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Commentary on Johnson

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Commentary on Ralph H. Johnson's "Revisiting the Logical/Dialectical/Rhetorical Triumvirate"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Johnson's analysis of what he terms the Triumvirate View and its accompanying Tripartite Distinction raises several critical concerns that merit review. My purpose in this commentary is to reconceptualize the value-added nature of Wenzel's original project, and to suggest where its greatest utility may lie. With respect to the primary focus of Johnson's argument, I'm inclined to agree with some of the reservations being advanced. However, there are some qualifications that I would place on outright acceptance of the position taken.

The analysis appropriately credits Wenzel for providing an approach to argument that has merited attention by a number of scholars. While I would not rely on a Google search as the primary evidence for its importance, as there are multiple sources not referenced by that search engine, it is nonetheless the case that the Triumvirate has had a strong impact on argument studies.

My approach will be to first chronicle some of that influence in an area not cited by Johnson. What I will argue is that, irrespective of the faults Johnson cites (assuming for the moment that they are in fact fatal flaws), the LDR trio and its distinctive nature as product, process, procedure has a strong pedagogical utility. Wenzel's framing of argument functions, as I hope to explain later, as a *convenient fiction*. However lax its particulars in sustaining distinctions, it remains a highly convenient way to address broad contours of argument for undergraduates. With this review in hand, I will then turn to a more focused review of specific claims made with respect to the flawed character of the theoretical frame.

2. A PEDAGOGICAL JUSTIFICATION

Although not aimed at undergraduates, I want to begin with a source Johnson cites. Christopher Tindale (1999) frames his text, *Acts of Arguing*, in the same manner as Johnson with respect to an early reliance on Aristotle and Perelman. He adopts the same

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frame in his 2004 *Rhetorical Argumentation*. The definitions he provides are a useful starting point in laying out the manner in which the Triumvirate has been conceived:

The *logical* emphasizes the product of statements collected in the relationship of premises and conclusions [...]

The *dialectical* sense of argument focuses attention on the argumentative exchanges within a dialogue and the moves that might be involved. There are several dialogues of interest, such as the quarrel, the negotiation, the debate, or the inquiry [...]

The third division is the *rhetorical*, which emphasizes argument as a process. Here attention is paid to the means used in argumentative communications between arguer and audience. (pp. 4-5)

One might note the rather loose use of ‘dialogue’ in the consideration of dialectic argument above—a concern that I suspect Johnson and I share. I’ll return to the dialogue/dialectic distinction at a later point.

Inch and Warnick (2010) address the same issues in their introduction to what they term a “co-orientational view of argument” in this manner:

These are not three different kinds of arguments, they are three different ways of looking at argumentation. Each perspective emphasizes a different set of functions and features of argumentation [...]

The logical perspective asks, “Is the argument sound?” The dialectical perspective asks, “Has the discussion been handled so as to achieve a candid and critical examination of all aspects of the issue in question?” And the rhetorical perspective asks, “Has the arguer constructed the argument so as to successfully influence a particular audience?” All three perspectives are useful and necessary, and the significance of any one perspective at any time depends on the arguer’s purpose and the situation in which the argument is made. (p. 35)

What is most significant in their approach is that “perspective” is operationalized in terms of a general question that frames the primary function of each separate entity. In addition, context and purpose and its impact on the relative importance of any one perspective is clearly addressed.

Karen and Donald Rybacki (2004) also frame their introduction to the historical development of argument in terms of Wenzel’s distinctions:

We can think of these three perspectives as [...] three different ways of understanding how argumentation functions as an instrument of communication. Each gives us a different focus on the structure and use of argumentation, and [...] of what is meant by “good” argumentation.

First, the *rhetorical perspective* explores how we use communication to influence or change others [...]

Second, the *dialectical perspective* explores the structure of conversations. [...] [It] is a plan for interaction in which all sides of an issue or opinion are raised and resolved through discussion.

Third, the *logical perspective* offers a series of formal rules for distinguishing sound arguments from unsound ones. (pp. 7-8)

Note that their reference to logic restricts its field of operation to formal reasoning—a move that ignores the work done by informal logicians and others to broaden the domain in meaningful ways. Although I and others might wish a broader view had been taken, they are following a highly traditional orientation toward the perspectives.

Richard Rieke, Malcolm Sillars and Tarla Rai Peterson (2009) offer a slightly different approach to the same basic set of distinctions. Although they do not cite Wenzel, their reference to an earlier work by Daniel O’Keefe (1977) reminds us that the

conversation around “process” and “product” predates Wenzel’s work—a conversation he was quite familiar with as he developed his own conceptual frame. O’Keefe (1977) suggested there are two “senses” of argument: Argument1 and Argument2. Argument1 is perceived as the product of argument—a claim plus a reason—which constitutes a specific “communicative act” (p. 121). Argument2 is the process-oriented view of argument—what Rieke, Sillars, and Peterson reference as “argumentation” or the engagement in arguing between people (p. 9). They go on to distinguish (following Montgomery and Baxter’s (1998) ‘relational dialectics’ model) dialogue as the internal facet they name “critical thinking” from the external facet they term “dialectics” (pp. 13-17).

The foregoing should be sufficient in noting that the idea behind Wenzel’s attempt to coordinate the relationship among logic, dialectic and rhetoric is alive and well in contemporary argumentation textbooks aimed at undergraduates. They share, with Tindale, what might be termed broad brush strokes across the three domains as a means of indicating their relevance in the study of argument. Having used these texts in teaching argumentation, I can also attest to their utility in demarcating, at a broad level, the respective orientations of each as they impact what will be involved in building and evaluating arguments as the course progresses. It is for this reason that I employ the phrase “convenient fiction.” However fictional the actual distinctions are when subjected to close scrutiny—do they stand up under critical examination?—they are a convenient “peg” on which to hang one’s differentiation of conceptual frames.

3. A PERSPECTIVE ON PERSPECTIVES

Does *perspective* require a definition. While noting that the term is not clearly defined by Wenzel, one might also ask—it is thus unclear? What is there about the term that is not understood by its ordinary use in everyday contexts? A quick perusal of its multiple uses does suggest the term is far more complex than a simple phrase would cover, such as “a point of view.” While its etymology suggests a focus on sight—“to look through” or “see clearly” (Miriam-Webster Online) other functions abound:

The state of existing in space before the eye
 The state of one's ideas, the facts known to one, etc., in having a meaningful interrelationship
 Of or pertaining to the art of perspective, or represented according to its laws.
 A view or vista
 A mental view or outlook
 The relationship of aspects of a subject to each other and to a whole
 Subjective evaluation of relative significance; a point of view. (Dictionary.com)

Given the multiple ways in which the term can be used in everyday discourse, it is perhaps no wonder the question is raised. However, given the above, we can stipulate a “perspective” on the term as an “orientation toward an object of inquiry.” Unlike “method,” which presumes a specific pattern of actions or behaviours in relation to an object or event, an orientation is a way of being in relation to that object or event. It is a positionality or stance that might be expressed in terms of “starting point.” “From where I stand [...]” is one way of suggesting what the term represents. In fact, Wenzel (1990) does offer his own “definition”—as he notes Brockreide’s explanation as “a strategy of emphasis” and goes on to say:

It means attending to an object or a phenomenon from one point of view at a time so as to highlight some feature in the foreground of our understanding while allowing other features to recede into the background. It allows us to shift our viewpoint as our purposes and interests require. (p. 11).

In this context, it is easier to see how the significance of either one of the three variables—logic-dialectic-rhetoric—might be different. All are of equal importance at a general level. This brings us to a second concern Johnson raises—what is meant by “equal?”

If we accept the locution, borrowed from Aristotle, that we do not deliberate about those things that are self evident, we might find an answer. I suspect the reason Wenzel does not provide an argument supporting the suggestion “that these three perspectives are of equal importance” (Johnson, p. 9) is precisely because it is a taken for granted assumption. Wenzel was writing at a time when the discussion of the role of logic, as a specific illustration, was undergoing a transformation within rhetorical studies writ large, and argumentation theory (as discussed within communication departments) specifically. This was due in large part to the work of Ehninger and Brockreide in bringing Toulmin’s work to the field of study. My own work in seeing argument as “pragmatic justification” (1990) was premised on that transformation as well. Thus, Wenzel was fully conversant, as multiple references in the work we are reviewing attests, with the issues involved.

The key sentence in the quote above, in reference to this issue, suggests we “shift our viewpoint as our purposes and interests require.” What this means is simply that no one perspective is privileged as inherently more important than any other when applied across all instances of argumentative discourse. What determines the relative need for any one of the three perspectives is the end in view: why are we examining the argument? What is our goal? Depending on the answer to that question, we have three broad, non-discipline specific orientations to draw from. In any specific application, whether it is essential to examine the artefact from all three perspectives will depend on the context and our need to know (though it may be wise to do so in some instances). Whether this response is equivalent to Johnsons’ “the most general and vaguest of senses” is arguable (p. 7). I don’t happen to think so, but I can see why one might make that claim.

Perhaps this is an opportune moment to examine that claim in the context Johnson offers it—as a way of noting that there is little to recommend “perspective” as a term denoting much of anything substantive, as there is “no such thing as ‘the rhetorical perspective,’ much less a ‘logical’ or ‘dialectical’ one. I understand the point being made, as Johnson proceeds to “drill down” into the myriad ways each of these terms might be employed with respect to their own complex assortment of particular emphases. We can, for example, discuss textual or critical/cultural criticism as two relatively distinct approaches within a ‘rhetorical’ mode of analysis. It is quite true that each of the terms admits multiple meanings/uses, making a mockery, perhaps, of any attempt to generalize broadly about the overarching role each possesses. A possible answer to Johnson, in reclaiming the value-added nature of an appeal to these three terms, is to focus on answers to questions that are ‘what’ or ‘why’ versus those that focus on ‘how.’ In fleshing this out, I want to re-assert Wenzel’s own definitional claims:

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The rhetorical perspective directs our attention to the occurrence of arguing among people as a natural communication process. (p. 15)

[T]he dialectical perspective calls up a procedural or methodological sense of argument. (p. 16)

[T]he special concerns of the logical perspective are with techniques for representing an argument in a form amenable to criticism and with standards for evaluation. (p. 17)

My point is that each of these orientations responds initially to a question—what are we interested in knowing, or why are we asking for more information about the specific discourse instance? Once we determine the answer to this question, we can then focus on which specific orientation is best able to answer the question. With that second answer in hand, we can “drill down” into the morass of options or possibilities to select that which more clearly addresses our goals. This might be, with respect to logic, a formal validity assessment, or a consideration of the argument’s layout (Toulmin is implied here), or a more ‘informal logic’ approach. The critical toolbox has multiple tools—each may respond to a different sub-question relative to our specific purpose. To say that, is NOT to say that the initial question is “vague” or relatively unimportant because of its own lack of specificity. Whether the above statements adequately capture an ability to go more deeply into any one orientation may be arguable. I would contend, in defending Wenzel’s admittedly general observations, that each is a reasonable representation of a credible “starting point” for more precise analysis. In fact, in the “logic” perspective noted above, he goes on to cover formal, informal, Toulminesque approaches—without privileging any one as the ultimate or superior approach.

A word on “process-procedure-product” may be helpful here—Johnson notes, correctly, that within any one of the Triumvirate, as one engages its implications, one finds themselves unavoidably enmeshed in the other terms. As he notes, process is invoked when engaging dialectically in ways that determine what the product will look like. When engaging rhetorically, one also examines how one speaks as well as what one ends up saying. Nonetheless—I don’t think Wenzel would disagree with this, but might well argue that, at the same time, the broad ‘parallels’ are still in place with respect to the initial thought process that one invokes when moving from one orientation to another.

Where I think Johnson has the strongest argument is in the discussion of a much maligned term—dialectic. I am not claiming that the assertion, for example, that dialectic has become the dominant theme in argument studies, somehow grants it a privileged status for all time. What counts as important in scholarship ebbs and flows across time—at one time, formal reasoning occupied attention within argument texts in communication studies departments. What I am suggesting is that the fact that one perspective is taken as “basic” by any one theorist, or at any point in time, does not, by itself, invalidate the general claim advanced by Wenzel.

As part of his analysis of dialectic, Johnson briefly notes the conflation of that term with “dialogue.” While this is not the occasion for an extended discussion, I would agree with the position taken. As further support, consider Bakhtin’s (1986) comment:

[67] Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices [...] remove the intonations [...] carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness—and that’s how you get dialectics. (ellipses in original; p. 181)

It is unfortunate that we’ve been as “sloppy” with respect to definition—and Johnson’s own summary of the many uses of dialectics is a case in point. As a further example,

Montgomery and Baxter's (1998) sense of "relational dialectics," drawing as it does from Bakhtin, can be seen as continuing a pattern of conflating otherwise distinguishable orientations to communicative interaction.

3. CONCLUSION

In bringing this response to a close, I want to return to the sense of "convenient fiction" noted earlier. To the extent that one adopts Johnson's position on the Triumvirate, a pedagogical use of the concepts remains valuable. In adopting this phrase, one accepts the difficulties involved in applying the concepts with precision, while still noting the broadly conceived distinctive character of each as a point of view.

What I've tried to do, in dealing with the more specific criticism, is to suggest how one might think about Wenzel's overarching purpose in proposing the Triumvirate. At that level of analysis, wherein one raises the initial question—what do I want to know?—orients the person toward one (or more than one) perspective in seeking an answer. It is simply a mechanism for advancing the idea that each has a contribution. It is not a claim that, having exhausted the analytic possibilities of each, one has exhausted the field. It is a claim that, in so doing, one has at least covered some critical issues with respect to the justifiability of one's claim on another's attention.

[Link to paper](#)

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