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# Commentary on Alvarez

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Commentary on:     A. Alvarez's "Critical Thinking as Arguing Against Oneself: Informal
                   Logic in the Philippines"

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According to Professor Alvarez, the Acuña and Johnson models of argument construction are different in at least three ways. I will present some problems with each one.

The first purported difference is that the Acuña model emphasizes that one should *first* convince oneself *before* attempting to convince others, while Johnson's model focuses on convincing others. Prof. Alvarez states that to convince "oneself does not merely refer to causing oneself to be psychologically predisposed to accepting a claim but (1) thinking of the best reasons to support or reject a claim, and (2) comparing the argument and counter-argument to determine which [conclusion] is better supported by evidence." I suspect that he is referring to the *best* counter-arguments. For if we compare our arguments to only weak counter-arguments, this procedure would generally just reinforce our attachment to our own views, and not foster a genuine evaluation of our views.

Given this explanation of the meaning of "convincing oneself", there seem to be more similarities than differences between both models. Whenever we try to rationally convince *others* who have the best opposing views against our argument, we inescapably reconsider our own argument in the light of their objections, and if we are to be reasonable, we must be open to changing our minds in the light of those objections. So, in such cases we indireclty use the perspectives of others to *evaluate ourselves*. Consequently, Johnson's model, as reported by Prof. Alvarez, implies the kind of *self*-critical model explicitly advanced by Acuña, and it also puts us in the position of convincing or "reconvincing" ourselves as we consider the best opposing views. I am not sure whether we could determine in the Johnson model whether we first convince ourselves or the others.

But even if we could, why should one *first* convince oneself *before* convincing others in any model of argument construction? No evidence is provided. So, according to Acuña's Skeptical Rule that we should never accept the truth of any statement or belief unless there is adequate evidence for it, we should not accept this rule or argument construction, at least until someone provides adequate justification.

I have additional reasons for not accepting this rule. *What is the logical value of* this rule? Whether the best opposing view against one's own argument comes from oneself or from another person whom one is trying to convince is logically irrelevant to the construction and evaluation of an argument. What is relevant is the sincere attempt to consider fairly and impartially the best opposing views, *regardless of their origin*, and to apply correctly the standards of reasoning to the best opposing views and to one's own argument.

Secondly, there is a good reason to encourage students to do the opposite of Acuña's rule: they should first attempt to convince *others* who have the best opposing views. For there is a general disposition among us, at least in Western cultures, to accept more easily one's own arguments and ideas than to accept those of others, and to overlook one's weaknesses and blind spots. One way of counteracting this inclination is to develop the habit of putting ourselves in the

position of the best critics of our own argument, and trying to convince them by considering fairly their best objections. Acuña's proposal in Western culture would slow down the identification of those weaknesses.

Perhaps Acuña's rule stems from some cultural differences. For instance, perhaps in the Philippines people are more critical toward themselves than toward others. If this were the case, and if a Philippine first convinced other Philippines, then in such a context one could successfully convince others to believe a conclusion that is *not* well justified. So in order to avoid such consequences, it would be more responsible to first attempt to convince the most demanding critic, who in this case could be oneself. However, such consequences could still be avoided *without* convincing oneself first if, after improving one's argument through self-criticism, one proceeded to re-convince the others to accept the corrected or improved argument. The practical (and not logical) problem here is that we might not have the time or energy for another discussion, or the others might not be open to changing their minds again.

My comments suggest that there are some problems with the rule that we should first convince ourselves before others. So, if we eliminate this rule, there is one less difference between the Acuña and Johnson models. I invite Professor Alvarez to clarify and justify that rule.

The elimination of that rule does not undermine Acuña's important explicit emphasis on impartial self-criticism through the construction of the best counter-arguments. In fact his approach in the Philippines has lead to a very interesting pedagogical innovation: a Critical Thinking Festival in which teams argue against themselves and not against other teams. The winner constructs the best complete argument, which requires the construction of the best counter-arguments, and the appropriate changes to one's argument in the light of the best counter-arguments. I invite Prof. Alvarez to give us more information about these critical thinking festivals.

Another purported difference between both models is that the obligation in Johnson is directed towards anticipating objections while in Acuña's model it is directed towards the "critical establishment of the reliability of a belief or claim [i.e., the a conclusion]". The problem here is that one anticipates objections *precisely in order to* better establish the reliability of one's conclusion. This description of both models misleadingly suggests a difference between them because it portrays Johnson's model in terms of a *means* for establishing a reliable conclusion, but conveys the Acuña model in terms of the intended *result*, which is a reliable conclusion.

A third purported difference is that "Johnson's model imagines another reasoner while [the Acuña model considers] only one reasoner." I'm not sure how significant this difference is if both approaches result in the genuine consideration of the best opposing view. Moreover, the Acuña model creates some pedagogical problems: how could instructors know whether their students are considering only themselves and not imagining the best critic against their argument? But the more important question is why should we impose such a restriction when in some cases it is helpful to take into account a whole audience of knowledgeable critics, for some of them might have relevant knowledge or abilities that we lack?

Prof. Alvarez has made a few references to Acuña's textbook, *Philosophical Analysis*. I have examined it and focused most of my attention on the chapters dealing with counter-argumentation. It does give a few detailed examples of counter-arguments, but I find that it does not present the best counter-arguments. The textbook also limits counter-arguments to arguments against one's intended conclusion, and fails to consider the best arguments *against premises*, or the best (most probable) counterexamples *against the support* of those premises. So the approach

to arguing against oneself is limited. Another weakness is that there are no guidelines to estimate the strength of support that is less than conclusive, and as a result it is not possible to compare in a reliable way the strength of support of premises in arguments and counter-arguments. But this is a weakness that is common to all textbooks of which I am aware. Despite these weaknesses, I think that the textbook deserves praise for explicitly emphasizing and modeling in detail one kind of counter-argument, and making it an integral part of argument construction. It will serve as a springboard from which to reach greater pedagogical heights in the teaching of some critical thinking skills.

In my comments I have advanced objections against the rule that one should first convince oneself before convincing others; entertained a possible cultural difference that would partly account for this rule; argued against other alleged differences between the Acuña and Johnson models; mentioned a few weaknesses in Acuña's textbook; and invited Prof. Alvarez to give us more information on the Critical Thinking Festival.