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### Commentary on Johnson

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**In Response To:** Ralph H. Johnson's [More on Arguers and Dialectical Obligations](#)

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It is with some diffidence that I enter the present discussion on the dialectical obligations of arguers, an issue which has been so competently discussed, both by professor Johnson (1996, 1998, 1999) and by professor Govier (1998, 1998a). They already reached agreement on many points, and I do not think they are waiting for me (or anyone) to act as an arbiter on remaining differences.

But, to discharge my obligations as a commentator, I shall make some brief remarks on professor Johnson's latest contribution to this ongoing metadialectic. Johnson mentions two objections that would subvert his thesis (Section III B). He does not get back to them at the end of the paper. So it might be worthwhile to see whether these objections can now be dissolved. Johnson's distinction between a phase of argument construction and a revising phase will greatly facilitate this task.

## 1. Does It Make Sense to Speak of Dialectical Obligations?

### 1.1 The Phase of Argument Construction

To speak of obligations one needs a normative context, some standards of behavior that may not be universally valid, but nevertheless hold for a particular context or professional practice. The practice of argumentation provides such a context. Or rather a number of such contexts. For instance, in critical discussion there is the obligation to abide by the rules of dialogue, that is: not to commit a fallacy (in the pragma-dialectical sense of fallacy). This is a first level obligation. There is also the second level obligation to try to do well in the dialogue. Perhaps both may be called "dialectical obligations", but they must be distinguished. (Compare a commitment to play chess according to the rules versus a commitment to play as well as one can.)

Solo argument provides a different set of contexts. Here, too, one may distinguish different levels of obligation. On the first level the solo arguer has to fulfill certain minimal requirements, such as providing what Walton and I called an *elementary argument* (1995), and others have dubbed a Claims-Reasons Complex or an Illative Core, but in order to do really well, there are further requirements to fulfill. Again, these further requirements depend on what exactly is the task at hand. What purpose is the argument supposed to serve? At present I shall assume that this purpose is to rationally convince an audience to accept some claim. But it should be noted that in some contexts arguments may be presented to serve some other purposes such as presenting a contribution to an ongoing discussion or arousing interest in some considerations.

If the arguer is committed to this goal of rationally convincing a certain audience, some more detailed obligations can be derived. They may well be called "dialectical obligations". What the arguer needs to do (at least) is to present an argument (or a case, or an argumentation) that is capable of rationally convincing each person of his audience. (Whether each person is actually convinced will be another matter.) This can be made more precise:

An argument *A* for a claim *C* is capable to rationally convince a person *X* if and only if *X* can from this argument construct a critical discussion *D*, such that:

- (1) *D* contains no fallacies;
- (2) *D* is a plausible critical discussion between *X* and the arguer, with the arguer as the Proponent of *C* and *X* as its Opponent;
- (3) *D* is won by the arguer and lost by *X*.

Notice that if an argument is capable to rationally convince a person, it may yet fail to do so since the person in question, notwithstanding the opportunity offered, may actually fail to construct a dialogue with the three properties listed above.

Thus one may see that an arguer in order to complete this task may need to address objections, alternative positions, criticisms and challenges (Johnson, 1999: 5).

Challenges, by the way, may require the arguer to construct not only an elementary argument but also arguments supporting premises of this elementary argument and arguments supporting premises of these arguments, and so on, leading to a tree-formed argument structure. (In Walton and Krabbe, 1995, such a more complicated argument is called a *basic argument*.)

Even without taking the issue of objections into consideration, the dynamics of challenges may seem to lead to the Regress Problem, but it does not. The arguer's task is, after all, limited to presenting a structure capable of convincing a certain audience. In many cases a finitary structure will suffice to realize this possibility. If not, well, then the arguer cannot fulfill his obligations; so what? Not all claims need to be defensible. Often, however, even an elementary argument may suffice to carry conviction (It's Saturday. So they'll close at five).

Thus we see that it makes perfectly sense to speak of an arguer's dialectical obligations in a given context of argument. Of course, Johnson wants to go beyond the obligation to present a basic argument. For instance, according to him, the arguer should construct his argument in such a way that it deals with salient objections. But this does not change the story. I agree that salient objections must be handled, if otherwise the argument would be incapable of carrying conviction. So I agree that the arguer may have dialectical obligations in this respect. On the other hand, in some cases no salient objections may be present, so the obligation to handle objections would dissipate.

It should also be noted that an obligation to handle objections can, in solo argument, be dealt with within the structure of a basic argument. As Francisca Snoeck Henkemans (1992: 97) has shown, objections can be countered by complementary arguments that are part of this basic structure (cf. also Freeman, 1991, Sections 6.6, 7.3 on counterrebuttals). Finally, the obligation to deal with objections need not lead to a Regress Problem, since not in all cases of argumentation is it required that the arguer deal with further objections (that he present a complimentary argument) in order to construct an argument capable of rationally convincing a particular audience.

## 1.2 The Phase of revision

Thus far I have discussed the dialectical obligations in the phase of argument construction, let us now turn to the revising phase. Is there any dialectical obligation for the solo arguer to respond to actual objections brought forward after publication of the argument? To respond to such objections equals to entering a critical discussion with the objector as one's interlocutor. Now it seems that dialectical obligations concern the ways one should perform certain tasks in an argumentative discussion or in presenting an argument, not the question whether one should enter some discussion at all. This is not to deny that one may feel obligated to respond, either for external reasons, or because one wants to preserve the original argument's power to convince, or perhaps simply to be true to oneself. Only, such an obligation would not be "dialectical", at least not on the same level as before. This, basically, solves the Discrimination Problem: as far as dialectical obligations go, the arguer is free to respond to or to neglect critical reactions.

Once the arguer decides to preserve the original argument's power to convince (or to defend an amended version of the original argument), this will create new or renewed dialectical obligations. As the e-mail box fills up with objections, the arguer is confronted with the Discrimination Problem. Since the goal is to keep the original argument (or a revised version) in business, it is most urgent to treat those objections that create the appearance that one's argument has been utterly refuted. That is to say: the arguer is foremost obligated to deal with the *serious* objections. On this I agree with Johnson.

Can dialectical obligations be specified?

This is a type of question that cannot be answered a priori. Of course dialectical obligations are highly context dependent and governed by numerous features. The problems are closely analogous with those concerned with the specification of premise adequacy (Blair, 1995). In both areas, however, this context dependence does not prejudge the extent to which some theoretical observations will hit the mark. Johnson and Govier have taken some steps. Others will take others.

The present discussion has borne out that a more thorough theory and classification of objections may provide important underpinnings for a more specific theory of dialectical obligations. Empirical studies, too, are called for. In this context, it would be a good idea to reread what Finocchiaro (1980, Ch. 17) has to say about the active evaluation of reasoning.

One dialectical obligation, however, is fairly simple to specify: *be brief*. So, here I shall end my commentary.

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