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Commentary on Allen

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COMMENTARY ON ALLEN'S "SHOULD WE ASSESS THE BASIC PREMISES OF AN ARGUMENT FOR TRUTH OR ACCEPTABILITY?"

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Introduction

The issue that Allen is addressing in this paper is the issue of premise-adequacy. Many informal logicians (Govier, Johnson and Blair) have taken the view that acceptability is the appropriate criterion to invoke.¹ Allen challenges that doctrine. Allen begins by reviewing three objections to the truth requirement and argues (I think successfully) against these objections. In the second section, he reviews the acceptability requirement and various problems associated with it. In the third section, Allen argues that we should adopt both the truth requirement and the acceptability requirement and he provides a way that this can be achieved: by embracing both an epistemological and a logical conception of a good argument.

I find myself generally in agreement with the position that Allen takes here. I generally favour, and for many of the reasons he has indicated, the inclusion of truth as a requirement of premise adequacy, and I also wish to maintain some form of acceptability requirement. The problem of how to include both is what I call *The Integration Problem*. The reason this is a problem is illustrated well in Allen's paper: these requirements can often pull in opposite directions: a premise may be true but not acceptable; a premise may be false but acceptable. I think there are some difficulties with Allen's solution and I would like to turn my attention to those now.

Some Problems

1. About basic premises:

Allen claims that the problem concerns what he calls a basic premise (1). But it is not clear to me that if we incorporate the truth requirement its application will be limited to basic premises. And in fact in the discussion that ensues the claims that Allen makes strike me as claims about premises generally speaking rather than just about basic premises. One place I can specify is the following:

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 evidence for p 's truth.

If she does present this evidence, then p cannot be a basic premise. And yet the point remains valid.

2. About the truth requirement:

Allen considers and rejects three objections that have been made to the truth-requirement and I think his arguments here succeed. But I think there may be an even stronger objections to the truth-requirement that he has not discussed. One would be the view that truth is simply too woolly, too unmanageable and not suited to the task of argument appraisal.² Then there is Hamblin's view that truth and validity are onlooker's concepts and

presuppose a God's eye view of the arena and hence are not well suited to the task of argument appraisal. In addition to this claim, Hamblin argues that truth is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for premise adequacy.³ I believe his arguments need to be addressed.⁴

A further question I would have for Allen is this: if you include truth as a requirement for premise-adequacy, what sort of unpacking of that criterion do you intend? Shifting now to the other side of the truth-requirement, I notice that Allen takes the view that a false premise provides no support for its conclusion. He writes: "If the premises of an argument are false, they are not good reasons for the conclusion. Thus if the premises of an argument are false, this is a defect of the argument."

Now I would agree that if all of the premises of an argument are false, the argument is defective. It is not clear to me that an argument that has *one false premise* is necessarily a bad argument. If the premise were, let us say, a premise which plays a minor role in the argument, the argument's worth is not going to be affected by it. Further, it is going to matter how grievous the falsity is. For example, an argument which has a premise that is just barely false will not, it seems to me, be as defective as an argument with a premise that is grievously false.

Here is an example. In *Logical Self-Defense* (224-226) Johnson and Blair present an argument for capital punishment in which the author asserts that "In England convicted murderers move speedily toward execution" (referring to the period from 1968-77) a premise which turns out to be false and I think this is a grievous defect in the argument. But suppose in this same argument the arguer includes a premise in which he slightly overstates the population of England during this period. This premise is false but its falsity does not strike me as grievous.

This problem is important because the conception of logical goodness that Allen opts for requires that all the premises be true.

Allen's proposed solution

I turn now to the crux of the matter: how do we get the truth-requirement and the acceptability requirement together? In my view, there are some problems with Allen's proposed solution which is to develop conceptions of logical and epistemological goodness which allow for an argument to be good from an epistemological standpoint (its premises are all acceptable), while not being good from a logical standpoint (because its premises are false).

The first problem is with Allen's definition of logical goodness in which he follows Goldman. The problem it seems to me is that this conception reflects a formal rather than an informal approach to the theory of argument. The odd thing is that the challenge he is posing is really more appropriately directed to informal logicians (who have abandoned truth in favour of acceptability) than to the formal logician who has accepted truth all along. In any event, his definition of logical goodness relies on the criteria of deductive validity and inductive strength and so assumes that each and every argument can be judged as either deductive or inductive—a doctrine which many have challenged notably Govier (1987). It ignores the possibility taken seriously by many informal logicians of a third type of inference, some would call it conductive, in which the premises provide good reasons for the conclusion.⁵

A second problem is the idea that there is this tension between logic and epistemology: an argument may be epistemologically good but logically bad. I would much prefer a solution which does not have this feature which

in some ways resembles the old theological doctrine of the two truths: something may be true in philosophy which is not true in theology.

One final feature of Allen's proposal that I find disturbing is that it seems to make logical goodness dependent on or a supplement to epistemological goodness, and I am not sure why this should be the case.

In conclusion, let me say that I believe that Allen's challenge is a timely and appropriate one and I look forward to further discussion of this important issue in the theory of argument.

Notes

1. See Govier's *A Practical Study of Argument*, 4th ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997; and Johnson and Blair's *Logical Self-Defense*, 3rd ed., Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1993. 

2. C. L. Hamblin, *Fallacies*, London: Methuen, 1970. p. 242. 

3. *ibid.*, pp. 234-36. 

4. In my view, this is a dialectical weakness in Allen's argument. He has not discharged his dialectical obligations; he has not addressed a well-known and fairly standard objection to the truth-requirement. 

5. Govier (*op. cit.*) takes this notion seriously as does Hitchcock, *Critical Thinking: A Guide to Evaluating Information* (Toronto: Methune, 1983). See also Govier's *Problems in Argument Analysis and Evaluation* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1987), for a detailed theoretical treatment of the view that there are conductive arguments.



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