

Difficult is easy

This note has been triggered by a recent text, whose authors will remain unmentioned. After introducing "tableaux" with separate columns for "assertions" and "goals", the text continues as follows:

"Any tableau is equivalent to the one obtained by removing an assertion and adding its negation as a new goal [...]. Similarly, any tableau is equivalent to the one obtained by removing a goal and adding its negation as a new assertion. Thus we could manage with a system that has no goals or a system that has no assertions, but the distinction between assertions and goals does make derivations easier to understand."

While reading the introduction of tableaux, I had already been worried by the distinction between assertions and goals because it seemed a superfluous distinction whose main effect was to double the length of many sentences (e.g. "the tableau is true if some instance of at least one of the assertions is false or some instance of at least one of the goals is true"), and I was wondering whether I was missing something. Quod non. The quoted paragraph nicely settles that, indeed, we don't need both assertions and goals, but it makes the question why the superfluous distinction was introduced in the first place --or, as the case may be, was kept-- only more burning.

And then comes the answer: "the distinction [...] does make derivations easier to understand". Now I ask you, how can an intelligent reader be expected to buy that nonsense? It has just been established that the distinction is so meaningless that we have no criterion to choose which column to use! The distinction has been identified as mental lumber; yet we are supposed to accept that carrying the burden around makes understanding easier.

The answer is so patently nonsensical that one begins to wonder how such a text could have been written at all. One possibility is that the authors have acted on the principle "Complexity sells better" and that, in an effort at promoting what they perceive as their careers, have welcomed the opportunity of lengthening their article by a suitable dose of obfuscation. Another possibility is that they acted on the principle that the average reader's mind is so muddled that you should not confuse it by clarity. In both cases their scientific integrity is at stake.

Let me close by quoting Strunk and White --mostly White in this case--: "No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader's intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing."

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