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What's in a Good Argument about Evaluative Claims? Argumentation in Accountability Practices

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Abstract: What counts as a good defence of the conduct of a political agent? I formulate an answer combining insights from argumentation scholarship on the different types of standpoints and the schemes suitable to defend them with insights from philosophical literature (fact vs. value, theoretical vs. practical reasoning ... etc). The goal is to make a proposal that is best suitable for examining the type of evaluative claims that is typically discussed in accountability practices.

Keywords: accountability, argument from sign, conductive argument, evaluative claim, evaluative adjectives, fact-value distinction, symptomatic argument, type of standpoint

1. Introduction

Accountability is a key indicator of democratic governance in our world today (Mulgan 2004). In order to hold political agents accountable, democratic systems put them under the obligation to explain and justify their conduct, publically as well as in closed doors in front of specialised bodies. An agent who is accountable to a certain body is obliged to inform the body about her actions and decisions, justify them and expect to face consequences and suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct (Bovens et al. 2010; Schedler 1999). Thus understood, in its complete form, accountability involves three aspects: (i) monitoring, (ii) justification and (iii) enforcement. Argumentation is obviously central for the second aspect, i.e. justification. Through it, accountability practices control power by subjecting it to the rule of public reason (Schedler 1999). Engaging in good argumentative exchanges about the conduct of those in power is central for a healthy political culture where the conduct of political agents is subject not only to the rule of law, but also to the logic of public reason.

The exercise of accountability is not restricted to institutions whose primary function is to call public officials to account, such as audit offices, ombudsmen and administrative tribunals (Mulgan 2000). Accountability practices take place also in other institutions which adopt an accountability role, though accountability is far from being their primary purpose. For example, modern legislatures have a variety of functions among which is to hold the executive publicly accountable. Furthermore, accountability is not restricted to those procedures designed particularly in order to hold the power accountable. Accountability “may occur at any point, in legislative debate or financial authorization, where members of the government are required to explain their actions and take the consequences” (Mulgan 2000, p. 565).

From the argumentative perspective, accountability practices involve discussing a claim about the conduct of the agent who is being held accountable. Underlying the practice is a difference of opinion about such an evaluative claim: the agent can be expected to defend a positive assessment of her conduct against the doubt, or often opposition, of the body to which it is accountable. Accountability is exercised through subjecting the evaluative claim to critical testing.

In this paper, I address the question of what counts as a good defence of an evaluative claim, in particular claims about the conduct of a political agent. My goal is to make a proposal that is best suitable for analysing and evaluating the type of evaluative claims that is typically discussed in accountability practices. Finding out what counts as a good defence of an evaluative claim about the conduct of a political agent helps us better understand, assess and improve accountability practices. Posing the question as I do assumes that there can be, in general, a link between the type of claim defended and what counts as a good defence of it. The link is certainly not uncommon. It has been made, in different ways, by argumentation scholars, by debate practitioners as well as by philosophers. Yet, not much work has been done on what counts as a good defence of an evaluative claim as such – compare to the immense bulk of work devoted to practical reasoning and argumentation!

In order to answer the question, I start by discussing what it is like to argue about an evaluative claim in general (section 2). In addressing the question, I draw insights from argumentation theory and debate as well as from philosophy. Turning to political literature, I then move to discuss the question of what makes (the assessment of) the conduct of a political agent satisfactory (section 3). This is important in order to further specify the content of the argument supporting the particular evaluative claim discussed in accountability practices. On the basis of that, I formulate a proposal for the “ideal” argument in defence of an evaluative standpoint about the conduct of a political agent (section 4). I conclude by discussing the proposal in view of its strengths and limitations (section 5).

2. What it is like to argue about an evaluative claim

The assumption that there is a link between the type of claim defended and what counts as a good defence of it is not uncommon in argumentation literature. For example, argumentation scholars, distinguish between different types of standpoints and the argumentation schemes that are suitable to defend them. Debate practitioners distinguish between fact, value and policy debate propositions and offer guidelines tailored to the type of proposition debated. Philosophers distinguish facts from values and theoretical from practical reasoning. In this section, I synthesise the existing insights aiming at sketching a ‘model’ for good argumentation in defence of an evaluative claim.

2.1. The type of standpoint defended in accountability arguments

Since Hume made his claim that one cannot derive an “ought” from an “is”, the distinction between facts and values has been a central theme of philosophical. The distinction is a good starting point when we think of the type of proposition expressed in evaluative standpoints. Obviously, a claim that assesses the conduct of a political agent is on the value side of the divide. Nevertheless, the distinction is not adequate for capturing the type of accountability claim I am interested in.¹ The accountability claim is not a typical “ought” claim. A typical “ought” claim, where a certain action

¹ Despite its appeal, the fact-value dualism has long been subject of challenge (e.g. Dewey 1978; Quine 1951; Searle 1964; Putnam 2002). Particularly relevant for the purposes of this paper is the criticism articulated by Putnam against the distinction as a dichotomy: fact and value are entangled; there are large ranges of statements that cannot be simply classified as either analytic truths or statements of observable fact (2002). The accountability argument may be seen as an example of the entanglement of fact and value. In this argument, the claim defended is neither a purely descriptive fact nor a value as such but a combination of the two: a sort of an evaluative description. Furthermore, in accountability arguments, we can clearly see the type of facts that Searle (1995) coined as *institutional facts* and which allow deriving “ought” from “is”: a special type of “ought”, one about what ought to have been done.

is recommended, is one that is standard in deliberation discussions. The accountability claim is rather a value-based judgment of a certain state of affairs. The two variants, evaluating a certain state of affairs and evaluating a certain course of action, need to be distinguished especially because the argumentation adequate for defending one is not necessarily adequate for defending the other. Not surprisingly, the two have indeed been distinguished by argumentation scholars such as van Eemeren and his colleagues at the pragma-dialectical school.

Following Hans Albert (1975), van Eemeren et al. distinguish between standpoints that express “factual judgements as well as value judgements and normative standpoints” (van Eemeren et al. 2007, p. 9 n5):

The types of standpoints supported by argumentation vary from descriptive standpoints (“The King of the Netherlands is inaugurated in Amsterdam”) to evaluative standpoints (“The Mahler concert in the Concertgebouw was excellent”) and prescriptive standpoints (“You should come with me to church this Sunday”). (van Eemeren et al. 2014, p. 7)

This classification incorporates the fact-value distinction: purely descriptive standpoints are distinguished from standpoints which are value-based. Furthermore, it distinguishes between two variants of value-based standpoints: evaluative standpoints in which a value-judgment about a certain state of affairs is expressed vs. prescriptive standpoints in which a certain future action is recommended for its value.

The three-fold classification is also adopted within the debate tradition. Take for example, the American Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). In their intercollegiate debate tournaments in the United States, debate propositions are classified into three types: fact, value and policy propositions:

A proposition of fact is a type of descriptive claim. In a debate on a proposition of fact, the affirmative maintains that a certain thing is true, while the negative maintains that it is false. [...] A proposition of value is a type of evaluative claim. Values are our beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad. So a proposition of value essentially makes a statement that something is good or bad. In a debate on a proposition of value, the affirmative maintains that a certain belief, value, or fact is justified, that it conforms to the definition or criteria appropriate to evaluate the issue. [...] A policy proposition is a type of advocate claim. CEDA defines policy resolutions as those “phrased so as to affirm the value of future and specific governmental change, and suggesting a broad but predictable array of potential affirmative plans.” (Freeley & Steinberg 2009, pp. 55-58)

Examples of a typical fact proposition is “Resolved: That the stock market will decline next year,” of a typical value proposition “Resolved: That abortion is immoral” and of a typical policy proposition is “Resolved: That the Senate should advise and consent to the nomination of Joseph Doakes as ambassador to France.” (ibid).²

² The argumentative practice of accountability involves arguing in defence of a standpoint similar to value debate proposition. But not completely. The value debate proposition can take one of three forms: (1) endorsing a value, for example, “Resolved: That compulsory national service for all qualified U.S. citizens is desirable” or (2) choosing one value over another, for example, “Resolved: That inflation is a greater threat to American society than is

Argumentation and debate scholars connect different aspects of the argument to the type of standpoint that is being defended. For example, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992) tell us that reasonable arguers defend their standpoints by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly. As they put it, “in some cases, it has to do with the type and the scope of the proposition expressed in the standpoint which argumentation scheme is appropriate and how it is to be used” (p. 159). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst assert that “there are no hard and fast rules for the appropriateness of argumentation schemes to propositions of a certain type and scope, some combinations seem to fit better than others” (p. 162). As examples, they cite the argument from analogy as a scheme which fits different types of standpoints, as opposed to the argument from consequences which cannot be used to defend descriptive standpoints (otherwise, we have a case of the *ad consequentiam* fallacy).³

More on the link between the type of proposition and the argument scheme fit to defend it can be found in other studies devoted to argument schemes (e.g. Macagno 2015). As the discussion below shows, in such studies, we get helpful clues to which schemes are better fit for defending evaluative judgments in particular.

2.2. The argument scheme used in accountability arguments

In a recent attempt to systematise the classification of argument schemes, Macagno (2015) argues that two things are necessary when considering argument schemes: 1) the pragmatic purpose of the argument, i.e. the end and 2) the ontological structure of the conclusion and premises, i.e. the means. Considering the pragmatic purpose, he distinguishes argument schemes that establishes “the desirability of a course of action” from schemes that establish “the acceptability of a judgment on a state of affairs”. In doing so, Macagno parallels the long standing philosophical distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning.

Practical reasoning, understood as reasoning about action, has been long contrasted with theoretical reasoning, understood as reasoning about state of affairs (Wallac 2014). While practical reason addresses the question of what “ought to be done”?, theoretical reason is usually concerned with question of what “is” in fact the case:

Theoretical reason [...] addresses the considerations that recommend accepting particular claims as to what is or is not the case. That is, it involves reflection with

unemployment” or (3) rejecting a value, for example, “Resolved: That the emphasis on competitive athletics is deleterious to American society” (Freeley & Steinberg 2009). The main difference between debate value propositions and the accountability standpoint is that while the former has values as its subject, the latter has an evaluative judgment instead. Another important difference relates to the format of interaction. CEDA debate format are highly conventionalised, and take a shape different from the format of accountability practices. Furthermore, in CEDA debates, debating value propositions is usually seen as a step preparing for debating policy propositions. This is obviously not necessarily the case in the argumentative practice of accountability. Debate literature may be the source of interesting insights for examining accountability practices. After all, debate scholars also start from the assumption that there is a link between the type of standpoint and the way to defend it, and discuss what counts as good defence (Freeley & Steinberg 2009, Ch.11-13) as well as good refutation (Freeley & Steinberg 2009, Ch. 14) of each of the types. Nevertheless, the debate literature requires some considerable translation, in order to accommodate the significant differences.

³ Moreover, van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck-Henkemans (2007) identify indicators that express the arguer’s strength of commitment to each of the three types of standpoints (pp. 34-50) and they analyse the eligible requests for clarifications after each type of standpoint (pp. 50-52 and pp. 74-6). Also, van Eemeren (2010) tells us that the type of standpoint centre of controversy is one of the elements defining the different argumentative activity types (p. 151).

an eye to the truth of propositions, and the reasons for belief in which it deals are considerations that speak in favor of such propositions' being true, or worthy of acceptance. Practical reason, by contrast, is concerned not with the truth of propositions but with the desirability or value of actions. (Wallace 2014, p. 3)

This is yet another manifestation of the “ought” vs. “is” divide. However, from the perspective of this manifestation, standpoints in which an assessment of a state of affairs is expressed are on the “is”-side. Accountability standpoints, the ones in which the conduct of the agent is assessed, are concerned with what is or is not the case and are discussed using theoretical rather than practical reasoning. Here, we may think of two variants of theoretical reasoning: theoretical reasoning about descriptive state of affairs and theoretical reasoning about evaluative state of affairs.⁴ This seems to be what Macagno does in his typology.⁵

Within the class of argument schemes that establish “the acceptability of a judgment on a state of affairs”, Macagno distinguishes between a sub-class of schemes that attribute factual properties and another where value judgments are expressed.⁶ He lists argument from sign and from classification as the schemes fit for the defence of claims that attribute a value-judgment to a certain state of affairs (p. 197):

Value judgments are classifications that are [...] based on [...] values, or rather hierarchies of values. Such judgments proceed from criteria for classifying what is commonly considered to be “good” or “bad.” Also the reasoning underlying the attribution of evaluative predicates, such as “to be a criminal,” can be considered as belonging (also) to this group of arguments. These latter patterns are grounded on signs of an internal disposition of character, which in its turn is evaluated. (p. 196)

⁴ Insights from the philosophical scholarship on reasoning is undoubtedly important for the study of argumentation. Reasoning and argumentation are often used to refer to the same thing, namely the act of reason-giving. Sometimes as an internal mental act and other times as an external verbal one. Despite the obvious link between the two, it is necessary to distinguish between the mental and verbal manifestation of reason-giving. The two differ significantly when it comes to the role that public commitments play in the quality of the act. As John Searle nicely put it, “The belief and the intention have nothing like the commitments of the statement or the promise” (2010, p. 81). As a result, something that counts as a good piece of internal mental reason-giving may not necessarily count as equally good external verbal reason-giving. Following Searle, again, I take it to be an important difference that

If the privately held belief turns out to be false I need only revise it. But in the case of the statement, I am committed not only to revision in the case of falsehood, but I am committed to being able to provide reasons for the original statement, I am committed to sincerity in making it, and I can be held publicly responsible if it turns out to be false. (2010, p. 84)

In order to avoid the confusion, I will be using reasoning to refer to solely to the internal mental act and argumentation to refer to the external verbal one.

⁵ Macagno provides an enlightening survey of the literature and a critical reading of the existing classifications. His main point is that the existing classifications confuse semantic analysis of the link between premises and conclusions with the types of reasoning that connect the two.

⁶ Macagno draws a few other distinctions within the class of schemes that establish the acceptability of a judgment on a state of affairs. He distinguishes schemes according to the evidence for the judgment: externally as in authority arguments vs. internally when based on the properties of the subject matter; within the internal schemes according to the time in the judgment: present and past as in descriptions vs. future as in predictions; and finally within the past and present judgments according to the type of the judgment: value vs. factual judgments.

The schemes of argument from classification (Walton, Reeds & Macagno 2008: p. 66) and argument from sign (Walton, Reeds & Macagno 2008: p. 329) are represented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.

All F's can be classified as G's.
a is an F.
Therefore, a is a G.

Figure 1. Argument from classification

Specific premise: A (a finding) is true in this situation.
General Premise: B is generally indicated as true when its sign, A, is true.
Conclusion: B is true in this situation.

Figure 2. Argument from sign

Considering the nature of accountability practices, namely the lack of clear cut classifications for what counts as good or bad conduct, we may opt for the scheme of the argument from sign (Figure 2), rather than the scheme of the argument from classification, to model the good accountability argument. The scheme is very similar to what the pragma-dialecticians call symptomatic argumentation represented by Figure 3 below.⁷

y is true of x,
because z is true of x
and z is an indicator of y

Figure 3. Symptomatic argumentation

Supposing that the scheme of argument from sign is fit for defending evaluative standpoints, the question to address now should relate to the structure of the argumentation required for an adequate defence of the standpoint (in accountability practices). Scholarship on the semantics of evaluative adjectives can be of help here.

2.3. The argumentation structure of accountability arguments

In the survey provided by Stojanovic (2015), evaluativity is one of four main criteria according to which adjectives can be classified. The other criteria are (ii) gradability, (iii) dimensionality and (iv) the presence or absence of an experiencer. Adjectives are evaluative when they carry with their use an implication of a positive or negative attitude. They are gradable, when the property in question is held to a degree that passes a certain context-dependent threshold. They may be dimensional or not depending on whether or not the adjectives may “be felicitously used with constructions such as in every/some/most respect(s) or except for” (p. 2), and they may depend on the presence of an experiencer, that is, “a sentient individual who perceives the property in

⁷ In previous work, I have used the symptomatic scheme to reconstruct accountability discussions in the parliamentary session of Prime Minister’s Question Time in the British House of Commons (See e.g. Mohammed 2009).

question”, as in “shocking, disgusting, astonishing, enjoyable, or boring” (p. 3).

What about the (evaluative) adjective used to describe the conduct of the agent in accountability practices? Generally speaking, we can think of an adjective expressing a positive attitude. I suggest we use an adjective that is also gradable and dimensional. After all, the conduct of agents is a multi-dimensional thing and the assessment of it is a gradable matter. I suggest to use the adjective “satisfactory” to discuss the conduct of someone who is being held accountable.

The argumentative aspect of the accountability practice is then seen as a discussion about whether or not the conduct of the agent is satisfactory. Such an adjective is clearly evaluative: it carries a positive attitude. It is also gradable: we can think of a threshold, albeit not usually specified. Finally, it is multi-dimensional: there are different aspects of what makes a conduct satisfactory. Each of these three characteristics can help us investigate what counts as an adequate defence of a claim about a ‘satisfactory’ political conduct.

The evaluability characteristic requires that the symptomatic argument includes evaluative premises and conclusions. The evaluative symptomatic argument scheme would be as in Figure 4 below:

Evaluative adjective v^ is true of x ,
 because z is true of x
 and z is an indicator of *evaluative adjective v^*

Figure 4. Symptomatic argumentation about an evaluative standpoint

Furthermore, in view of the dimensionality characteristic, we may expect an adequate defense to have a complex (rather than a single) structure. For each dimension a line of arguments. In view of the gradability characteristic, we may expect that the different lines are cumulative and that there is a threshold after which the accumulated arguments become adequate. It is important that the structure that connects the different lines of argument reflects the cumulative nature of the different indicators of “satisfactory”.

Argumentation scholars have identified several types of argumentation structures that may be suitable for this purpose. An example is the *cumulative coordinative* argumentation structure identified by Snoeck Henkemans (2000, p. 464). Another example is the structure of an appeal to considerations where “the considerations cited are features of a subject of interest, and the conclusion drawn from them is the attribution of some supervenient status to that subject, such as a classification, an evaluation, a prescription or an interpretation” (Hitchcock 2013, p. 226). However, the structure most suitable for the purpose of accountability argument may be the structure of conductive arguments (Govier & Allen 2011):

arguments in which premises are put forward as separately and non-conclusively relevant to support a conclusion, against which negatively relevant considerations may also be acknowledged (p. 262)

Govier and Allen’s conductive argument expresses the accumulation of indicators and allows for taking into account both the signs in favour of and those against the claimed evaluative attribute.

Thus far, we can say that in general an adequate defence of an evaluative claim takes place by means of complex symptomatic lines of argument presented together in a conductive structure. In the next section, this sketch will be fleshed out using insights from political literature about

accountability and good governance.

3. What makes the conduct of a political agent satisfactory

The further specification, hereafter, is obviously informed by context-dependent political insights. Specifications are dependent on the empirical context which is characterised by who the agent being held accountable and the account holders are, as well as on the theoretical political context from which we derive the understanding of accountability and what counts as good conduct.

The empirical context of my interest is that of the accountability of agents who are in government (compared to accountability within companies or other types of non-governing institutions). Typical examples of those who govern are national governments, represented by ministers and prime ministers. Different political systems develop different accountability relationships and arrangements to hold the ‘government’ accountable. Parliamentary question sessions are an example. Less typical examples can be found in contexts where government takes place also at an international level. The European Union (EU) is an interesting example. In the young EU institutional setting, arrangements are developing by the day in order to hold the European Commission (EC) accountable (The EC is considered the main executive arm of the union).

3.1. Types of accountability

In the scholarship on accountability, the practice is characterised according to several sets of questions. Here, I give a survey of the ones that are most relevant for my investigation.

Firstly, accountability can be characterised as (1) accountability *for* something or (2) accountability *to* someone (Tsai 2011). In examining the accountability *for* something, “government accountability is conceptualized as the responsibility of government officials for representing majority preferences and implementing the government’s policies effectively” (p. 6). In examining the accountability *to* someone, “government accountability is conceptualized as the responsibility of government officials to answer for its behavior to citizens” (ibid).

Secondly, from the perspective of the accountability *for* something, we may distinguish between (a) performance accountability and (b) policy-making accountability. Performance accountability “refers to the ability of citizens, first, to observe whether the government is implementing its policies effectively and efficiently, and, second, to hold them to account for their behavior” (ibid). Policy-making accountability refers to “the ability of citizens to ensure that government policies are representative and reflect the preferences of the population” (ibid).

Finally, from the perspective of the accountability *to* someone, we can distinguish between (i) *vertical* and (ii) *horizontal* accountability:

In vertical accountability, citizens and societal actors such as civic groups, voluntary associations, and mass media seek to hold the government officials above them accountable.

In horizontal accountability, agencies and offices within the state, such as auditing agencies, oversight commissions, or the legislative branch, oversee other branches or offices within government. (ibid)

In other words, while in vertical accountability, account holders are under the agents held to

account, in horizontal accountability, the agents and account holders are at the same level of institutional hierarchy.

In general, I am interested in accountability practices that take place in parliaments, where the political agent held accountable is an executive and the account holders are the members of parliaments, those who are elected to represent the general public. Such practices are cases of *vertical* accountability, in which the agent in government is accountable *to* the general public through its elected representatives, *for* both its (a) performance and (b) policy-making.⁸ Thinking of the accountability argument, we may assume that a good defence of the evaluative standpoint needs to include premises that relate to these two aspects. In the next section, I will further detail the relevant premises on the basis of scholarship on good governance.

3.2. (Good) governance

When theorising about good governance, two aspects are usually crucial: representation and effectiveness (Colomer 2011).

A representative government, if it is not effective at decision making, may generate frustration and conflict among different groups. In turn, administrative effectiveness, if it is not based on fair representation of the society, can be counterproductive, since it may produce arbitrary governmental decisions against the citizens' majority preferences. (Colomer 2011, p. 687)

These two aspects have become generally associated with “a set of institutional rules, coordination, and decision-making processes aimed at attaining effectiveness in defining collective goals, making priorities, and producing outcomes” (ibid).

For the accountability practice of my interest, this means that a satisfactory conduct of the executive agent is one which involves policy making and implementation, i.e. plans, policies and/or actions, that are both representative and effective. Representative can be understood as being in line with collective goals, with the institutional rules and processes which are in force, with the promises made and with the commitments undertaken. Effective can be understood in relations to the way priorities are addressed and to the outcomes achieved.

Considering the evaluative accountability argument, we may think of each of the elements identified as a premise in a symptomatic scheme. For example:

Satisfactory conduct is true of the executive agent A
 because *having policies/plans/actions which are in line with the collective goals* is true of A
 and *having policies/plans/actions which are in line with the collective goals* is an indicator
 of *satisfactory conduct*

Figure 5. A symptomatic argument defending the conduct of a political executive agent A

Other premises would include the assertions that A's policies, plans and actions are *in line with institutional rules and processes which are in force*, are *in line with the commitments undertaken*

⁸ The specific subject of my interest is those accountability practices which occur simultaneously with other practices, in particular simultaneously with the deliberation of future courses of action. The debates on statements in the EP are an interesting example.

by A, are *effective in addressing priorities*, and finally, are *effective in bringing about good outcomes and/or preventing bad outcomes*. If taken together, these would indicate governance that is both representative and effective.

A successful defence of an evaluative claim about the conduct of an executive agent A would have several lines of symptomatic arguments such as the above, linked in a conductive argumentation structure. The complete argument will be put together in the next section.

4. The proposal

Before the overall argument is laid out let me make an important remark. The assessment of a political executive's conduct is multi-dimensional in different ways. Two are relevant here: (i) the assessment of the conduct can be made in relation to the multiple areas of the agent's responsibility and (ii) in each of the areas, several factors determine what a satisfactory conduct is. As a result, we may need an intermediate level of argumentation where the assessment of the agent's conduct is divided into the multiple areas of the responsibility of the executive agent.

- 1 The conduct of the agent A is satisfactory
- 1.1a A's conduct in area x is satisfactory
- 1.1b A's conduct in area y is satisfactory
- 1.1c A's conduct in area z is satisfactory
- ...
- (1.1') Satisfactory conduct in areas x, y and z ... is an indicator of a satisfactory conduct

The premises are linked as a conductive symptomatic argument, which makes a satisfactory conduct the outcome of the accumulation of both positive and negative assessments.

An agent may acknowledge that in a certain area, let us say *in area z, her conduct is not satisfactory (1.1c)*, and still maintain that overall, *her conduct is satisfactory (1)*. In such a case, the linking premise (1.1') would have to express such a balance of considerations, which may also be defended by further premises. For example, as follows:

- 1 The conduct of the Prime Minister is satisfactory
- 1.1a The Prime Minister's conduct in the area of security is satisfactory
- 1.1b The Prime Minister's conduct in the area of health is satisfactory
- 1.1c The Prime Minister's conduct in the area of education is *not* satisfactory
- ...
- (1.1') Satisfactory conduct in the area of security and health is an indicator of a satisfactory conduct, even if the conduct in the area of education is not
- 1.1'.1a The country is facing such difficult security threats that it is most important that the conduct in security is satisfactory
- 1.1'.1b The unsatisfactory conduct in education is largely the result of external unforeseeable circumstances

The threshold that makes the conduct satisfactory is usually itself a matter of disagreement, hence the need to defend it by advancing arguments in support of the linking premise (1.1'.1a and 1.1'.1b in defence of 1.1').

In defending the conduct of the agent in a certain area, say area x, the symptomatic argument sketched in Figure 5 above is used as follows:

- 1.1a A's conduct in area x is satisfactory
- 1.1a.1a A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with the collective goals
(1.1a.1a') (A policy/plan/action which is in line with the collective goals is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
- 1.1a.1b A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with institutional rules and processes which are in force
(1.1a.1b') (A policy/plan/action which is in line with institutional rules and processes which are in force is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
- 1.1a.1c A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with A's commitments
(1.1a.1c') (A policy/plan/action which is in line with the commitments undertaken by A is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
- 1.1a.1d A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is effective in addressing priorities
(1.1a.1d') (A policy/plan/action which is effective in addressing priorities is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
- 1.1a.1e A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is effective in bringing about good outcomes / preventing bad outcomes
(1.1a.1e') (A policy/plan/action which is effective in bringing about good outcomes / preventing bad outcomes is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
- (1.1a.1') *Considering collective goals, institutional rules and processes which are in force, A's commitments, the priorities and the outcomes achieved by policy-i/plan-i/action-i, A's conduct in area x can be considered satisfactory*

The five premises (*1.1a.1a, 1.1a.1b, 1.1a.1c, 1.1a.1d, 1.1a.1e*) represent the different aspects that are necessary for a certain policy, plan or action to indicate satisfactory conduct. They are symptomatic arguments, which is expressed in the linking premises (*1.1a.1a', 1.1a.1b', 1.1a.1c', 1.1a.1d', 1.1a.1e'*).⁹ The premises can be repeated for other policies, plans or actions undertaken by the agent.

The premises are linked in a conductive structure, expressed by the overall linking premise (*1.1a.1'*). Similar to premises *1.1a, 1.1b and 1.1c*, their strength accumulates into a balance of considerations. This means that there may be cases where one of the premises cannot be asserted, and yet, overall, the conduct may still be considered satisfactory. For example, it may be the case that premise *1.1a.1b* cannot be asserted because *A's policy-i/plan-i/action-i is not in line with A's commitments* (and *a policy/plan/action which is not in line with the commitments undertaken by A is an indicator of unsatisfactory conduct*). In case one would still like to defend that *the conduct*

⁹ The positive attitudes assigned as part of the adjective satisfactory can be justified by means of further support for the individual linking premises.

of the agent in area x is satisfactory, one needs to have a linking premise that asserts that, and to justify it. For example, one may argue that:

- 1.1a.1’ Considering collective goals, institutional rules and processes which are in force, the priorities and the outcomes achieved by the government immigration policy, the Prime Minister’s conduct in relation to borders and security can be considered satisfactory, even though the government policy is not in line with the commitments undertaken by the Prime Minister in his election manifesto.
- 1.1a.1’¹ The commitments undertaken by the Prime Minister to reduce the number of accepted migrants had to be scarified in view of the emerging humanitarian crisis, unforeseeable at the time election commitments had been undertaken.

Here, again, an agent needs to set the threshold and justify that.

Overall, the complete argument would look as in Figure 6 below:

1	The conduct of the political agent A is satisfactory
1.1a	A’s conduct in area x is satisfactory
1.1b	A’s conduct in area y is satisfactory
1.1c	A’s conduct in area z is satisfactory
...	
(1.1’)	Satisfactory conduct in areas x, y and z is an indicator of a satisfactory conduct
1.1a.1a	A’s policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with the collective goals
(1.1a.1a’)	(A policy/plan/action which is in line with the collective goals is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
1.1a.1b	A’s policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with institutional rules and processes which are in force
(1.1a.1b’)	(A policy/plan/action which is in line with institutional rules and processes which are in force is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
1.1a.1c	A’s policy-i/plan-i/action-i is in line with A’s commitments
(1.1a.1c’)	(A policy/plan/action which is in line with the commitments undertaken by A is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
1.1a.1d	A’s policy-i/plan-i/action-i is effective in addressing priorities
(1.1a.1d’)	(A policy/plan/action which is effective in addressing priorities is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
1.1a.1e	A’s policy-i/plan-i/action-i is effective in bringing about good outcomes / preventing bad outcomes
(1.1a.1e’)	(A policy/plan/action which is effective in bringing about good outcomes / preventing bad outcomes is an indicator of satisfactory conduct)
(1.1a.1’)	<i>Considering collective goals, institutional rules and processes which are in force, A’s commitments, the priorities and the outcomes achieved by policy-i/plan-i/action-i, A’s conduct in area x can be considered satisfactory</i>

Figure 6. The complete argument defending the conduct of a political executive agent A

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I addressed the question of what counts as a good defence of an evaluative claim, in particular claims about the conduct of a political agent who is in government. Following earlier work by argumentation scholars, I assumed that there is a link between the type of standpoint defended and what counts as a good defence of it. I synthesised insights from argumentation and philosophical scholarship and sketched a general proposal for how to defend an evaluative claim. Then I made my proposal more specific by incorporating insights from political scholarship on accountability and good governance. My goal was to make a proposal that is best suitable for analysing and evaluating the type of evaluative claims that is typically discussed in parliamentary accountability practices where an agent in government is accountable, vertically, to the general public through its elected representatives.

The general proposal I made can be a good starting point for reconstructing, analysing and assessing evaluative standpoints in general. More investigation needs to be done in order to take into account possible differences between various types of evaluative standpoints. The proposal specific to accountability arguments can help us better understand, and assess the argumentative aspect of accountability practices. A disclaimer is due here. The proposal I am making here is meant to be fit for examining accountability practices which are not triggered by accusations of misconduct. These are the day-to-day accountability practices where the agent held to account is expected to inform the account holder about her plans, policies and actions and to justify them, without any specific allegation of misconduct advanced by the account holder. From the argumentative perspective, accountability practices which are triggered by accusations of misconduct are significantly different. While in both types of practices, the agent has the burden of proof to defend the claim that her performance is satisfactory. Only in those practices triggered by accusations does the account holder have a burden of proof to defend the claim that the conduct of the agent is not satisfactory. In these practices, the agent also has the obligation to respond to the particular accusations against her, which makes the defence of her conduct significantly different.

The proposal made here is preliminary. It can certainly do well with some refinement, including some simplification. There is definitely a need to apply it to the examination of actual cases, to test it and hopefully also refine it and simplify it.

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