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May 14th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

The Truth about Orangutans: Defending Acceptability

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1. Introduction: Deep Disagreements between Logic and Rhetoric:

Ralph Johnson (2000), when considering what still ails theories of informal reasoning finds a ready culprit in the form of rhetoric: "Many informal logicians," he writes, " have adopted acceptability as a criterion of premise adequacy. In dropping the truth requirement, informal logicians have—so I believe—been persuaded by rhetorical values and concerns" (2000, 271). This has not been a happy persuasion and rhetoric's influence has been negative, at least on this important front. For Johnson, a viable theory of evaluation must include both truth and acceptability. This gives rise to what he calls the 'Integration Problem' (191), namely, how is a theory of argument evaluation to include both an acceptability criterion and a truth criterion when they can sometimes come into conflict?

According to Johnson, "The truth criterion concerns the relationship between the premise and the state of affairs in the world. The acceptability criterion concerns the relationship between the premise and the audience" (336-337). From this it follows that many arguments will satisfy both. Moreover, since all arguments are addressed to an audience, the acceptability requirement will have a broader applicability than the truth requirement.

Johnson's solution to the integration problem seems simple and non-controversial: informal logic should adopt the truth requirement, while rhetoric will adopt the acceptability requirement (271). In fact, Johnson is proposing much more. In his mind, the truth requirement, and a perspective that adopts it, is to be preferred because it is more rational, and so any tension between the two criteria should be resolved in favor of the truth criterion (337).

There are several things to contest in such a claim. In the first instance, appealing to a criterion of truth is ill-advised because the criterion itself is vague and generally problematic. In the second case, a truth criterion is unnecessary because the acceptability requirement is perfectly adequate and no less rational. In developing the discussion of this paper, I will support both these assertions.

2. Hamblin's Orangutans

Johnson gives separate consideration to two cases presenting the tension between the criteria. In the first case, where a premise is false but acceptable, he allows that it may be rational for someone to be persuaded by an argument that has a premise that subsequently turns out to be false, but he is concerned an arguer might knowingly advance a false premise because an audience will accept it. This is to present the issue in terms of the behavior and character of

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the arguer, avoiding the question of how the premise is known to be false (by the arguer, but not the audience).[1]

Shifting from the perspective of the arguer to that of the evaluator, the same decision holds: "If he or she believe the premise is false, the evaluator has a compelling reason for not accepting the premise" (338). Here, as later, the evaluator is judging the merits of the argument *in and of itself*, and not in relation to any audience or context. This helps clarify the two very separate operations at work in Johnson's theory of evaluation: one looking at the world and the argument's fit there; and the other looking to the audience. "A bad argument does not...cease to be a bad argument just because it is an argument that some people may be justified in accepting" (339).

The second case arises when a premise is true but unacceptable. Should an arguer advance a premise that the audience is not expected to accept even though it is true? If his theory was "rhetorically driven," Johnson would answer this in the negative. But on his model, this solution violates the requirement of manifest rationality and the arguer is exhorted to find a way to make the premise acceptable. Nor would such an argument be good for an evaluator, who would also require support for the premise. Here, the acceptability requirement has priority.

With these points made, Johnson turns to the position of C.L. Hamblin (1970). Hamblin rejects alethic criteria, principally the requirement that an argument's premises be true, arguing that they are neither sufficient nor necessary (1970:234). With respect to the first of these points, he questions the use of premises that are true if no one knows they are true. To illustrate the problem he provides several examples, including the following:

> ...the argument that oranges are good for orang-utans because they contain dietary supplements might or might not carry some weight in the second half of the twentieth century but would rightly carry none at all as between two ancient Romans who had never heard of vitamins (232).

A recipient of such an argument, suggests Hamblin, would not so much question the truth of the premise as question how the arguer *knows* the premise. That is, it is its epistemic status rather than its truth which is being questioned. Hence, a requirement that an argument's premises be true is not sufficient; they must be *known* to be true. To whom should this be known? Johnson's tact, as we have seen, is to focus on what the arguer knows. But if, like Hamblin, we are talking about the *use* of the premises, we should be focusing on what the audience knows.

The second part to Hamblin's charge, that alethic tests are not necessary, stems from the fact that not all people will be able to follow an inference from a true premise to a conclusion implied by it, so it is not enough for the conclusion to follow, it must be acknowledged to do so– another epistemic criterion. However, we might stop before this second move and argue that if what is at stake is a requirement that a premise be known in the appropriate cognitive environment, then this also renders truth unnecessary because we are now talking clearly about the audience and what it accepts. In terms of the dual directionality of Johnson's problem, the focus shifts away from the world to the context of the audience.

Johnson's concerns with Hamblin's rejection of alethic criteria revolve around the orangutan example. First, he finds it too tersely presented. To be useful, we must imagine for it a dispute arising among ancient Romans over the nurturing of orangutans. A dispute that would involve alternatives and reasons for those alternatives. Secondly, the example itself is alleged to

be misdiagnosed. The reason the Romans should reject the argument is not because they do not know the premise to be true, but because it would be unintelligible to them. To persuade rationally, an arguer should avoid premises the audience will not understand at all. "Thus, the problem for the Romans would not be knowing whether the premise is true but, rather, would be understanding its meaning" (185). Thus, Hamblin's case against the truth requirement is unsuccessful, at least on this front.

There is always a potential for problems when employing hypothetical examples. If the example fails, this has serious, although not necessarily fatal, repercussions for the point it is intended to illustrate. Hamblin asks us to imagine a case where an audience cannot accept true premises because that truth has no meaning for them and cannot enter into their deliberations in any way. Rather than allow that this is one of the cases where acceptability would have priority, Johnson unpacks the example, to show that it is inadequate for the purpose intended. We should not overlook, though, that in cases where we fail to accept a premise, or appreciate its truth, we will in fact engage in a dialectical exchange of the kind envisaged by Hamblin and preferred by Johnson. Asking the arguer, "how do you know?" is a legitimate and common attempt to establish where the burden of proof lies.

Premises are acceptable, unacceptable, or questionable for a specific audience (and, in the terms set out elsewhere, for a universal audience). In Hamblin's orangutan case, the premise is, as Johnson rightly observes, unacceptable to this audience because the arguer cannot meet the burden of proof that he or she is obliged to meet. This cannot be done because what is required to support that premise and render it meaningful is not available at that time. Hamblin is undone by the hypothetical nature of his example. Bad choice. If the audience cannot understand such a premise, then, for the same reason, the arguer could not be expected to either. The orangutan example, however, is supposed to represent a *kind* of argument, and it is not the only one offered.

Consider Hamblin's first suggestion: "If I argue that the Martian canals are not man-made because there never has been organic life on Mars..." (236). Here, the premise is not obviously unacceptable; rather, it is questionable, if we imagine a general audience of intelligent people. That is, while it is an intelligible premise to us, we have neither the grounds to accept it, nor yet the grounds to reject it. It remains questionable for us (and in a weaker sense, cannot be accepted), until the arguer assumes the burden of proof to provide support and succeeds or fails in that effort. If he fails, we will not accept the premise. We reject it not because it is false (we remain skeptical on this point), but because it fails to be a reason for us to accept the conclusion that the Martian canals are not man-made. Yet, for those who insist on a correspondence between proposition and world, the premise "there has never been organic life on Mars" is either true or false. This is Hamblin's point.

Again, Johnson's best response might be to add this to the category of cases in which acceptability is the primary criterion. But this should lead us to ask when this is *not* the case. That is, what cases have truth as the primary criterion, and are they enough to matter?

Another tact Hamblin takes in criticizing the truth criterion is to charge that truth (and validity) "are onlookers' concepts and presuppose a God's-eye-view of the arena" (1970:242). I will consider only the claim about truth here. With respect to this, Johnson allows that the criticism carries some weight. Or at least, it carries weight with respect to some theories of truth, like "certain forms of the correspondence theory [which] presuppose omniscience" (196). But other theories of truth, like the coherence, idealist, pragmatist, instrumentalist, or relativist, do not presuppose such a perspective and so a theory of evaluation could avoid Hamblin's objection

by framing its truth criterion in terms of one of these theories. He reiterates the point, noting that a correspondence theory of truth "would appear to be open to the sorts of criticism mentioned by Hamblin" (198). Instead, "a relativistic concept of truth would make for a theory that is largely indistinguishable from theories governed by dialectical criteria" (Ibid).

Two things should be observed here: (i) If by "dialectical criteria" we are to understand some notion of acceptability, then, given the baggage that accompanies the notion of truth in argumentation (if we can pin it down to any particular theory), and granting that theories governed by truth criteria and dialectical criteria would be "largely indistinguishable," then would we not be better advised to adopt the notion of acceptability?

(ii) A second point is more problematic for Johnson and his theory of evaluation. The one theory of truth he allows to be susceptible to Hamblin's criticism and thus dismisses is the correspondence theory. Yet, as we saw earlier, this is the very theory his model ends up adopting: "The truth criterion concerns the relationship between the premise and the state of affairs in the world" (336-337). In fairness to Johnson, what he attempts in his work *Manifest Rationality* is not a developed account of the truth criterion, but an argument supporting its necessity and to give some sense of what such a criterion should involve (Johnson, 2002:323). But his own difficulty in clarifying a consistent notion of truth to underlie the truth criterion points to the problems that can be involved in pinning this down and sharpens our question: what notion of 'truth' is assumed by any truth criterion?

Beyond his eventual problematic adoption of a correspondence theory of truth, Johnson gives some other pointers about the nature of this truth and why it is required. He writes, for example, in ways that seem to relate it most clearly to the domain of science. Along this line of thinking, he explains why he resists a wholesale adoption of a truth requirement:

> As one moves away from science and toward other spheres of reasoning–the practical sphere of human decision making: the areas of morals, ethics, politics and everyday human affairs–that doctrine begins to seem questionable. This is not because the criterion of truth is inapplicable to human affairs but rather because, as one reviews the nature and functions of argumentation in this arena, it seems clear that premises need not be true in order for the argument to be a good one (196).

While this does not preclude the use of the truth requirement for arguments outside of the domain of science, it goes a long way to restricting their necessity to that domain, perhaps because of it being more amenable to views of truth along the lines of a correspondence theory.

Johnson's strongest argument for the truth requirement is an indirect argument that involves pointing out that theorists who thought they had abandoned the use of a truth criterion turn out to still be appealing to it in all kinds of ways. Thus, the argument appears to be, the truth requirement is necessary because people who do argument evaluation cannot avoid using it. It creeps in through the use of inconsistency, contradiction, assumption, and validity. And Johnson even believes it may be required to make "acceptability" intelligible. As an example of what he has in mind, he cites his own work with J. Anthony Blair (1993).[2] While they had not advanced a truth requirement for premise adequacy, they assumed it in judging premises inconsistent if they could not be true together, and in testing for relevance on the basis of whether the truth of a premise dictated the truth of a conclusion (2000:198). But while the underlying use of the term 'truth' is undoubtedly there in the work of Johnson and Blair as well

as many other argumentation theorists, this commits none of them to a full-fledged notion of a truth criterion that is *necessary*, nor does it explain how truth is being understood in such instances. If it is being used loosely in a way actually tantamount to 'acceptability,' then, again, there might be reasons for preferring the latter designation. We must delay a decision about this until we have a clearer idea of how both 'truth' and 'acceptability' are being used.

3. The Rhetoric of Philosophy: Metaphors as Arguments

Traditional candidates for a truth criterion arise in the form of the correspondence, pragmatist and coherence theories, and these do not exhaust the possibilities, others of which were mentioned by Johnson.[3] Given the complexity of asking about the nature of truth itself, the various theories instead focus on what it means for a proposition to be true, as well as when this would pertain.

We see, for example, that Johnson is inclined to use it when considering reasoning in the domain of science rather than in that of morals, and employs it to capture an existing relationship between a proposition and an external reality. In a similar fashion, when Derek Allen writes that "a proposition, p, is true if p" (1995, 218), we can understand him to be asserting a relationship between the proposition and some external state such that the proposition is true if the external state actually pertains. The most likely candidate for the truth criterion being evoked by argumentation theorists, then, is the correspondence theory.

This theory boasts the credentials of longevity. While modern versions offer variants on the basic theme, the core has changed little from when Aristotle wrote in the *Categories*: "The fact of the being of a man carries with it the truth of the proposition that he is...for if a man is, the proposition wherein we allege that he is, is true...the fact of the man's being does seem somehow to be the cause of the truth of the proposition, for the truth or falsity of the proposition depend on the fact of the man's being or not being" (14b, 14-21). This Aristotelian insight holds across the various versions, from Wittgenstein's and Russell's isomorphism of proposition and fact, to Austin's linguistic conception of a relationship between demonstrative and descriptive conventions. Russell (1912), for example, talks of propositions 'mirroring' facts, thereby invoking (and perhaps distracting us with) a particularly vivid metaphor to explain the relationship expressed in the core term 'correspondence.' How *do* propositions and facts correspond? How do we account for what it is we are striving to express when the reach of language ends and the world of things begins? If language is a mirror of reality, how can we trust that the images are not distortions?

Strict correspondence would seem to require a one-to-one relation between the contents of propositions and the items of reality, this being the sense of saying that "p is true if and only if p." Stark without the dressing of metaphor, this reveals the problem such devices hide, because it does not begin to explain what first fixes, and then maintains, the relationship between what is said and what is.

Less demanding is to interpret correspondence as a relationship 'with,' rather than a relationship 'to.' Thus, but again metaphorically, "a key may correspond *with* its key-hole and one half of a stamp *with* the other half, while an entry in a ledger may correspond *to* a sale, and one rank in the army *to* another in the navy" (White, 1970:106-107). When we search for a fit between the constituents of propositions and facts in the world, we are confounded by the failure

of propositions and the facts to which they correspond to 'contain' the same number of constituents. This approach would also seem to assume a denotative theory of meaning. If a simple proposition "the bird is in the tree" is to fit the facts, then 'bird' will denote the bird and 'tree' the tree. But the proposition has a third element that captures the relation between the bird and the tree. How are we to understand this? Moreover, other simple statements like "the hat is red" would seem to commit us to a constituent of the fact that matches 'red,' and hence to holding that properties like 'redness' exist independently of red things. Further metaphysical difficulties emerge the more we dwell on such simple propositions, and this is without asking what correspondence pertains between 'true' negative or conditional propositions and whatever accounts for their truth.

All this is to do little more than rehearse familiar objections to correspondence theories of truth. The point is that argumentation theorists who wish to adopt such an approach as the candidate for the meaning of truth in any truth criterion have their work cut out for them. One promising place to begin is with the recent theory forwarded by Alvin Goldman (1999) that attempts to succeed in just the places the traditional accounts have failed.

Goldman advances what he calls a "descriptive-success" theory, where this means "faithfulness to reality" (1999:60). On his account:

> (DS)   An item *X* (a proposition, a sentence, a belief, etc.) is true if and only if *X* is descriptively successful, that is, *X* purports to describe reality and its content fits reality (59).

Employing the metaphor of faithfulness or fidelity in human relations, Goldman argues that a proposition, etc., corresponds to reality insofar as it is faithful to it. He believes this captures the sense of "true" in phrases like "true to life" or "true to form." This leads him to a looser notion of "truth maker"–those correlates in the world that make propositions true. Recognizing the problems of identifying pieces of reality that correspond to negations, disjunctions, conditionals, etc., and the general concerns with depicting facts in propositions, Goldman dispenses with the need for facts as the truth makers in his theory. Instead, propositions could be made true by concrete events or relations among abstract entities. "As long as anything that makes a proposition true is part of reality–construed as broadly as possible–this fits the correspondence theory as formulated by (DS)" (62). If a claim is true, then it is descriptively successful; if it is false, it is descriptively unsuccessful.

So here we have a candidate for Johnson's truth criterion: a premise needs to be true in the sense of being faithful to reality, and is tested by the success of its description. Whether or not Johnson adopts such a theory remains to be seen, but if he chooses to, he would seem to first be obligated to subject it to the criticism against correspondence theories that he judged most compelling–that of the God's-eye-view.

Hamblin's objection needs careful consideration, if for no other reason than that he considers it to be of "fundamental philosophical importance" (1970:243). When two people are arguing, he tells us, terms like 'true' and 'valid' have different currencies for the participants than they do for onlookers. The latter can judge the truth or falsity of statements according to what is observed. But within the dialogue, a participant's saying that something is true tells us only what he or she accepts. When someone says "'S is true," the words 'is true' are empty and he might as well have said simply 'S'" (Ibid). The emptiness or parenthetical character of these

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terms serves to divert us from the more important quest of what the participants accept. In terms of what was said earlier, it diverts us outside the argument to a different perspective, that of an omniscient onlooker, whose grounds for saying "S is true," or "S is a faithful description of reality" are never questioned because of that assumed omniscience.

The quintessential onlookers in such cases are, Hamblin reminds us, logicians who, while allowed to express their views, should not mask their own judgements of acceptance as statements of logic. "The logician does not stand above and outside practical argumentation or, necessarily, pass judgement on it...he is, at best, a trained advocate" (244).[4]

Johnson allows that certain forms of the correspondence theory presuppose such omniscience (2000:196). By this, I take him to mean that they assume a perspective of knowing a correspondence of fit between propositions and reality without accounting for that within the argument. So to learn that the participant in an argument holds something to be true is to learn not about the truth of what is asserted but about what that person accepts.

4. Acceptability:

William James' (1970) pragmatic view of truth argued not only that true beliefs are verified over time, but that they are adjusted to deal with anomalies and preserve internal consistency. In this sense, there is an element of coherence suggested, and it is in coherence theories of truth that we may find our best candidate for a truth criterion.

Coherence theories deny, or express an open skepticism about, the existence of foundational beliefs with independent justification. Instead, if beliefs are to be justified (that is, deemed true) this must come through their coherence with other beliefs in a belief system, otherwise they are deemed false. Important work on this theory has been done by Nicholas Rescher (1973). As with "correspondence," the central term here, "coherence," has a vagueness that needs to be clarified, and proponents of coherence theories tend to approach this in terms of the kind of system within which we see the coherence of beliefs arising. Rescher appreciates that there is an array of potential beliefs available to us and that guidance is needed in deciding which set we would be warranted in holding as true. Given that no external criteria can help us, Rescher suggests "plausibility-indexing" (on par with probabilistic likelihoods–116) to narrow down what is acceptable. But of course, in using this last term, I show my hand here, for with respect to the coherence of beliefs in a system we are as well to adopt acceptability as to adopt truth. That is, given the difficulties associated with deciding what is meant by truth when it is to be applied as a criterion in argument evaluation, and given that the principal terms can be brought together in talk of coherence, then acceptability is to be preferred.

Johnson's strongest argument for the truth requirement, it will be recalled, is that theorists continue to rely on it in all kinds of ways (2000:197). Such reliance, given that it is expressed in no clear conceptual way, seems quite consistent with a coherence understanding of truth, particularly as it arises with respect to talk of consistency (one of Johnson's concerns).

As Trudy Govier (1987:214) makes clear, "*Acceptability is not acceptance*: there is no need to reject the distinction between what is in fact taken as cogent by an audience and what that audience ought to take as cogent." Indeed, we would not wish to collapse acceptability into acceptance. Retrospectively, we can look at what an audience has accepted, or rejected, and evaluate whether they were justified in doing so.[5] Prospectively, and especially when

constructing argumentation, the appropriate criterion is acceptability. Here premises are constructed such that the intended audience should be justified in finding them acceptable.

Johnson has no difficulty with an acceptability requirement *per se.* His problem is with its integration with a truth requirement in argument evaluation. When conflict arises between the two criteria, he resolves it in favor of the truth requirement because, simply, it is not reasonable to accept a false premise (337). We must now consider this in light of the difficulties found in making sense of how "false premise" might be understood. The best candidate, I submit, is that a premise is "false" because it does not cohere with the others in the system. Put another way, the belief it expresses is inconsistent with other beliefs. For this reason, an arguer should not advance it and an audience would not be justified were they to accept it. But the acceptability requirement itself is quite sufficient to do this work. The premise is unacceptable because it expresses a belief that is inconsistent with other relevant beliefs that are acceptable (where being acceptable does not assume acceptance). Johnson himself, when he returns to consider Hamblin's orangutan example concludes that its failure is really at the level of "coherence" (340). While by this he means that it is unintelligible, that is not the only sense we can attribute to coherence. Of course, unintelligible beliefs (if it makes sense to speak of such) will be inconsistent with, or fail to be relevant to, beliefs that are intelligible. We see this irrelevance in the orangutan example.

Drawing on the many threads that give us a picture of the Romans and the cognitive environments available to them, we find that the truth about orangutans is ultimately not so much that the Romans would have found talk of whether the vitamin content of oranges would be good for them unintelligible, but that for Romans of 450 AD (and the example refers to *ancient* Romans) talk of *orangutans*, creatures indigenous to the Southeast Asian islands of Borneo and Sumatra, would be unintelligible. The point is not that this further weakens Hamblin's example, which we have already decided to have been a bad choice. The point is that we may be prepared to say that it is 'true' that ancient Romans could not have engaged in a dispute about vitamins and orangutans. What we are saying here is that, given our current understanding of the ancient world, and the evidence available to us, this is an acceptable belief, cohering with other beliefs we have about the period and the customs involved. To say that it is true is to say no more than that it is acceptable, and acceptable on quite strong grounds. But it could become questionable or unacceptable; the door never closes on our knowledge of the past. We revise and reject; we understand more completely (which is to say, we combine different insights into a deeper understanding). What we hold to be acceptable today may be revised as unacceptable tomorrow. That does not require a retrospective judgment that it was always unacceptable (that is the difference between judgments made under the acceptability requirement and those made under the truth requirement). It means that what once was acceptable (on reasonable evidence), at last date is no longer acceptable (on revised evidence). What counts as reasonable evidence changes over time. That those who wish to re-adopt a truth requirement would not want to say that what was true is now false, is a reason for not adopting that requirement.

For Johnson, the truth requirement is still attached to the idea of evaluating arguments in and of themselves, detached from the contexts in which they arise. It sees a premise's truth as a property inherent in it. He does not recognize the overriding force of the "for that audience" judgement. The mistake is in seeing rhetoric as something that ails informal logic, rather than as something that offers a solution to one of its problems. The rhetorical view that espouses the

acceptability requirement views a premise in *relation to an audience* and judges its acceptability in relation to the contextually given audience and its situation. *Perhaps* a statement has a value independent of its use in an argument, what we might choose to call its truth value. But for *argumentative purposes* this is irrelevant. Its value here arises in relation to an argument intended for a specific audience. On this ground, then, we do not require a truth criterion in order to evaluate arguments.

Notes

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[1] It also seems strange, given Johnson's dialectical model, that he would take it to be agreed "that for the arguer to attempt to persuade by means of a premise the arguer thinks is false and therefore does not himself accept is in some important way tantamount to abandoning the *telos* of rational persuasion" (2000:338). If we are to couch our premises in terms acceptable to our audience, and respond to their objections, then we will often advance premises we do not ourselves accept and which we may, depending on how we cash out 'true' and 'false,' even regard as false.

[2] In (1999) Johnson develops a similar treatment but analyzes the work of more theorists with informal logic sympathies, including the work of the pragma-dialecticians.

[3] Good discussions of the merits and demerits of the primary candidates can be found in Grayling (1990) and White (1970). Also of interest is Bernard Williams' discussion in (2002, Chapter 4).

[4] While Goldman discusses Hamblin's dialogue logic (155), he does not specifically address this problem, but indicates that his own account of argumentation contrasts with this because it has no commitment to truth as the proper aim of argumentation.

[5] I address this elsewhere (Tindale, forthcoming).

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