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SHOULD WE ASSESS THE BASIC PREMISES OF AN ARGUMENT FOR TRUTH OR ACCEPTABILITY?

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Abstract:

In this paper I challenge the currently fashionable view that we should assess the basic premises of an argument for acceptability rather than for truth, and argue in favour of recognizing premise-truth as a criterion of argument goodness in one important sense and premise-acceptability as a criterion of argument goodness in another important sense.

Every argument has at least one premise it does not defend. Such a premise I call a basic premise. A central issue in argumentation theory is whether for an argument to be a good one its basic premises must be true. Nowadays it seems to be pretty widely thought that premise-truth is not an appropriate criterion of good argument. What is often favoured in place of premise-truth is premise-acceptability. On this approach, for an argument to be a good one its basic premises must be acceptable, but need not be true. In a paper I read at the Third ISSA Conference on Argumentation held in Amsterdam in 1994 (Allen), I defended premise-truth as a criterion of one variety of good argument. The present paper is work-in-progress in which I respond to certain criticisms I have received of my Amsterdam paper.

Two verbal points. First, by the term "argument" I will mean a direct argument containing at least one premise and at most one conclusion. Second, by the term "premises" I will mean basic premises.

The view that an argument's having true premises is necessary for it to be a good argument I call the truth requirement. I shall begin by considering three objections to the truth requirement.

The first objection says that truth is too stringent a requirement because in many cases it is difficult to decide whether the premises of an argument are true or false; consequently, the truth requirement is of little practical value. Let us call this objection the pragmatic objection. Suppose that, as the objection maintains, in many cases it is indeed hard to tell whether the premises of an argument are true or false. Is this sufficient reason to reject the truth requirement—that is, to deny that a good argument must have true premises? Consider a parallel case. It is certainly a widely held view among philosophers that a necessary condition of the truth of third-person knowledge claims of the form "S knows that p " is that p be true. Is this view to be rejected on the ground that in many cases it is hard to tell whether a proposition is true? Surely not. If we accept that the truth of p is necessary for knowledge that p , but admit that in many cases it is hard to tell whether or not a proposition is true, our position will be that in many cases it is hard to tell whether the conditions for propositional knowledge are satisfied, hence to tell whether or not these are cases of knowledge. But then why not hold similarly in the case of the conditions for good argument? If we admit that it is often hard to tell whether the premises of an argument are true or false, why not say that in such cases it is hard to tell whether or not the argument in question is a good

one? Why not take this view, rather than abandon the truth requirement for good argument on the ground that whether or not it is satisfied is often hard to determine? These considerations lead me to think that the pragmatic objection fails to show that the truth requirement is mistaken.

The second objection comes from Trudy Govier. She writes: "if we stipulate that people should be convinced only by those arguments that have true premises, we would in effect be stipulating that in many times and places people should not be convinced by arguments at all" (Govier: 280). Why so? Because in many times and places arguments have false premises? This is surely not the answer Govier would give. Rather, she would surely say that in many times and places arguments have premises that people do not know to be true. Whether or not this is so we need not ask. Rather, we need to ask whether endorsing the truth requirement compels us to stipulate that people should be convinced only by those arguments that have true premises. The answer is that it does not. Endorsing the truth requirement is compatible with stipulating that people should be convinced only by arguments whose premises it is reasonable for them to accept. If we make this stipulation while endorsing the truth requirement for good argument, we will want to insist on distinguishing the question what the conditions for good argument are from the question what the conditions are under which people should be convinced by an argument. Of course this distinction is untenable if a good argument *just is* one that people (the argument's intended audience) should find convincing. But as yet we have no reason to think this. Thus I am not persuaded by Govier's skeptical objection (as we may call it) to the truth requirement.

The third objection is based on a line of argument found in Johnson and Blair's text *Logical Self-Defense* (49-50), and goes as follows. There are many arguments with one or more premises that are neither true nor false. Ethical arguments are a case in point, because (the objection maintains) ethical sentences, and so ethical premises, are neither true nor false. Clearly it would be a mistake (the objection continues) to require all the premises of an argument to satisfy the truth requirement if one or more of them are neither true nor false. Hence the truth requirement is not an appropriate requirement for such an argument, and so it is not the case that for *all* arguments it is an appropriate requirement.

The first point I want to make in response is that this objection (which I will call the non-cognitivist objection) leaves open the possibility that the truth requirement *is* appropriate for arguments with truth-valuable premises—or, more precisely, that it is appropriate to require of an argument with one or more such premises that each such premise it contains be true. The non-cognitivist objection permits the view that truth is a requirement for all and only those premises that are either true or false. And this view could be combined with some non-truth requirement for truth-valueless premises (if such there be) to yield a general account of premise adequacy—though, to be sure, this would be a less simple account than one that set a single condition of adequacy for all premises; but perhaps no single-condition account will in the end prove satisfactory.

The second point I want to make in response to the non-cognitivist objection is that it is incoherent—at least on a very widespread textbook account of what a premise is. The account I have in mind says in part that a premise is a statement, or proposition, and is expressed by and only by a declarative sentence—that is, by and only by a sentence that (as Robert Paul Churchill puts it) "could be either true or false" (Churchill: 10; bold removed). On this account, a premise as such is truth-valuable. If so, then the view that some premises are neither true nor false is incoherent. Thus the non-cognitivist objection, if it is to avoid incoherence, must be conjoined with a non-standard account of what a premise is, an account on which a premise need not be a statement or proposition. But then a proponent of the non-cognitivist objection owes us such an account.

This completes my consideration of certain objections to the truth requirement. I turn next to the acceptability

requirement (as I will call it)—the view that an argument's having acceptable premises is necessary for it to be a good argument. There are different accounts of acceptability, but any plausible account will recognize that, as Govier remarks, "[a]cceptability is not acceptance" (Govier: 284). Unlike acceptance, acceptability is a normative notion. According to Pinto, Blair and Parr in their textbook on reasoning, a premise is *acceptable* just in case it is *reasonable* to accept it. The authors go on to make four points about acceptability. First, "[a]cceptability is not the same thing as truth" (Pinto, Blair, Parr: 122; italics removed). Propositions that are reasonable to believe (such as propositions supported by careful observation) are acceptable as premises "even though occasionally such propositions turn out to be false" (ibid.). Second, "[a]cceptability is relative to a person's knowledge, and so can vary from one person to another" (ibid.; italics removed). Thus, certain premises may be acceptable for Smith because, given his prior knowledge, it is reasonable for him to accept them, but the very same premises may fail to be acceptable for Jones because, given her different prior knowledge, it is not reasonable for her to accept them. Third, "[a]cceptability can vary from one time to another" (ibid.: 123; italics removed). Thus, "[a] proposition that is reasonable for me to accept today may not be reasonable for me to accept tomorrow" (ibid.) if I acquire additional information that casts doubt upon it. Fourth, "[a]cceptability is a property that belongs to each premise taken by itself" (ibid.; italics removed). Thus, when assessing the premises of an argument for acceptability, "it is necessary to assess each proposition separately" (ibid.).

Taken together, these points constitute at least a partial account of acceptability, and one that I propose to follow for the purposes of this discussion. Note that on this account the notion of acceptability is doubly relativistic. A proposition, p , is not simply acceptable, but is acceptable for a person, or persons, S , at a certain time, t . The first of these aspects of the relativity of acceptability—the personal aspect—commends the notion of acceptability to those, or some of those, who prefer to define good argument in terms of acceptable premises rather than in terms of true premises. Thus, as an anonymous critic of my Amsterdam paper put it, one reason for defining good argument in terms of acceptable premises is founded on the rhetorical insight that "an argument needs to be judged from the point of view of its intended audience", since in ordinary life arguments are tools for practical ends. An argument will be judged from the point of view of its intended audience if its goodness is held to depend on whether its premises are acceptable—acceptable, that is, for the argument's intended audience. Suppose we grant that an argument needs to be judged from the point of view of its intended audience. This does not require us to say that an argument must be judged, or can be judged, *only* from that point of view. Consistently with allowing that an argument needs to be judged from the point of view of its intended audience, we could maintain that an argument can also be judged—or, indeed, must also be judged—from a different point of view, and that from this different point of view an argument is a good one only if it has true premises.

We have just noted one reason that has been offered for defining good argument in terms of acceptable premises rather than in terms of true premises (viz., that an argument needs to be judged from the point of view of its intended audience). Govier offers another reason when she says that "standards of argument appraisal that are intended to give real practical guidance will have to move from truth of premises to acceptability" (Govier: 280). I take it that in Govier's view this is because (as I take her to believe) the acceptability of premises is decidable in the many cases in which their truth value is not—or, at any rate, is more easily decidable in those cases. Whether or not this is Govier's view, it, or something like it, is a view that underlies the following argument (made by a critic of my Amsterdam paper) for moving from truth of premises to acceptability, namely that "because we can't say what is true in most contexts we must rest content with more tentative judgments of acceptability." This argument evidently assumes that in most contexts it is easier to tell whether a premise is acceptable than to tell whether it is true. I have not seen a defense of this assumption, and I wonder whether it is true. Suppose that we want to decide whether premise p is acceptable for some person S at time t —that is, whether it is reasonable for S to accept p at that time. Whether or not it is reasonable for S to accept p at time t depends on what we may

call S's epistemic circumstances at that time, where these include S's perceptual experiences and prior beliefs. To decide whether p is acceptable for S at time t , then, we must be able to tell what S's epistemic circumstances are at that time—or, more precisely, we must be able to tell whether S's epistemic circumstances at time t are such that it is then reasonable for S to accept p . And will it always, or usually, be easier to tell this than to tell whether p itself is true? I think we may fairly ask this question, and require an argument in support of an affirmative answer to it from those who prefer acceptability to truth as the criterion of premise adequacy on the ground, or partly on the ground, that we can't say what is true, in most contexts.

A further consideration. Suppose that S has no doubt that premise p is true. Moreover, S considers it reasonable for her to accept p , for she has strong evidence for p . If she were to try to show that it is reasonable for her to accept p , she would do so by presenting her evidence for p . But this would be for her to present evidence for p 's truth. Thus, in attempting to show that it is reasonable for her to accept p , she would at the same time be making a case that p is true. The general point here is that a case for the acceptability of a premise may at the same time be, at least in part, a case for its truth, despite the fact that acceptability is not the same thing as truth. In a case where this is so (that is, where a case for the acceptability of a premise is at the same time at least in part a case for its truth), it will be no easier for someone who finds the premise acceptable to show that it is acceptable, *for her* at any rate, than to make a case for its truth.

On the other hand, plainly there *are* cases in which we can tell whether a premise is acceptable for us but do not know whether the premise is true. Suppose the premise is that there is intelligent extraterrestrial life. And suppose that for us the truth value of this proposition is indeterminate—that we would say that we do not know whether the proposition is true or false. Suppose we would also say that at the present time we have no good reason to accept the proposition, hence that it is not reasonable for us to accept it at present, hence that at present it is not acceptable for us. Call the proposition p and assume that our task is to assess the argument containing it as a premise. Assume further that we would judge that argument to be satisfactory in all relevant respects (that is, in all respects that are relevant under our criteria of appraisal) other than in respect of the adequacy of premise p . If our criterion for premise adequacy is truth, then, since we take the truth value of p to be indeterminate, we will be unable to say whether the argument is in all relevant respects a good one, for in one respect (namely, in respect of the adequacy of premise p) the argument's goodness will be for us indeterminate. Not so, however, if our criterion for premise adequacy is acceptability. For then, *ex hypothesi*, we will say that the argument is a good one in all relevant respects save one, and that in one respect it is a defective argument because it has a premise that is unacceptable for us at the present time. In short, if truth is our criterion for premise adequacy we will be unable to say whether or not the argument is good in all relevant respects, while if acceptability is our criterion we will be able to say that the argument is *not* good in all relevant respects. Those who prefer acceptability to truth as the criterion of premise adequacy on the ground, or partly on the ground, that we can't say what is true in most contexts will, of course, hold that this case is representative of a very large number of cases—cases in which we can't tell whether the argument's premises are true, but can say whether or not they are acceptable. If this is in fact so, then the acceptability criterion has what we may call a pragmatic advantage over the truth criterion.

There is, however, an objection to the acceptability criterion, which goes as follows. An acceptable premise may be false. More precisely, a premise that is acceptable for the argument's intended audience at a certain time may be false. If a premise is acceptable but false, its falseness is not a defect of the argument if acceptability is the criterion of premise adequacy. But if an argument has a false premise (the objection continues) this *is* a defect of the argument. The acceptability criterion of premise adequacy fails to capture this defect, at least in the case of a premise that is acceptable but false. Consequently (the objection concludes) acceptability is a defective criterion

of premise adequacy.

But is it *true*, as this objection maintains, that if an argument has a false premise this is a defect of the argument? Imagine that in a criminal trial the following evidence is offered in support of the proposition that White committed the murder: (a) White's fingerprints were found on the murder weapon; (b) a hidden video camera caught White in the act; (c) White has told the police, of his own volition, that he committed the murder. Each of these evidence propositions would seem to be favourably relevant to the proposition that White committed the murder; in each case, if the evidence proposition is true, its truth would seem to count, to a greater or lesser degree, in favour of the proposition that White committed the murder. But suppose that the evidence propositions are false. Then, despite their favourable relevance to the proposition that White committed the murder, they are not *good reasons* for that proposition. To generalize: a false proposition, p , even if favourably relevant to a second proposition, q , is not a good reason for q because, being false, it has no tendency to show that q is true. If then the premises of an argument are false, they are not good reasons for the conclusion. But if an argument's premises are not good reasons for the conclusion, this is plainly a defect of the argument. Thus if the premises of an argument are false, this is a defect of the argument.

If an argument fails to give good reasons for its conclusion, it fails to *support* its conclusion. Thus, an argument fails to support its conclusion if its premises are false. I made a claim to this effect in my Amsterdam paper. In commentary, a critic asked whether the premises of a deductively valid argument support the conclusion, and answered that surely in one sense they do, even if they are false. Assume that what is in question is an argument that is deductively valid otherwise than in virtue of having an inconsistent premise-set or a necessarily true conclusion. At least on this assumption, the argument's premises are favourably relevant to the conclusion. But support, as I understand it, is not the same thing as favourable relevance. For an argument's premises to be favourably relevant to the conclusion, they need not be true; rather, roughly speaking, they must be such that *if* they are true their truth counts in favour of the truth of the conclusion. For an argument's premises to support the conclusion, it is necessary that they be favourably relevant to the conclusion; but it is not sufficient that they be favourably relevant to the conclusion. It is also necessary that they be true. Or so it seems to me. Thus I agree with Monroe Beardsley that "false premises give no support for the conclusion" (Beardsley: 37). (I am not claiming, note, that favourable relevance and truth are sufficient for support; I do not think they are. Rather, I am claiming that they are necessary.) But suppose, as my critic holds, that there is a sense of "support" such that it is possible for the premises of an argument to support the conclusion even if they are false—as, perhaps, in the case of a deductively valid argument with false premises. Then my claim would be (and my critic's comments suggest that he or she would agree) that there is a further sense of "support" such that if an argument's premises are false they fail to support the conclusion. And I would add that an argument whose premises fail to support the conclusion in this sense is in this respect defective, because such an argument fails to give good reasons for its conclusion.

The objection I stated above to the acceptability criterion of premise adequacy was that this criterion fails to capture the defect an argument has if its premises are false, or at least that it fails to capture this defect in cases in which the premises are both false and acceptable. I think this objection is sound. I also think, however, that a theory of argument should make room for premise-acceptability as a criterion of argument goodness. At the same time I think that a theory of argument should also make room for premise-truth as a criterion of argument goodness. What I will do next is suggest how a theory of argument might accommodate both premise-acceptability and premise-truth as criteria of good argument.

To begin with, I want to note, and endorse, a view of Alvin Goldman's, namely that "[t]here are several viable

conceptions of a good argument" (Goldman: 56). One such notion Goldman calls the "logical" notion, and says that it might be defined as follows:

An argument is a good argument if and only if (i) the relation between its premises and conclusion is either that of deductive validity or strong inductive support, and (ii) it contains only true premises. (Ibid.)

Goldman thinks that this is "one legitimate conception of a good argument" (ibid.), but he also thinks that there is another sense of good argument, namely an epistemological sense, and that it too is "extremely important" (ibid.: 57). As Goldman notes, the epistemological conception of a good argument has been defined by Richard Feldman roughly as follows:

An argument is a good argument relative to person S if and only if:

- (i) S is justified in believing the conjunction of all the premises of the argument,
- (ii) the argument is either valid or inductively strong, and
- (iii) S is justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion. (Ibid.)

Note that premise-truth is a criterion of good argument in the logical sense of "good argument" as defined by Goldman but not in the epistemological sense of "good argument" as defined by Feldman. Neither is premise-acceptability a criterion of good argument in Feldman's epistemological sense. But Feldman's definition does include a criterion of premise adequacy cognate to that of premise-acceptability, namely a justified-belief criterion. Substituting for this criterion an acceptability criterion gives us a revised version of Feldman's definition, such as the following:

An argument is a good argument relative to person S if and only if:

- (i) the argument's premises are acceptable for S,
- (ii) the argument is either valid or inductively strong, and
- (iii) S is justified in believing that the premises are "properly connected" to the conclusion.

Now a theory of argument might coherently embrace two conceptions of good argument—a logical conception (say Goldman's) and an epistemological conception (say Feldman's conception or the revised version of Feldman's conception that I have just given). A theory of argument which embraced the logical conception of good argument defined by Goldman would treat premise-truth as a condition of good argument in one sense (the logical sense), while if it also embraced my revised version of Feldman's epistemological conception of good argument it would treat premise-acceptability as a criterion of good argument in another sense (the epistemological sense). Thus it is evident how a theory of argument might accommodate both premise-truth and premise-acceptability as criteria of good argument. It could do so by embracing a logical conception of good argument for which an argument is good (that is, logically good) only if its premises are true, and also an epistemological conception of good argument for which an argument is good (that is, epistemologically good) only if its premises are acceptable for the intended audience.

But is there good reason for a theory of argument to accommodate both a logical conception of good argument and an epistemological conception? I will now argue that there is.

I will begin by arguing that there is good reason for a theory of argument to accommodate an epistemological conception of argument goodness. The starting-point of the argument is an account offered by Govier of the social institution of argument. According to Govier, the social institution of argument has as its typical function or purpose the rational persuasion of a rationally critical audience (Govier: 149-50). Suppose that Jack makes an argument whose audience is Jill. On Govier's conception, this performance is to be understood as follows (at least in the typical case): Jack presents what he regards as good reasons for some proposition, p , and does so with a view to persuading Jill, whom Jack takes to be a rationally critical person, to accept that proposition. Now (and here I move on from Govier's account) in such a context it is appropriate for Jill, as the rationally critical person she is assumed by Jack to be, to consider whether it is reasonable for her to accept the reasons Jack gives for p , and whether it is reasonable for her to believe that those reasons are "properly connected" to p ; in short, given the purpose of Jack's performance as an arguer, it is appropriate for Jill to consider whether it is reasonable for her to "buy", and so to accept, Jack's proffered argument for p . Consequently, it is appropriate for Jill to consider whether Jack's argument for p is a *good argument relative to Jill herself*. Equally, it is appropriate for Jack to consider whether his argument for p is one that it would be reasonable for Jill to accept, given that it is precisely Jack's aim rationally to persuade Jill, as an assumedly rationally critical person, to accept proposition p ; thus, it is appropriate for Jack to consider whether his argument for p is a good argument relative to Jill. But then for both Jack and Jill, and similarly for any arguer and his or her audience, at least in typical cases, there is utility in a notion of argument goodness that, in Goldman's phrase, is "relativized to a person" (Goldman: 57). Further, such a notion also has utility in typical cases for an external assessor of an argument—that is, for an assessor who is neither the arguer nor (a member of) the intended audience. For if, as in typical cases, the arguer's purpose is the rational persuasion of a rationally critical audience, it is appropriate for an external assessor to consider whether the argument is a good one relative to the intended audience. Thus a notion of argument goodness that is relativized to a person (or persons) has utility in typical cases for an arguer and his or her audience, and for an external assessor of the argument. And it is precisely such a conception of argument goodness that an epistemological conception of good argument provides. Consequently, there is good reason for a theory of argument to accommodate an epistemological conception of argument goodness.

In so arguing, I am assuming that Feldman's epistemological conception of good argument is representative of such conceptions in being relativized to a person. I shall further assume that it is representative in not making truth a criterion of premise adequacy.

The next stage of my argument is this. If our sole conception of argument goodness is an epistemological conception, we will not have a criterion of argument goodness relative to which an argument is defective if it has false premises. And this is reason to supplement an epistemological conception of good argument with a conception on which an argument with false premises is defective. Goldman's logical conception of good argument is, of course, such a conception, and so, I shall assume, is *any* logical conception of good argument. Consequently, there is good reason for a theory of argument to accommodate a logical conception of good argument *as well as* an epistemological conception.

A logical conception of good argument, I wish to add, will have explanatory utility for a theory of argument, independently of any practical-evaluative utility it may have. For given a logical conception of good argument, a theory of argument can explain what it would be for an argument to prove its conclusion, or establish that its conclusion is very probably true. On Goldman's conception of a logically good argument, for example, the explanation is that it would be for the argument to be logically good, either in virtue of being deductively valid and having true premises (in the case of a proof) or (in the case of establishing that the conclusion is very probably true) in virtue of being inductively strong and having true premises.

Thus a logical conception of good argument has explanatory utility. It is also capable of having practical-evaluative utility. Thus, even if it is often hard to tell whether the premises of an argument are true or false, it is sometimes possible to tell. In cases where we can tell that the premises are true, if we can also tell that the argument is, say, deductively valid, we can conclude that the argument is logically good, at least by Goldman's criteria, while in cases where we can tell that the premises are false we can straightaway conclude that the argument is not logically good.

An argument that is not logically good may, however, be epistemologically good—it may be good relative to its intended audience at a certain time. There are three other possibilities. An argument may be both logically good and epistemologically good, or neither logically good nor epistemologically good, or logically good but not epistemologically good.

Recall our earlier argument about White. In that example there were three evidence propositions for the claim that White committed the murder, and each, we supposed, was false. But the argument might still have been epistemologically good; it might have been a good argument relative to its intended audience (the jury in White's trial); it might, that is, have been an argument that the audience had good reason to accept. Suppose it was. Then it was a good argument in the epistemological sense; but, still supposing that its premises were false, it was not a logically good argument. Suppose next that at the time the argument was made there was no reason to think that its premises were false, but strong reasons to think they were true, but that later it is discovered that the premises were in fact false. When this discovery is made it remains the case that the argument, when it was advanced at White's trial, was a good one relative to its intended audience, but it is now evident, as earlier it was not, that it was not a logically good argument—that it failed to prove its conclusion, or, if false premises give no support for the conclusion they are intended to support, that it failed to provide any support at all for its conclusion.

To conclude. A theory of argument with two conceptions of good argument—a logical conception and an epistemological conception—will hold that premise-truth is a criterion of good argument in the logical sense and that premise-acceptability (or some cognate epistemic requirement) is a criterion of good argument in the epistemological sense. There are, I have argued, good reasons for a theory of argument to embrace both a logical conception of good argument and an epistemological conception. This being so, it would be unwise for us to accept Govier's advice to move from truth of premises to acceptability. We would do better to opt for a theory of argument for which premise-truth is a criterion of argument goodness in one important sense (the logical sense) and for which premise-acceptability is a criterion of good argument in another important sense (the epistemological sense), hence a theory for which premise-truth and premise-acceptability are necessary conditions of an argument's being both logically good and also epistemologically good relative to its intended audience and so are criteria of an argument's being good in what might be called the logico-epistemological sense.

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