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Commentary on Ralph H. Johnson's "On Distinguishing Between an Objection and a Criticism"

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In my commentary, I will first elaborate on why the theory of criticism merits attention when you take an interest in argumentation. Second, I comment on Johnson's distinction between criticism and objection. My ideas about this go back to the OSSA conference in 2009, when I commented on Doug Walton's paper called "Objections, Rebuttals and Refutations" (Walton 2010; van Laar 2010). Walton's paper dealt with types of criticism, and he made some headway in the confusing terminology in this area. In my commentary, back then, I distinguished a number of parameters that might be useful for characterizing the various types of criticism in a more or less systematic way. Back in Groningen, Erik Krabbe and I wrote a paper about these parameters, called "The Ways of Criticism" (Krabbe and van Laar 2011), and my commentary today is partly based on ideas from that paper.

Criticism is essential to argument production and analysis. For normally, argumentation grows and develops as a result of being fed with, what I use as a generic term, *critical reactions*. How about the argument's illative core: Why would a premise be advanced in support of a thesis? Because, apparently, someone has called the thesis into question or the arguer chooses to anticipate such doubts. How about the argument's dialectical tier: Why are further critical reactions taken into account and responded to? Because, apparently, there is someone who entertains these critical considerations, or who should do so, and the arguer aims at rationally convincing this critic. Critical reactions have a steering function when it comes to production of argument and an explanatory function when it comes to the analysis of argument.

Criticism is also essential to argument quality. One aspect of the evaluation of arguments is the extent to which it engages adequately with the critical reactions that confront it, and from a dialectical viewpoint this is even the primary normative stance towards argument quality. Critical reactions, thus, have a testing function when it comes to the assessment of argumentation.

Given the importance of critical reactions for argumentation studies, it is essential to develop guidelines for identifying and distinguishing types of critical reactions and the norms that govern them, and for that reason I am enthusiastic about Johnson's project of developing a theory of criticism (see also: Johnson 2000).

There are many types of critical reaction. Some well-known members of this family are: attack, challenge, charge, counterargument, counterconsideration, critical question, criticism, critique, defeater, denial, objection, rebuttal, refutation, rejoinder, undercutter, and there are quite a number more. I conceive of a critical reaction as the product of the dialogical contribution where a dialogue participant responds to a conversational contribution of an interlocutor (present or absent, real or imaginary) by negatively evaluating this contribution, or at least part of it, or by preparing for such a negative evaluation by challenging this interlocutor to repair an alleged flaw or omission. Four parameters can be distinguished that seem to be required in order to provide a more or less complete characterization of a critical reaction of some type. Johnson's concepts are critical reactions at quite high levels of

generality. After quoting his definitions of “objection” and “criticism,” I proceed by analyzing the concepts by means of the four parameters, labelled *focus*, *norm*, *level* and *force*.

Johnson proposes the following definition of “objection”: 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.” Johnson’s proposed definition of criticism is: “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.” I must confess that I do not have clear linguistic intuitions about how to define “objection” or “criticism,” probably because I am only a fluent speaker of Broken English, and my comments are mainly motivated by a desire for clarity and methodological fruitfulness.

First, a critical reaction has a *focus*, as it is about something, and responds to a contribution, or to a part of it, or to a configuration of parts. A critical reaction may have a propositional focus, for instance on the argument’s premise, its conclusion or its connection. Instead of a propositional focus, a critical reaction may have a locutional focus, or a personal or situational one. According to Johnson’s definitions, both objections and criticisms are focused on an argument, or at least a part of an argument. As we shall see, an objection does not contain an argument, in Johnson’s view, so that one implication of his theory seems to be that one cannot object to an objection, and the term “counter-objection” is contradictory. A desire to heed ordinary language might provide a reason to broaden the concept of objection, so as to allow for objections of other dialectical objects than arguments. A difference between the two concepts that Johnson identifies is that objection is less, and criticism is more focused, in the sense that criticism is more than objection targeted at a specific part of the argument.

Second, a critical reaction appeals at a *norm*, as it evaluates the element focused on, or at least prepares for such an evaluation. For example, the critical reaction’s evaluation may come down to the assessment that the argument fails to discharge the required burden of proof, or that it is not clearly formulated, or that it is ugly, or strategically weak, and so forth. As becomes clear from Johnson’s comments on his definitions, both objections and criticisms appeal to norms for rational persuasion, rather than some other kind of norm, such as an aesthetic or ethical one.

Third, a critical reaction is advanced at a particular level of discussion, such as the ground level of dialogue when contributing quite directly to the issue at hand, or at a meta-level of dialogue when making evaluative comment about the course of the dialogue, for example by making a procedural objection, or by making evaluative comments about the strategy to be adopted. Johnson’s reference to procedural objections suggest that objections may be advanced both at ground as well as at meta-levels of dialogue. The same applies, I expect, to criticism.

Fourth and finally, a critical reaction has an illocutionary force, as it is a verbal contribution itself, and made up from one or more speech acts. For example, a critical reaction can be a denial, or a request for argument, or a request for clarification, or counter-argumentation, and so forth. In the remainder of this commentary I deal with differences in force.

It becomes clear from Johnson’s definitions that the main difference between an objection and a criticism is that the former is less dialectically developed and the latter more dialectically developed, in the specific sense that former need not contain assertion or argument and the latter does involve assertion and argument, so that they clearly are connected with different illocutionary forces.¹ An objection may just present a challenge and a critical test, rather than an allegation of wrongdoing. However, the evidence that Johnson

¹ Given that there is a clause that requires criticism to contain *appropriate* support, I wonder whether the definiendum should be “appropriate criticism,” rather than “criticism.”

offers in support of this way of conceptualizing the distinction is suggestive of reasoning as being constitutive of objection. First, I want to emphasize the reasoning element in objections. Then, I will discuss how, nevertheless, the concept of an objection can be understood in line with Johnson's assumption that objections do not contain arguments.

As I understand the definition, the propositional content expressed in an objection is not the same propositional content as the proposition that is evaluated negatively, so that if a proponent asserts "P," the opponent's mere challenge "Why P?" or her mere denial "not-P" does not count as an objection to P. Consequently, the propositional content expressed in an objection must be some other proposition, say Q, that the opponent advances in opposition to the proponent's argument. Q apparently underlies the opponent's evaluation of the proponent's argument, even if the evaluation only amounts to the idea that the arguer's stance is doubtful. According to this reading, both criticism and objection involve reasoning, with Q as a premise and some kind of negative evaluation as its conclusion. But if both involve reasoning, where is the difference? One possible solution to this problem of interpretation is that the reasoning has different functions when it comes to objection and criticism.

First, the reasoning of the critic can constitute counter-argumentation, which is an attempt to convince the arguer to accept the denial of something this arguer at an earlier stage has asserted or implied. This seems to be the function of reasoning in criticism. *Second*, the function of the reasoning may be that of explaining to the arguer what motivates the critic to evaluate the arguer's argument unfavourably. For example, if the critic thinks that the arguer's assertion P (e.g. one of the reasons offered to the critic) is false, she may advance counterconsideration Q, not in an attempt to convince him to adopt not-P, but in an attempt to make him understand what motivates her to doubt P and to entertain the possibility that P is false. In such cases, the opponent reasons, but she does not advance an argument, for the measure of the reasoning's success is not whether it convinces the arguer on ground he considers acceptable, but whether it clarifies to the arguer what motivates the critic (cf. on cautious assertions: Rescher, 1977). Such an objection can be very helpful to the arguer, as it informs him about the argumentative strategy to adopt in order to stand a chance of convincing this particular critic. After all, if he knows what motivates the critic to challenge P, he knows what proposition to refute in order to take away the critic's doubts. In this case, the arguer should show that Q is false or insufficient to undermine his assertion that P. So one way of understanding Johnson's distinction between objection and criticism is that both contain reasoning, but in the case of objection the reasoning constitutes explanation, whereas in the case of criticism the reasoning constitutes counter-argumentation.

Let's take a look at one of Johnson's examples of an objection: "But how do you distinguish between X and Y?". This can be rephrased, Johnson explains, as an objection: "your position does not allow for a distinction between X and Y." In my reading of such an objection, reasoning is involved, and the reasoning at hand can be phrased as: "I am still in doubt about the position that you adopt and what underlies my position of doubt is that, as far as you have shown, your position does not allow for a distinction between X and Y." Similar pieces of reasoning can be construed for Johnson's other examples.

My reading of Johnson's distinction has the further advantage of doing justice to parts of the dictionary definitions of "objection" that Johnson refers to. The definition of "objection" that I found in the online version of the *American Heritage Dictionary* makes use of the phrase "a ground, reason, or cause for expressing opposition." And the online version of Merriam Webster Dictionary defines "objection" in terms of "a reason for disagreeing with or opposing something." These clauses suggest that an objection involves reasoning, for some purpose or other.

A consequence of my reading of "objection" is that, even though an objection need not contain an argument, the existence of reasoning makes an objection not less dialectically

developed than a criticism, and the normative importance Johnson attaches to the distinction – according to which an arguer should give priority to criticisms over objections when responding to critics – may need reconsideration.

A final comment. Johnson observes that some lexical definitions of “criticism” make mention of the idea of carefulness, whereas those of objection do not. This aspect of the difference between the two concepts, however, does not return in Johnson’s own definitions. Neither can it be adequately grasped by the four parameters that I have used. It might be worthwhile to characterize some critical reactions (objections, for example) as befitting situations where advocacy and competition is appropriate, such as the argumentation stage of a persuasion dialogue, and other critical reactions (criticisms, for example) as befitting situations that are less heated and where a more cooperative inquiry is appropriate, such as the concluding stage of a persuasion dialogue.

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