 101), "the standard skeptical objections" (p. 253), or "the skeptical doctrine" (p. 245), he is surely referring to something other than an arguer's shrug. Indeed, he makes a point of *distinguishing* "skeptical challenges" and "the shrug": in an interfield dispute, he writes, "the field we side against can, in the face of our criticism, adopt the most powerful epistemic posture available to field actors, namely, the shrug. The actor might trot out the *tu quoque* and the usual skeptical challenges; but why bother? The outcome of such challenges is a foregone conclusion—the shrug thus being the most parsimonious reply a field can make to outside critics" (p. 101). In short, then, it is difficult to see how Willard's writings can be construed as not invoking philosophical skepticism in the service of his attack on critical evaluation.

Second, the objection's proposed interpretation of Willardian skepticism (as merely the attitude of the doubting and unconvinced situated arguer) commits Willard to a new implausible premise. To

support the conclusion that warranted evaluation of argument is not possible, a somewhat different argument (different than that sketched at the outset of section II above) would be involved. The objection's interpretation of Willard's skepticism would have Willard argue something like this:

- (1') There are no foundations for the evaluation of argument that are guaranteed to convince a doubting arguer.
- (2) Hence warranted evaluation of argument is not possible.

But now the new premise that connects (1') and (2) would be something on the order of:

- (P1') Warranted evaluation of argument must rest on foundations that are guaranteed to convince a doubting arguer.

That is, Willard would (according to this objection) believe that argument evaluation, to be warranted, must rest on grounds sufficiently compelling to convince the doubting arguer; if the doubting arguer cannot be convinced of the soundness of the argument evaluation, then the evaluation is not warranted.

To bring out the implausibility of this new (P1') premise, consider the parallel case of art criticism. This sort of premise would lead to the conclusion that an art critic's evaluation of a painting would be unwarranted unless the critic could convince the *painter* of the soundness of the evaluation; if Jones cannot convince Smith that Smith's piano composition is a poor one, Jones has no good grounds for making that evaluation; if I cannot convince you of my critical evaluation of your sculpture, my evaluation is unwarranted. Or consider, say, the evaluations that *Consumer Reports* publishes of various products. The parallel sort of premise would commit one to believing that such evaluations would be warranted only if *Consumer Reports* could convince the

products' manufacturers of the soundness of the evaluations. Or consider the analogy Willard draws between critical evaluation and "social labeling" (pp. 247-248): this sort of premise would have it that for a clinician to justifiably evaluate a patient as "dangerous," the patient's consent to that evaluation would be required. This is surely a recipe that all but guarantees that only favorable evaluations will be warranted, since negative critical judgments are more likely to get a cold reception from the creators of the unfavorably-evaluated objects. In short, this objection would seem to commit Willard to a dubious premise about what is required to make argument evaluations warranted.

Third, the objection still leaves Willard committed to an implausibly sharp distinction between evaluation and description. To express the point briefly: *either* (P1) or (P1'), in conjunction with (2) and (3), commits Willard to a sharp evaluation-description distinction. As argued above, if (P1) is Willard's premise, then (P2) is also required to make his views a plausible and coherent whole, and the contrast between (P1) and (P2) gives rise to Willard's commitment to a sharp evaluation-description distinction.

But suppose instead that (P1') is Willard's premise, as the objection has it. A parallel argument applies. Willard will still be advancing claim (2), that warranted evaluation of argument is not possible; and he will still be advancing claim (3), that argument critics should take up the task of describing argument, and so presumably would still believe that warranted description of argument *is* possible. Surely Willard would not want to say that warranted *description* of argument requires foundations that are guaranteed to convince a doubting arguer. Such a requirement would have unhappy consequences: e.g., one would be warranted in characterizing an arguer's utterance as "addressing the felicity condition on



requests that concerns ability" only if one can actually teach (or perhaps—see below—can show in principle that one could teach) the arguer enough about speech act theory to get the arguer to agree that the description was justified; one would be warranted in characterizing one of Lincoln's arguments as "enthymematic" only if one could guarantee to convince that dead arguer of the justifiability of that description; Willard would be justified in describing an arguer's conduct in field-theoretic terms only if he could get the arguer to understand and consent to that characterization; and so on.

If Willard would not want to require that warranted argument descriptions meet the same requirement as he puts for warranted argument evaluation (that of being able to convince a doubting arguer), then he will be committed to a premise something like this:

(P2') Warranted description of argument does not require foundations that are guaranteed to convince a doubting arguer.

Without a premise such as this, Willard's call for argument description will founder on the same arguments he used to undermine argument evaluation.

Examining (P1') and (P2') together, the contrast between evaluation and description is once again striking: Willard would believe that warranted evaluation does, but warranted description does not, require foundations guaranteed to convince a doubting arguer. And once again Willard would place a heavy burden on a distinction between evaluation and description. Without such a firm distinction, Willard could not insulate a given instance of Willardian argument description from the sorts of attacks he levels at argument evaluation, because he would be unable to show convincingly that it was genuinely description as opposed to evaluation.

So, even if, as the objection has it, Willardian skepticism is taken to be the doubting attitude of the situated arguer rather than the doctrinal view of the philosophical skeptic, Willard's position still leaves him committed to an implausibly precise distinction between evaluation and description. And, at base, the reason is that if Willard is to protect his called-for argument descriptions from the attacks he levels at argument evaluation, he will need a sharp way of telling evaluation and description apart.

Fourth, the objection in fact leaves Willard still committed to (P1), the belief that warranted evaluations of argument must rest on indubitable (philosophical-skeptic-proof) foundations. That is, Willard will not have escaped this hidden justificationist premise by reverting to talk about doubting arguers rather than philosophical skeptics. To bring out Willard's deep justificationist commitment here, let me begin by noticing that the question of whether a given doubting arguer is convinced (of the soundness of a given critic's argument evaluation) is a factual one—was the arguer convinced or not?

But surely Willard would not want to say that the actual *convincing* of the arguer is required for warranted critical evaluation. After all, the parties to an argument might all be dead (along with the issue involved), and surely Willard's position is not one that commits him to saying that the critical evaluation of historical discourse is intrinsically unwarranted just because the discourse is historical. Or consider the circumstance in which the critic simply did not make any effort to display the evaluation to the arguer, and so the arguer was never convinced; surely Willard wouldn't want to say that such failure automatically invalidates the critical evaluation. (If he did want to say such a thing, then one would have expected Willard to have somewhere laid out criteria for what constitutes a

“good faith effort” on the part of the critic to reach the arguer, so that critics may see whether their efforts were sufficient to satisfy Willard’s criteria for warranted evaluation. Willard has not done such a thing, which suggests he really is not interested in whether critics actually try to convince arguers.) Moreover, Willard thinks he has shown that “no critic has the credentials” for refereeing interfield disputes (p. 228, emphasis added); if Willard thought that actually convincing a doubting arguer is required for warranted evaluation, then showing that “no critic has the credentials” would involve Willard’s making the factual case, for each instance of criticism, that the arguer wasn’t really convinced; but of course Willard does not attempt to make such factual cases, which suggests again that he is not demanding that critics actually convince doubting arguers.

The general point here is that it would be uncharitable to attribute to Willard a belief that what is required for warranted critical evaluation is actually convincing the arguer of the evaluation’s soundness. But if the doubting-arguer line of attack is not saying that warranted evaluation requires actually convincing the arguer, then what *is* it saying that warranted evaluation requires? The most plausible interpretation would seem to be that, in order for critical evaluation to be warranted, the critic must *in principle* have the resources to convince the situated arguer. The critic need not *in fact* do the convincing (since sometimes that would be impossible anyway), but only be able to show that in principle such convincing could be (or could have been) done.

But now consider what it would mean to be able to show that, *in principle*, one could convince a situated arguer of the worth of one’s evaluation. That would mean being able to show that no matter what sort of objection the arguer raised, one could guarantee obtaining the ar-

guer’s assent; it would mean having grounds so compelling, so convincing, so indubitable, that any arguer would have to agree; it would mean being able to show in principle that one could successfully turn away the challenges of the most doubting arguer; it would mean, in short, having foundations for argument evaluation that were immune to even the attacks of a doctrinal philosophical skeptic. Hence, even if Willardian skepticism is interpreted as the attitude of the unconvinced doubting arguer, Willard’s position still turns out to require that warranted critical evaluation of argument rest on indubitable (philosophic-skeptic-proof) foundations. That is, Willard remains committed to (P1), the hidden justificationist premise that was identified earlier.

To sum up this section: The objection discussed here would interpret Willardian skepticism as the doubting attitude of the situated arguer, and as not having anything to do with the view of philosophical skepticism. But this objection is on its face not an especially attractive line of defense (it does not fit Willard’s text very well, and it commits Willard to dubious premises) and, more important, the objection does not rescue Willard’s views from the problems identified earlier (the problem of needing an improbably sharp distinction between evaluation and description, and the problem of being committed to a questionable justificationist premise that seems inconsistent with the thrust of Willard’s viewpoint).

#### IV

I draw two main conclusions from all this. The first is that, at a minimum, Willard has not yet done enough to make his “field theory” a plausible candidate as a new focus for argument criticism. Given the arguments that Willard makes, some defense of the hidden premises (P1) and (P2) is required; and the joint defense of

these two premises [or even of the two substitute premises (P1') and (P2'), as the objection considered in section III would have it] will require a sharp way of differentiating argument evaluation and argument description. Since Willard has not provided these things (to my eye), I conclude that he has not yet discharged his burden of proof.

Of course, one might legitimately doubt whether the required burden *can* be discharged. Those with such doubts will want to conclude not simply that Willard yet has work to do, but that the unlikelihood of anyone's being able to successfully carry off the required work means that Willard's arguments are somehow intrinsically defective. As I have tried to suggest, I think there are good grounds for supposing that the sort of distinction Willard requires between evaluation and description is not likely to be had, and hence for supposing that Willard cannot insulate his argument descriptions from the objections he aims at argument evaluations.

The second conclusion is that argument critics have little to fear from Willard's

"skeptical" objections to argument evaluation. At least, critics will have little to fear if they refuse to concede (P1) to Willard. Willard can successfully brandish skeptical objections (of either the doubting-arguer or the philosophical-skeptic variety) only so long as one grants him the necessity of somehow answering the (philosophical) skeptic. If one denies such necessity (by denying that philosophical-skeptic-proof foundations are required before warranted evaluation of argument is possible) then Willard's skeptical objections can simply be ignored. This does not mean that evaluation can proceed willy-nilly, or that there are no good reasons for (say) argumentation's generally shifting from normative to descriptive concerns. But it does mean that one line of argument aimed at undermining argument evaluation—Willard's parading of skeptical objections—need not detain the argument critic.

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