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On Distinguishing Between an Objection and a Criticism

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Abstract: In this paper, I will argue that there are important differences between a criticism and an objection; that is to say, we should make a distinction between them. In the paper, I will do the following. First, I will review some pertinent literature. Second, I will give my reasons for thinking there is a distinction. Here I will be relying on insights from J. L. Austin and L. Wittgenstein. Third, I will make the distinction between an objection and a criticism by providing a definition of each term with appropriate supporting considerations. Finally, I will give my reasons for believing that the distinction is an important one by showing its utility in argumentation theory.

Keywords: alternative position, criticism, distinction, objection

1. Introduction

One way in which the arguer can satisfy the demands of objectivity is by taking into account and responding to dialectical material, such as objections, criticisms, counterarguments, alternative positions etc. In this paper, I will argue that there are important differences between a criticism and an objection; that is to say, we should make a distinction between them. In the paper, I will do the following. First, I will give my reasons for thinking there is a distinction. Here I will be relying on insights from J. L. Austin. Second, I will review some of the pertinent literature. Third, I will make the distinction between an objection and a criticism by providing a definition of each term with appropriate supporting considerations. Finally, I will give my reasons for believing that the distinction is an important one by showing its utility in argumentation theory.

2. Grounds for thinking there is a distinction

2.0. Overview

In this section, I present my argument for making a distinction between an objection and a criticism. First, I appeal to what I call ‘The Austin Principle’ which I extract from *A Plea for Excuses*. Second, I canvass some relevant authorities about meaning and usage: *Webster* (online), *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and *Roget’s Thesaurus*, all of which, I believe, support the view that these two terms have distinct meanings and should not be conflated, or used as if they were synonymous.

2.1. Austin on distinction

As justification for my claim that ‘objection’ and ‘criticism’ should not be conflated, I refer to J. L. Austin (1957) in *A Plea for Excuses*. There Austin writes: “First, words are our tools and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us... Thirdly, our common stock

of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and connections they have found worth making, in the lifetime of many generations” (Austin, 1957, pp.7-8). From the above text, what I extract might be dubbed ‘The Austin Principle’:

That there are two different terms (which we might think mean the same thing, or are equivalent) is a *prima facie* reason for thinking that there is an important difference in meaning, particularly when lexical definitions diverge.

To say that a reason is a *prima facie* reason is to say that that reason can be rejected or overturned by sufficiently strong reasons. Austin himself went to some trouble to distinguish between ‘entails,’ ‘implies,’ and ‘presupposes’ in *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). I hold that the terms ‘criticism’ and ‘objection’ do not mean the same thing. From which it follows that the distinction between them is worth marking and attending to. Appropriate linguistic authorities support Austin’s view, as I shall show in the next section.

2.2. Support from dictionaries and *Roget’s Thesaurus*

The view I am defending is supported by what we find in dictionaries and *Roget’s Thesaurus*.

A: *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2012) entries read as follows:

Objection: act of objecting; a statement or other expression offered or presented in opposition; an adverse contention, ground or reason or cause for expressing opposition or disagreement

Criticism: the act of making judgements or criticizing; 2. a passing of unfavorable judgment; censure’ disapproval; 3. the art skill or profession of making skilled judgements and evaluations (literary)

The verbal differences between these definitions are apparent.

B: *The Miriam Webster Online Dictionary* (2015) entries:

Objection: a reason for disagreeing with or opposing something; act of objecting
Examples: He said he had no objection to the plan. My main objection is that some people will have to pay more than others.

Criticism: the act of expressing disapproval and of noting the problems of faults of a person or thing; the act of criticizing someone or something; a remark or comment that expresses disapproval; the activity of making careful judgements about the good and bad qualities of books movies, etc.

While there is obvious verbal difference, it is not clear that the difference is substantial, though the reference to both making careful judgements about the good and bad qualities in the definition of ‘criticism’ does seem to differentiate it from ‘objection.’ It would seem that ‘criticism’ is a more complex undertaking.

C: *Roget's Thesaurus* (2001) entry for 'objection'

Objection: 520 protest; 728.4 obstacle; 1004.2 demurrer; 773.3 have no objection

These terms all suggest some form of opposition. Note that the term 'criticism' does not appear in this list. I take this as some evidence that *Roget's Thesaurus* provides some support for my view that the two terms are distinct in meaning.

Here is the *Roget's* (2001) entry for 'criticism':

Criticism: 493.2 judgement; 604.2 commentary; 967.4 censure

First, the terms above suggest more than just opposition; they suggest some sort of supported opposition. Second, the term 'objection' does not appear; which indicates that the authors considered that there is no overlap in the entries.

Thus I believed that the *Roget's Thesaurus* (2001) points in the direction of the position I am taking—viz., that these terms have different meanings, and the lexicographical evidence cited here provides support for my position. I now proceed to look at some pertinent secondary literature.

3. Review of some pertinent literature

In this section, I discuss the positions taken by two scholars who have paid particular attention to this matter, Trudy Govier (1999) and Douglas Walton (2011).

3.1. Govier's position (1999)

In Chapter Thirteen of *The Philosophy of Argument* (1999), "Progress and Regress...", Govier offered one of the first attempts that I am aware of to think through the question of just what an objection is, and to develop in a somewhat systematic way a doctrine of types of objection.

Govier (1999) begins by presenting an intuition: "an objection is an allegation that there is something wrong with the position of the arguer." (I must say that here our intuitions do not line up. My intuition is that an objection is more like a challenge than an allegation of wrongdoing. But more of this later.) Govier (1999) then discusses the focus of the objection and offers this account:

an objection is (a) any claim alleging a defect in the argument or its conclusion; (b) which, insofar as it does not compete for the same intellectual and social space as that conclusion, does not constitute an alternative position to the conclusion; and is either (c) raised by the audience to which the argument is addressed or (d) might plausibly be raised by that audience; or (e) might plausibly be raised by a rational person to whom the argument might plausibly be addressed. (p. 229)

This account is important for a number of reasons. *First*, to the best of my knowledge *this is the first definition of an objection to be found in the scholarly literature by argumentation theorists about argument.* (I find that startling. One would have thought that it would have emerged as a concept worth clarifying.) *Second*, here Govier distinguishes between an objection and an alternative position. I support this distinction and will want to incorporate it into my own theory. *Third*,

Govier's account contains the clear recognition that an objection proceeds out of Otherness; it is a concern raised by someone in the audience, or one's interlocutor. It is a type of argumentative material that should be distinguished from an alternative position. Indeed, I want to take the next step and propose that we might also usefully distinguish between an objection and a criticism. *Fourth*, Govier sees an objection as a form of resistance to the argument—a claim alleging a defect in the argument or its conclusion. Here I think Govier's position is too limiting and will explain why shortly. Govier now offers a more succinct characterization of an objection:

An objection is an argument, a consideration put forward, alleged to show either that there is something wrong with the conclusion in question or that there is something wrong with the argument put forward in its favour. (p. 229)

This account contains an important "amendment" not found in the earlier account; for here Govier seems to require that an objection be an argument, in the sense that some reasoning must itself support the objection. I say "seems" because she uses both "argument" and "consideration" here, and the latter might seem to allow for a simple claim to qualify as an objection. But that issue seems to be settled by what she then says:

Implicitly, if not explicitly, one who raises an objection is either saying "O; therefore there is something wrong with conclusion C" or "O; therefore there is something wrong with the argument in support of C." Here "O" refers to the substantive considerations which constitute the premises of the objection." (Govier, 1999, p. 229)

I take this to mean that Govier thinks of an objection as itself having the form of an argument and as leading to the conclusion that there is something wrong with the argument. I will argue that this view is too narrow.

3.2. Douglas Walton (2011)

In his paper for OSSA 10, Walton writes:

We begin by noting that the term 'objection' is quite a broad one. An objection does not necessarily have to be a counter-argument posed against an original argument. It could be merely asking of a critical question. Even when an objection is a counter-argument posed against an original argument, it does not have to be an argument that the original argument is weak, unsupported or incorrect. It could be a procedural objection,¹ not implying that the argument it is addressed against is incorrect, insufficiently supported by evidence, or even questionable as an argument in itself. Such a procedural objection could merely claim that the argument, even though it might be reasonable enough, or well enough supported in itself, is not appropriate for use in the context of the given discussion. In law, for example, an argument might be objected to on the grounds that the evidence it purports to bring forward has been obtained illegally, even though that evidence

¹ This suggests a subdivision (procedural v. substantive), but Walton (2011) does not focus on developing it.

might otherwise be quite convincing in itself as a rational argument. (Walton, 2011, p.2)

Walton seems here concerned with the relationship between an objection and a counterargument. I believe he is on the right track in wanting to distinguish them. He also takes the view that an objection is an argument, a position that I will argue against.

On the whole, I agree with what Walton has said; my one reservation is that he has not provided a clear definition of ‘objection’—something I intend to do later.

3.3. Krabbe (2007)

In this paper Krabbe lists seven ways an opponent can critically react to a proponent’s expressed argument. (1) A request for clarification, explanation or elucidation may contain an implicit criticism that the argument was not clearly expressed to start with. (2) A challenge to an argument comprises an expression of critical doubt about whether a reason supports the argument. (3) A bound challenge raises a more specific doubtful point that offers some reason for entertaining doubt. (4) An exposure of a flaw poses a negative evaluation of an argument and requests further amplification. (5) Rejection is a kind of critical reaction by an opponent who may not deny that the proponent’s argument is reasonable, but takes up an opposite point of view. (6) A charge of fallacy criticizes the contribution of the proponent by claiming he or she has violated some rule of fair procedure. (7) A personal attack is a common kind of critical reaction that provides a means of defence against unreasonable moves by one’s opponent (2007, pp. 55-57). Krabbe (2007) suggests that all these critical reactions can properly be called objections, because they express dissatisfaction with an argument presented by a proponent (p. 57). If, as it appears to me, Krabbe conflates ‘objection’ and ‘critical reaction,’ that seems to me mistaken. For an objection may be intended just as a test: How would you react to X? Krabbe also seems to take the view to speak of a request for clarification or a pure challenge as an objection would be an overstatement, because objections, he believes, presuppose a negative evaluation, whereas these other two types of reaction precede evaluation. It seems to me that Krabbe’s view is too narrow; an objection may simply be a challenge to the argument.²

3.4. Summary

In this section I have reviewed the positions of three important theorists: Walton, Govier, and Krabbe. In each case, I have found the account wanting. I believe that there is room for improvement. I proceed next to draw the distinction between an objection and a criticism.

4. Making the distinction between objection and criticism

4.1. The nature of an objection: A proposal

The previous sections surveyed various positions on the nature of an objection and indicated some problems. In this section, I argue that we need a broader account of what an objection is, one that will pave the way for the distinction between an objection and a criticism. An important

² Krabbe and van Laar (2011) in *Ways of Criticism* offer the following categories: objections, critical questions (but not criticism), rebuttals, refutations, counterarguments, and fallacy charges.

consequence is that the arguer's dialectical obligations are different with respect to these two types of dialectical material.

A definition of 'objection'

Typically, an objection as posed by the objector, will go something like this: "I want to raise the following objection:..." However, there are other ways of signaling this sort of intervention. Thus:

"But how then do you distinguish between X and Y?" can be rephrased as an objection = your position does now allow for a distinction between x and y.

"What do you say to those who argue that *p*?" can be rephrased as an objection = my objection here is that *p*.

"But doesn't your argument assume that *p*?" can be rephrased as an objection: my objection here is that *p*.

All of these ways of phrasing an objection make it clear that an objection is a response to a specific argument. The response makes plain that there is dissent, disagreement, difference, without however providing support for that claim.

Let me, then, propose the following definition³: An *objection* is "(1) a response to an argument that (2) expresses propositional content that (3) presents a challenge, difficulty or some possible impediment to the goal of being rationally persuaded by the argument."⁴ I now comment on each of element of the proposed definition.

(1) An objection is one type of response to an argument. An objection only exists in a *dialectical environment*.⁵ No statement or assertion is an objection *per se*. It only takes on that status when it is directed toward a specific argument. (That is not to deny that objections can exist in advance of an argument: viz., the standard objections.)

(2) An objection has propositional content that is typically presented in a statement or an assertion, but need not be. A question can be used to present an objection: "But how do you handle this situation?" This is not an assertion yet it may express an objection. Thus the reference to propositional content avoids restricting objections to responses that take the form of statements. It allows for a question to count: How do you respond to the objection that *p*?

(3) The propositional content in some way challenges the argument—whether by raising a question, or posing a potential problem. However, it need not *assert* the existence of a flaw or a problem, because the one raising the objection may only be testing of the argument. The objector may wish to see how the arguer can respond to the objection. On the other hand, it is also often the case that the one who raises the objection thinks that the objection has the potential for undermining the argument. The future life of an objection could be as a criticism, as I understand that term. For if the objector is not satisfied with the arguer's response to the objection posed, he or she may decide to re-present the arguer with that same content, now in the form of a criticism.

An objection may be directed to an explicit part of the argument—a premise or an inference or even the conclusion: "I object to your premise to the effect that...." But it need not be. It seems quite common that the objection is directed against something that the objector believes is *assumed* or *implied* by the argument.

³ If asked what kind of definition, I would say that it is a theoretical one. See Johnson and Hamby (2015).

⁴ My position here is to some degree dependent on the frame of argument as rational persuasion.

⁵ See Johnson (2000).

There are two immediate payoffs to this way of defining an ‘objection.’ *First*, we bring our definition into somewhat closer alignment with informed use. That is, we do not rule out as an objection a statement not supported by any reason. Other accounts by Govier (1990) seem to have this consequence. *Second*, this definition paves the way for drawing the distinction between an objection and a criticism, a matter I turn to next.

4.2. Distinguishing between ‘objection’ and ‘criticism’

The first point to attend to is that the term ‘*criticism*’ is generally taken to have a negative connotation. We hear it said: “Don’t be so critical” or “You’re so critical all the time.” And when we say such things, we are in using “critical” in the sense of making an adverse judgement. (The same cannot be said of ‘objection’.)

However, criticism, as I propose to explain it, is not necessarily adverse or negative, though, as we shall see, there is a good reason why criticism (in the sense discussed here) tends to be negative. In intellectual work, and particularly in argumentation, we acknowledge the value of criticism, and we teach our students that it is important to develop “the critical spirit” (Siegel, 1988). In university we teach subjects like literary criticism. In these cases, “criticism” is closer to its original meaning. The word “criticism” derives from the Greek word *krinein* from which we get our words “critic” and “critical”—which means to estimate the value of something. A critic is a person who judges, appreciates, estimates the value of something. A good critic can see both the strengths and the weaknesses in whatever is being discussed, say a work of art or a musical performance. A good critic of an argument can see both the strengths and weaknesses in the argument and makes his or her assessment in light of them

The value and importance of criticism is indicated in this remark by the psychologist, Dr. Arnold Rincover:

There is one thing that everyone wants to give and no one wants to receive. Criticism. You can call it “correction,” “feedback,” “guidance,” or any nicer sounding name, but most people still hate it. It is a rare person who likes criticisms ... Yet it is crucial. After all, how can we know if we’re doing a good job if our strengths and weaknesses aren’t evaluated and told to us?⁶

Notice the tension between the idea of criticism as something that no one wants (here thinking of it as negative), and criticism as helping us see our strengths and weaknesses (which some do want). Rincover’s next comment is quite remarkable: “The truly wise and strong will actively solicit criticism. They want it, chase it, and are excited ... because it is an opportunity to learn.” This remark certainly applies in the practice of argumentation, at least as I conceive it. Once the arguer has produced an argument for the purpose of rational persuasion (reaching the most rational position), the arguer will want feedback. If the purpose of the exercise were simply to cow the other into submission or to make the arguer feel good about himself, then only “positive” criticism and praise would be welcomed. But I have been supposing that participants come to the practice of argumentation with a different orientation, one in which the arguer is open to, and indeed interested in, seeing the problems with the argument. The orientation of the arguer, as I have been conceiving of it, is something along these lines: “Here are the reasons that

⁶ Unfortunately, I cannot give a specific reference for this text.

I think this claim is true.⁷ I hope you find them persuasive. If you do not, if you find my reasoning defective, I would be enlightened to know why, so that I may revise my own views if necessary.” The arguer as we have imagined her is, thus, essentially interested in receiving criticism; and if no criticism should arise, the arguer will solicit it.

I have been discussing what might be called “the spirit of criticism.” Let me return our focus to the thing itself. The term ‘*criticism*,’ is ambiguous as between a single claim or allegation of a defect in the argument, and an extended set of criticisms, which we might term a *critique*. This latter, I see as an attempt to offer an overall assessment of the argument, one which assesses both strengths and weaknesses and comes to an overall judgement of its merits based on this assessment.⁸ The latter is more developed dialectically than the former which in turn is more dialectically developed than an objection. In what follows, I shall be looking at the former sense, that of a single criticism (on a par with a single objection).

Having discussed the nature of criticism, I proceed to propose a definition.

4.3. A definition of “criticism”

The definition of ‘*criticism*’ I will propose parallels the definition given above for ‘*objection*.’ The basic idea is that a criticism is a developed and focused dialectical intervention, as contrasted with an objection which need not take the form of an argument and which is often not clearly targeted. A criticism, then, is a claim supported by reasons that the argument suffers from some defect.

Specifically, a *criticism* of an argument is (1) the expression of propositional content that (2) claims that the argument suffers from a defect (or defects) and (3) provides appropriate support for the claim.⁹ The critic makes an assertion or claim, (C), which identifies some propositional content, (P) of the argument (A) as defective, and supports (C) with a line of reasoning (R). Criticism, as I understand it here, must take the form of an argument, whereas that is not the case with an objection.

I now offer comments on each of these three components.

(1) Like an objection, a criticism has propositional content. Just booing and giving the raspberries, though these might qualify as criticism in common parlance, would not qualify as criticism. The propositional content of a criticism is categorical. It is more than suggestion or challenge or probe. It asserts a specific defect in the argument. Thus, criticism will be susceptible of truth-falsity.

(2) Criticism, as conceived herein, requires a specific assertion about a specific defect in the argument. Criticism focuses on some particular aspect of the argument—whether it be a premise, an inference, an assumption, an implication, the conclusion—and alleges a defect in that part of the argument. If one adopts a traditional approach to argument analysis, then the criticism will be directed either to one of the premises, or to the inference from the premises to the conclusion. But no matter what theory of evaluation one adopts, these features must be present.

(3) Criticism is reasoned. The critic cannot simply assert the existence of the defect in question. Why not? The short answer is that the critic is bound by the same constraints of

⁷ This would include both illative core and dialectical tier.

⁸ See *Logical Self-Defense* (1983), 2e.

⁹ How is a criticism different from counterargument? alternative position? These are interesting questions which I cannot undertake to answer here.

rationality as the arguer. It would neither be rationally satisfying, nor would it appear to be so, were the critic to merely assert that the argument suffered from a defect (say, begged the question) without providing the reasons or evidence to support this claim (which will almost certainly be controversial). In line with the rationality requirements of the practice of argumentation, then, it follows that the criticism must be reasoned.

For example, Searle's "Re-iterating the Differences" (1977) contains many criticisms of Jacques Derrida's position as set out in *Signature, Event, Context* (1989). Searle criticizes Derrida's interpretation of J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, arguing that "Derrida's version of Austin is unrecognizable." That is the criticism. Now comes support. First, Searle claims, Derrida completely mistakes "the status... ." Second, Derrida mistakenly assumes that in using the term parasitic Austin meant to suggest, etc." Here I make no attempt an evaluation of the criticism. I present it simply as one example of criticism, in the sense in which I have defined that term.

4.4. Distinguishing between objection and criticism

As discussed above, the prevailing practice seems to be to use the terms *objection* and *criticism* more or less interchangeably—to make no distinction between them. I believe that it is beneficial to make a distinction. The reason is not the fondness philosophers have for making distinctions—a fondness satirized by William James in a famous passage from *What Pragmatism Means* (1907/2014)¹⁰—but rather because I believe that a case can be made for the proposition that the arguer's dialectical obligations depend on the type of dialectical material being dealt with. My sense is that the arguer has a greater obligation to respond to a criticism than to an objection, for two reasons. First, because a criticism is more dialectically developed, it will tend to have greater potential to destabilize the argument; it poses a greater challenge. And the author of the criticism has put forward an argument, not a mere comment. Hence, it would seem that the arguer's obligation to respond to criticism is stronger than the obligation to respond to an objection.

Someone may object that the distinction as I have presented it here does not fully capture the practice. I agree, but I believe that is because the practice is all over the place, so to speak. If I am right, then no attempt to report the use of the term "objection" would be able to capture all of the practice, because that practice is not itself uniform and/or consistent.

Someone else may object to the drawing of such a fine distinction as trifling. In response, I can point out that it is not at all unusual in our theorizing to make a distinction not drawn in either ordinary language or technical language. For example, Perelman (1958) distinguishes, where others have not, between the rational and the reasonable, and between persuading and convincing. O'Keefe (1987) drew a distinction between what he called Argument-1 and Argument-2 that many have found useful. Whether such "fine" distinctions are worthwhile depends on their ability to help us in the matters under investigation.

I turn finally to the utility of the distinction I have offered.

5. The utility of the distinction

First, I submit that this proposal does what a distinction is supposed to do: it provides clarity, a clear demarcation between an objection and a criticism, based on the degree of dialectical

¹⁰ The passage is about a debate regarding a squirrel, whether it goes around the tree or not.

development. Second, it can be used to provide a rational basis for prioritizing dialectical material in the following way. If the arguer were to adopt the position argued for here, then he or she will deal with any criticisms first, because they are clearer in that they are more dialectically developed than objections, and second, because in the view presented here they are *arguments* and so have a somewhat stronger claim on the arguer's attention.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there are important differences between a criticism and an objection; we should make a distinction between them. After a review of some pertinent literature, I gave my reasons for thinking there is a distinction. I then made the distinction between an objection and a criticism by providing a definition of each term with appropriate supporting considerations. Finally, I gave reasons for believing that the distinction is an important one by pointing to its utility in argumentation theory.

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