

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

Commentary on Tindale

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Johnson, Ralph H., "Commentary on Tindale" (2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 88.
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Commentary on: C.W. Tindale's "The Truth About Orangutans: Defending Acceptability"

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1 The issue

The issue Tindale is addressing is what a theory of evaluation should include; specifically whether our theories should include both truth and acceptability, or only acceptability. It would seem that Tindale belongs to the latter category and I certainly belong to the former. Tindale's opposition to the truth criterion (TC) seems to stem from two sources: first, from a disinclination to want to see argumentation as about Truth (absolute, objective truth), as he makes clear in his (1999); second, the difficulty in applying the criterion is a meaningful way in argument evaluation. These reasons he combines with a belief that the acceptability criterion (AC) will give us everything needed for argument evaluation, without the excess baggage.

2 Tindale's argument

In this paper Tindale criticizes my position on truth (both 1998 and 2000) in a number of ways but these generally focuses on two theses:

- T1 The truth-criterion (TC) is vague (confused) and problematic (not well justified).
- T2 The acceptability criterion (AC) is perfectly adequate.

Most of the paper is directed to supporting T1. The business about the orangutans stems from Hamblin's argument that alethic criteria are inadequate because truth is neither necessary nor sufficient for premise adequacy. Tindale concedes my point that the example is not well suited but argues that Hamblin has provided another (the Martian canals) that makes the same point. (I don't like this example any better, as will become clear later.) Tindale further defends Hamblin's critique of truth (3) by continuing the critique of correspondence theories of truth that he (Tindale) believes are problematic. He also counters what he considers my strongest argument (4) for the TC (i.e., that its debunkers continue to use it). In the next section (4) he discusses further problems with correspondence theories (reciting the familiar objections) concluding that correspondence theories won't work. He then takes up Goldman's approach (6), which he thinks may yet be subject to Hamblin's God's eye criticism. In the last section of his paper he turns to a defense of T2 (7 ff). The argument there is to the effect that I have not raised any objections to acceptability, and he argues that whatever need there might be for a truth criterion can be handled by acceptability; the truth criterion is unnecessary.

Tindale is pressing me, and rightly so, on an area where I admit my position is not well-developed. (It is not vague, though possibly confused.) I hold that an adequate theory of

evaluation must include both a truth criterion and an acceptability criterion. In (2000), I did not provide an account of either; rather I attempted to flesh out the conditions that such an account would have to satisfy. I did not present an account of truth but rather indexed the properties I believed an adequate account of truth would have to include to that degree, my position is not well developed. There was also some ground of confusion with respect to what I said there about correspondence theories and Tindale has questioned that. Fair enough. I made an attempt to solve the IP but I can see now that this was quite possibly premature. I should not have attempted a solution until I had worked out issues with regard to TC. Moreover in 1998 I attempted to defend the TC by showing that those who debunk it are nevertheless committed to it--a theme I return to shortly. Tindale thinks TC is redundant, whereas I think it is necessary.

3 Some dialectical matters

Looking at the situation from my vantage point on the dialectical tier, let me say that while in the main Tindale has given an accurate account of my position, there are aspects of my view that I believe Tindale slightly misunderstands, and there are others aspects of my view which I believe he has ignored.

As to the former: Tindale says that my solution to The Integration Problem is that informal logic should adopt the truth requirement, while rhetoric will adopt acceptability. He cites page 271 but I think a careful reading shows that that is not quite my view. My view is that informal logic should adopt both; that is what gives rise to the problem I then inherit of how to integrate them. I think I should not attempt to speak for rhetoric (I expect rhetoricians will be just about as divided on this as logicians; some eschew truth; others do not (as Jean Goodwin has reminded me) except to point out that I do not hold rhetoric accountable for the problems here. I lay the blame at the feet of Hamblin.

I do not take the view that the truth requirement is "more rational" than the acceptability but rather argue that it fits better with the requirement of manifest rationality. It may well be that my argument is not good enough but that is what I aimed to show.

Finally, the view he attributes to me about how truth is used in argument evaluation (pp.8) is not my view at all. I return to this later.

4 The truth criterion

In this response, I will argue that while there are problems with the truth criterion these problems are not sufficient reason for discarding it, since it continues to operate behind the scenes (reprising my 1998 thesis), and as we heard in the paper just presented not just behind the scenes but right on stage. The criterion cannot be as vague as he complains, because Tindale himself appears to be in favour of some form of the truth requirement (both in this paper and in 1999). Further I continue to argue that Hamblin's critique of truth which seems to lie at the core of his rejection and which so many have found persuasive is not effective because Hamblin, too, is committed to the truth criterion.

The 1998 objection. Tindale refers to my objection of 1998 as my strongest argument. That argument is that theorists who officially discharge the truth-requirement continue to depend

on it in their theorizing (1998, 2000). His response is that even if they continue to use it, their use of it does not commit them to its being necessary, nor yet does it explain how it is being used.

As to the first point: if it is not necessary, then what is its status? My view again is that truth is neither a necessary condition for premise adequacy, nor yet a sufficient condition (p. 680). As to the second point: it may be that theorists use truth without explaining how it is being used. Whether or not that is serious depends on how central a role it has in their theory. I certainly take truth to be a normative standard: it is good thing to have true premises. Possibly there are ways of handling TC that do not commit the user to a normative standard; and possibly the authors I mentioned in (1998) do not have this use in mind, though I suspect they do. But Tindale is not in their company. Let me quote a text where he gets into some trouble. At this point Tindale is arguing that everything I want from TC can be gotten from AC. He has presented on my behalf a coherence account of truth (which he attributes to James, but which is not quite James's view). Tindale writes:

a premise is false because it does not cohere with the others in the system. Put another way, an arguer should not advance it and an audience would not be justified were they to accept it. But the acceptability requirement is sufficient to do this work. The premise is unacceptable because it expresses a belief that is inconsistent with other relevant beliefs that are acceptable (8).

My question is: How are you going to unpack inconsistency? Doesn't inconsistency require some reference to two propositional contents that cannot be true together? And how are you going to unpack relevance without invoking truth? Can relevance be analyzed in terms of acceptability? I think these questions need answering.

Hamblin's examples. Tindale concedes that Hamblin's orangutan example, about which I wrote in MR, is perhaps unfortunate; a "bad choice" but he believes the point Hamblin intends remains valid and switches attention to another of Hamblin's examples (pp. 3) the one about Martian canals. I am sorry that I have to say I don't like this example any better.

The argument Hamblin offers us goes like this:

Martian canals are not man-made, because there has never been organic life on Mars.

Here is Tindale's take on the premise:

Here the premise is not obviously unacceptable; rather it is questionable, if we imagine a general audience of intelligent people. That is, while an intelligible premise to us we have neither the grounds to accept it nor 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, but because it fails to be a reason for is to accept the conclusion that the canals are not man-made (3).

As Tindale suspects, I do have some sympathy for this assessment. I would flag the argument because the arguer has failed to provide any support for the premise; not because the

premise is false but because it is not acceptable. Tindale says: "But this should lead us to ask when this is not the case. That is, in what case do we have truth as the primary criterion?" A reasonable question, though not an argument against having a truth criterion; it is a rather a question of when and how to apply it. In any event, here is one illustration: the argument just given about canals on Mars. Possibly the conclusion dealt with an issue that was disputed when Hamblin wrote this (in the mid60s). But the main problem with the argument is not the acceptability of the premise; it is that the conclusion *presupposes* something (that there are canals on Mars) that is false. <http://tpwww.gsfc.nasa.gov/tharsis/canals.html>

Hamblin's God's-eye View Objection Revisited

As to the God's eye view argument which Tindale takes up next. This has always seemed to me yet another unconvincing argument offered by Hamblin. Why does it follow that someone who adopt a truth requirement must adopts God's-eye view. What is a God's-eye view? I think the idea behind this argument is that a certain notion of truth may be said to presuppose omniscience. What view of truth? The traditional view conceives truth as absolute, an objective relationship between facts and statements. Truth is what God knows. However, this view is a remnant of a bygone day in which it was assumed that human knowledge imitated divine knowledge. But, the argument would run, we have long since abandoned such views of knowledge and truth. This view has merit. It runs through the fabric of the pragmatist attempt to redefine knowledge and inquiry. Even here, it is important to point out that neither Peirce nor Dewey though they abandoned certain views about knowledge and belief---Cartesian ones) ever abandoned truth as a standard, nor did they abandon the view that truth is a relationship between proposition and the world.

Moreover, Hamblin seems to think that logicians who advocate truth as criterion abandon their position as participants in the dialogue and assume this omniscient view. I think the point Hamblin is making is not so much about being omniscient but about taking a vantage point outside the argument and making pronouncements upon it (as a God might do). But, as I argued (2000:188), this objection seems to involve a misreading of what the logician is up to. The logician's task is not to offer an evaluation of any particular argument by deploying the truth criterion; rather it is to set forth conditions under which an argument is good or not. Hamblin says: "But consider now the position of the onlooker and particularly that of the logicians who is interested in analyzing and perhaps passing judgement on what transpires" (244). The logician does not stand above an outside practical argumentation or, necessarily, pass judgement on it; he is not a judge or court of appeal. "It follows that it is not the logician's particular job to declare the truth of any statement, or the validity of any argument "(244). This is, pardon me, true. The task of the logician is to set forth the standards that govern good argument, as he himself is engaged in doing in Chapter 7 of *Fallacies*. And what we find there is I think a bit surprising.

Tindale alludes to Hamblin's redundancy argument, the argument which says that "I accept P" and "P is true" amount to the same; that to say "P is true" is nothing more or less than to say "P." I am not convinced by this argument (2000:279) but let it pass. My purpose here is to point out that Hamblin never argues that we should not have the truth criterion available, nor that that we should discard it. He argues that dialectical criteria (acceptance/acceptability) have a certain priority over alethic and epistemic ones, which presupposes that they are around. I think

then that Hamblin is much like me in having available for his theory of evaluation both dialectical and alethic criteria but thinking that dialectical are more fundamental. In other words where we disagree is about the way to handle The Integration Problem.

5 The acceptability criterion

Tindale says that I have no problem with an acceptability requirement per se. But that is not entirely true. In (2000) I raised a number of issues (192 ff). My concerns there were framed in term of *acceptance*; and Tindale (citing Govier) makes it clear that acceptance (which was what Hamblin adopted) is not good enough.

First, what is acceptability? Tindale quotes Govier "A premise is acceptable when it is a premise that the audience ought to take as cogent?" Is that what Tindale thinks? What is meant here by "cogent"?

Second, as Derek Allen argued (1998), it can be quite as difficult to determine whether a premise is acceptable as to determine whether it is true. So if one of the objections raised against the TC is the difficulty of determining when it applies, then it is not clear that the acceptability criterion is any easier.

Third, inconsistency is clearly thought to be a bad thing; and I suspect Tindale will unpack inconsistency in the standard way: two beliefs are inconsistent if they cannot be true together. Could he have written: two beliefs are inconsistent if they cannot be acceptable together? Though P and not-P cannot both be true; if it is possible for P and not P to both be acceptable then what becomes of consistency requirement that Tindale is clearly committed to. In other words, will you be able to unpack crucial ideas used in argument evaluation, such as assumption, presumption, plausibility, coherence in terms of acceptability?

Truth again. In characterizing my position at the end of his paper, Tindale says that for me "the truth requirement is attached to the idea of evaluating arguments in and of themselves, detached from the contexts in which they arise." But I don't think I am committed to any such view of how to evaluate arguments. See for example how we analyze arguments (LSD, 2e 219-229), including one case where we reject an argument for having a false premise (p. 228). Tindale writes that my position "sees a premise's truth as a property inherent in it"(8); but in fact I see the truth of a premise as a function of its relationship to the world. The statement "There are nine planets" is true not inherently but because as a matter of fact there are nine. Part of this fit is coherence with other beliefs but another part, as but as James himself recognized, was that it accords with the facts.

In my theory then there is a need for reference to argument, audience and the world beyond them. It sometimes seems too me that Tindale has room for the argument and the audience. I get this from what he says at the end of his paper:

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.

How, I have to ask, would a statement lose its truth-value just because it becomes part of the argument?

It seems to me that when we evaluate we are playing off various aspects of the argument works: how well it fits with the audience's belief, and how well it fits with what we know or think about the world. For me, there are three vectors in the process of argument evaluation: from the premises to the conclusion; from the premises to the world; and from the premises to the audience. For Tindale, it seems, that there are just two: the audience and the argument. The world, it seems, has disappeared.

Conclusion

I may be confused; and I would certainly admit that I have not presented a well-worked out theory of truth to support my call for TC. *Maybe* I need one. If I do, my current favourite would be Goldman's theory of truth in *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999): "To summarize I believe that the various rivals of the correspondence theory are subject to crippling objections, so that the correspondence theory, while requiring further metaphysical clarification, is still the best bet" (88).

I know that am perplexed, because while Tindale seems to be arguing against the truth criterion, he continues to refer to it and to make use of it. If the AC is perfectly adequate, why this continued use of TC? And is the criterion he is defending for premise adequacy: acceptability or acceptance?

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