May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Freeman

Derek Allen

Author: Derek Allen

In Response To: James Freeman's *The truth about truth as a condition of premise adequacy*

Freeman is concerned with two problems. The first is that of understanding informal logic as a discipline. The second is what Ralph Johnson has called the integration problem; as Johnson characterizes it, this is the problem of how we get together the truth and acceptability requirements for premise adequacy. I will begin by summarizing Freeman's response to each of his two problems, and then turn to critical comment.

Informal logic holds that premises are not to be evaluated only for their logical status or overall consistency but may in addition be evaluated by considering whether they are doubtful or problematic. According to Freeman, "[i]f the opposite of being problematic is being acceptable, then to be cogent the premises of an argument must be acceptable"; or, as I think Freeman meant to phrase the consequent of this conditional, for an argument to be cogent its premises must be acceptable. Acceptability is an epistemological notion, at least on Johnson and Blair's account of problematic premise. But then, Freeman asks, "[b]y assessing premises for acceptability, ... are we still doing logic? Is this rather an exercise in applied epistemology? ... if assessing premises for acceptability is part of informal logic, is informal logic still logic? .... By incorporating issues of premise acceptability, what sort of discipline is informal logic?" With this question we have Freeman's first problem - that of understanding informal logic as a discipline. In his view, we cannot answer the question "what sort of discipline is informal logic?" unless we can give a positive characterization of acceptability. And this Freeman does. "Acceptability", he says, "amounts to justification; more precisely, a premise is acceptable to me as critical challenger or assessor of an argument just in case I am justified in accepting that premise." But this, he notes, does not advance the question of the nature of informal logic in the absence of an understanding of justification. Accordingly, Freeman presents an account of justification, one that he regards as especially appropriate for a definition of acceptability. "If I am aware of grounds for a belief, [and if] there is a presumption of reliability or trustworthiness for the source of these grounds, and [if] I am aware of no defeaters of this presumptive reliability, the belief is justified." A premise that is thus justified from my point of view is acceptable for me. Accordingly, Freeman offers the following definition of premise acceptability:

"A premise that p is acceptable for S if and only if S is justified in believing that p

where being justified is explicated according to [Freeman's] definition."

Freeman's definition of being justified is internalist, in virtue of its awareness conditions. Accordingly his notion of premise acceptability is also internalist. His argument here runs as follows:

"Acceptability is defined in terms of justification".

"[A] belief's being justified is an internal matter".

Therefore, acceptability is an internal notion.

In Freeman's view, the fact that acceptability is an internal notion "has important implications for understanding informal logic as a discipline". This is because defining the informal-logic notion of acceptability as Freeman defines it, namely in terms of an internalist notion of justification, has the consequence that informal logic, like deductive logic, "remains an internal discipline".

This, then, is one dividend for Freeman of his definition of acceptability. There is a second dividend, namely a straightforward solution to Freeman's second problem - the integration problem.

Here Freeman's thinking is the following. Just as we may distinguish between the objective and subjective rightness of acts, so we may distinguish between the subjective and objective correctness of arguments. An argument is objectively correct only if all its premises are true; it is subjectively correct for a given critical receiver of the argument only if all its premises are acceptable to that person. The truth condition for premise adequacy is objective because whether an argument's premises are true is an objective feature of the argument. The acceptability condition for premise adequacy is subjective because whether or not a person S is justified in believing a premise p, and thus, on Freeman's definition of acceptability, whether premise p is acceptable for S, is a matter of S's awareness, and is therefore a subjective feature of the argument, relative to S. "Objectively, a premise will be adequate just in case it is true. Subjectively, it will be adequate for a person S just in case S has a justified belief in that premise." But what is the relation between subjective and objective adequacy or rightness for premises - that is, between acceptability and truth? Freeman's answer: "The subjective rightness of a premise is the justified belief that the premise is objectively right." By seeing acceptability and truth as related in this way, we have an answer to the integration problem. "Truth is the objective criterion of premise adequacy; acceptability - understood as justification on an internalist analysis - is the subjective criterion. The subjective criterion is satisfied for S just in case S has a justified belief that the objective criterion is satisfied."

This completes my summary; I turn now to critical comment.

Freeman's response to his first problem - that of understanding informal logic as a discipline - relies on his definition of premise acceptability. "Identifying acceptable premises, acceptable at least from my point of view as the critical evaluator of an argument", is, for Freeman, "a matter of taking into account states or conditions to which I have internal epistemic access." Freeman is speaking here of what we may call first-person premise-acceptability assessments. In an assessment of this sort, the question is whether some premise, p, is acceptable for me. But what about second- or third-person

premise-acceptability assessments? Suppose that what I want to know is whether premise p, in an argument I am addressing to you, is acceptable for you. Or suppose I want to know whether premise p, in an argument that Johnson is addressing to Blair, is acceptable for Blair. On Freeman's definition of premise acceptability, what I want to know in the first of these cases is whether you are justified in believing that p, while what I want to know in the second case is whether Blair is justified in believing that p. But in neither case is this for me "a matter of taking into account states or conditions to which I have internal epistemic access". Rather, on Freeman's internalist analysis of justification, it is for me a matter of taking into account (if I can get access to them) states and conditions which are internal to someone else, and so external to me. Identifying acceptable premises, then, is not always an internal matter. Thus, defining acceptability as Freeman defines it does not have the consequence that informal logic remains *wholly* an internal discipline.

Next I want to consider Freeman's solution to the integration problem. As characterized by Johnson, this is the problem of how we get together the truth and acceptability requirements for premise adequacy. Freeman's solution relies upon seeing acceptability and truth as related in a certain way. As he puts it: "A premise *p* will be acceptable for S just in case S's belief that *p is true* is justified." Now if premise p is acceptable for S, then it is subjectively right for S, while if premise p is true, then it is objectively right. Accordingly, "the subjective rightness of a premise is the justified belief that the premise is objectively right." Seeing truth and acceptability as related in this way gives us an answer to the integration problem. To repeat: "Truth is the objective criterion of premise adequacy; acceptability - understood as justification on an internalist analysis - is the subjective criterion. The subjective criterion is satisfied for S just in case S has a justified belief that the objective criterion is satisfied." This is Freeman's solution to the integration problem.

The first point I want to make about Freeman's solution is that if the integration problem is the problem of getting together the truth and acceptability requirements for premise adequacy, then its solution does not require the classification of those requirements as, respectively, objective and subjective. Consider Freeman's statement that "[t]he subjective criterion [of premise adequacy] is satisfied just in case S has a justified belief that the objective criterion is satisfied". The subjective criterion is the acceptability criterion; the objective criterion is the truth criterion. Accordingly, we may rewrite Freeman's statement as follows: the acceptability criterion of premise adequacy is satisfied for S just in case S has a justified belief that the truth criterion is satisfied. This formulation links the acceptability and truth criteria for premise adequacy, but dispenses with the terms "subjective" and "objective".

Further, and this is my next critical point, the link, so described, does not depend upon an internalist analysis of justification. Rather, it depends upon the thesis that, as Freeman puts it, "[a]cceptability amounts to justification" and upon the further thesis, assumed but not mentioned by Freeman, that to believe that p is to believe that p is true. Thus, suppose that the acceptability criterion

of premise adequacy is satisfied for S in respect of premise p. If this means that S has a justified belief that p, and if to believe that p is to believe that p is true, then the acceptability criterion of premise adequacy is satisfied for S in respect of premise p just in case S has a justified belief that p is true - that is, just in case S has a justified belief that p satisfies the truth criterion. This analysis does not depend upon an internalist account of justification, though to be sure it does depend upon a justificationist account of premise acceptability. So the solution to the integration problem, understood as Johnson understands it, does not require an internalist account of justification any more than it requires that the truth and acceptability requirements be characterized as, respectively, objective and subjective.

(I speak here of the integration problem "understood as Johnson understands it" because Freeman also gives a second characterization of the problem. On Freeman's second characterization, the integration problem is that of "integrating the objective and subjective conceptions of argument correctness". I won't say anything about *this* integration problem; rather, my concern will continue to be with what I will hereafter call *Johnson's* integration problem.)

Freeman's solution to Johnson's integration problem relies, as I have noted, on an account of premise acceptability. There are, however, two accounts of premise acceptability in Freeman's paper, and they are inconsistent with one another. The two accounts are these:

> (1) "A premise that *p* is acceptable for S if and only if S is justified in believing that *p*".

(2) "A premise *p* will be acceptable for S just in case S's belief that *p is true* is justified" The first of the accounts speaks of S's being justified in believing that p; the second speaks of S's belief that p. Now a person may be justified in believing that p without actually believing that p. Robert Audi gives the following example: "simply by taking stock of the size and texture of the spruce [before me], I am justified in believing that it has more than 289 needles; but I did not actually believe that until the subject of its needles arose as I thought about the tree. Thus, I was justified in believing it before I actually did believe it" (Audi 1988: 2). On Freeman's first account of premise acceptability - the justified-in-believing account - a premise p may be acceptable for S without S's believing that p, but on his second account of premise acceptability - the justified-belief account - a premise p is acceptable for S only if S believes that p. Thus the two accounts are mutually inconsistent.

Freeman's solution to Johnson's integration problem is expressed in terms of the second account. Thus when Freeman asks what is the relation between acceptability and truth, he begins his answer by saying that "[a] premise *p* will be acceptable for S just in case S's belief that *p is true* is justified". This is Freeman's second account of premise acceptability. But this account of premise acceptability is mistaken. Whether a premise p is acceptable for S

does not depend upon whether S believes that p, but on whether S has good reason to believe that p. Accordingly, Freeman's second account of premise acceptability needs to be revised. If it is revised to say that a premise p will be acceptable for S just in case S is justified in believing that p is true, then Freeman's two accounts of premise acceptability will be mutually consistent. Or, rather, there will then be just one account expressed in two irrelevantly different ways. But then Freeman's solution to Johnson's integration problem will need to be reformulated accordingly. Rather than say, in answer to the question what is the relation between acceptability and truth, that "[a] premise *p* will be acceptable for S just in case S's belief that *p is true* is justified", Freeman will need to say that a premise p will be acceptable for S just in case S is justified in believing that p is true. And rather than say that "[t]he subjective rightness of a premise is the justified belief that the premise is objectively right", Freeman will need to say something like this: the subjective rightness of a premise for S consists in S's being justified in believing that the premise is objectively right. Further, rather than say that "[t]he subjective criterion is satisfied for S just in case S has a justified belief that the objective criterion is satisfied", Freeman will need to say that the subjective criterion is satisfied for S just in case S is justified in believing that the objective criterion is satisfied.

My next question is whether Freeman's solution to Johnson's integration problem eliminates what for Johnson is the worry that explains why the integration problem *is* a problem. The worry, as Johnson put it in his commentary on my 1997 OSSA paper, is that the requirements of truth and acceptability "can often pull in opposite directions: a premise may be true but not acceptable; a premise may be false but acceptable" (Johnson 1998). But of course this is also true on Freeman's approach. If a premise p is acceptable for S just in case S is justified in believing that p, then, given that S may be justified in believing that p even if p is false, a premise may be false but acceptable for S; equally, it may be true but not acceptable for S, for even if it is true S may not be justified in believing it. In Freeman's language, a premise that is subjectively right may be objectively wrong, or it may be subjectively wrong but objectively right. Thus Freeman's solution to Johnson's integration problem leaves intact what for Johnson is the worry that explains why the problem is a problem.

But now we need to ask, and this is my final question, whether that worry is a genuine worry. Should we be disturbed by the fact that the truth and acceptability requirements for premise adequacy can often pull in opposite directions, since a true premise may not be acceptable and an acceptable premise may be false? To put it differently, should we be disturbed by the fact that the truth and acceptability requirements are extensionally nonequivalent? I don't think so. The two requirements belong to different perspectives for evaluating arguments - the truth requirement to a logical perspective, the acceptability requirement to an epistemological perspective. An argument may be good relative to some logical perspective but fail to be good relative to some epistemological perspective. What is disturbing, or even surprising, about this? But if the worry behind Johnson's integration problem is not

genuine, then, if it is the reason why that problem is a problem, it follows that Johnson's integration problem is not a genuine problem after all.

To be sure, there is *this* problem: what is the relation between acceptability and truth? And to this problem Freeman provides an answer. Reformulated in terms of his first account of premise acceptability, his answer is that a premise is acceptable for S just in case S is justified in believing it to be true. And this answer is, I think, correct.

References

Audi, Robert (1988). *Belief, Justification, and Knowledge*. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Johnson, Ralph, (1998). "Commentary on Allen's 'Should We Assess the Basic Premises of an Argument for Truth or Acceptability?'", *Argumentation and Rhetoric*, CD-Rom. Hans V. Hansen, Christopher W. Tindale, and Athena V. Colman (Eds.). St. Catharines, Ontario: Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation.