

Discussion Note

ALETHIC, EPISTEMIC, AND DIALECTICAL MODELS OF ARGUMENT

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In a double-barreled attack on Charles Hamblin's influential book *Fallacies* (1970), Ralph Johnson (1990a) argues that Hamblin's chapter 1 is an unfair account of the standard treatment of fallacies, and then argues, in a second paper in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1990b), that Hamblin's chapter 7 on the concept of argument arrives at a wrong conclusion, based on reasoning that is flawed and problematic. This attack makes Hamblin's book appear, incongruously, to commit many of the very sorts of logical lapses, errors, and fallacies that it is supposed to be warning against. According to Johnson, Hamblin was not only biased and unfair in his account of the textbooks and other sources of his time—thus committing a kind of straw man fallacy—he was also weak in his reasoning.

Although most of Hamblin's scholarship has stood up amazingly well, his book still being an indispensable resource in the field of argumentation, it is, of course, easy to pinpoint some lapses or weaknesses in the book now, twenty years later, with twenty-twenty hindsight. But did Hamblin really commit the errors that Johnson attributes to him, to the serious extent that Johnson claims? In a companion reply (1991b), I argue that he did not, in his chapter 1 of *Fallacies* on the standard treatment. In this article, I will argue that Johnson's assessment of Hamblin's chapter 7 is also an attempt at refutation that does not hold up to critical scrutiny.

Pressing dichotomies

Throughout Johnson's account, one senses a failure of sympathy with what Hamblin tried to seek out as a line of investigation. In particular, there is a straw-man portrayal of the nature of Hamblin's line of investigation by caricaturing it through the use of

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black-and-white (unfairly dichotomous) questions. Johnson continually portrays Hamblin as "for" dialectical criteria of argument and "against" alethic or epistemic criteria. He asks (p. 279): "Is it that dialectical criteria need to be applied *as well as* alethic and epistemic? Or is Hamblin arguing for dialectical criteria *instead of* alethic and epistemic?" Pressing these dichotomies on Hamblin's investigation of fallacies shows a lack of appreciation of the kind of project of investigation that Hamblin attempted to carry out.

Hamblin was studying the fallacies. But the problem that kept arising was that the kinds of argumentation traditionally identified with these various fallacies were continually being revealed as impossible to pigeonhole or understand in conventional categories. Typically, they seemed to be kinds of arguments that were not totally worthless, not as bad or wholly erroneous as the label "fallacy" suggested, but then again they didn't seem to be good deductive arguments or good inductive arguments, or even good epistemic arguments (i.e., ones in which the premises could be said to be "known to be true" or in which you could say that it is "known" that the conclusion follows from the premises). But if these arguments were "good" or at least "somewhat good," or "good for some purposes," then what kind of "good" is that?

The kinds of arguments at issue were ones like argument from expert opinion, argument from sign, personal attack on or questioning of the reliability of a witness or source of opinion, argument from analogy, argument from popular opinion, and so forth. These kinds of arguments all seemed inherently defeasible, opinion-based, and "good" only in an acceptance-based way that made them seem "bad" when examined from the lofty viewpoint of alethic or epistemic standards of argument.

Hamblin was not trying to promote any kind of contest between acceptance-based arguments and epistemic or alethic arguments. He was trying to inquire into these defeasible types of arguments, which were commonly used to convince people to accept propositions they didn't accept before, in ordinary conversations on controversial and disputed subjects. Since the models of good argument traditionally emphasized deductive and inductive models, for the greater part seemed inappropriately to reject these common arguments as "fallacies," was there some different approach that might do more justice to them? Here naturally - and appropriately - Hamblin turned to dialectical criteria, seeking to understand these everyday types of argument as "good" when they meet acceptance-

based standards in a framework of dialogue where two speech partners "reason together."

However, it can be argued that both Hamblin and Johnson tend to acquiesce in an outmoded, but once widely accepted, presumption that there is a conflict between epistemic and acceptance-based (dialectical) models of argument as analytical tools or models that can be used to explain the fallacies as failures of correct argument. As Johnson shows, Hamblin tended to pretty well reject the epistemic model of argument that was current in epistemic logic prior to 1970 as a serious contender for analyzing fallacies. Hence his own preference for the dialectical model comes across strongly. It is clear that Hamblin was greatly influenced by the serious difficulties confronting epistemic logic at the time his book *Fallacies* (1970) was written.

Countering Hamblin's approach, Johnson sees all kinds of difficulties and incoherencies both in Hamblin's defense of the dialectical conception and in the conception itself, concluding (p. 285) that he (Johnson) is "uneasy about acceptance" as the fundamental conception of argument. Johnson even suggests (p. 285) that the acceptance-based model of argument may just be purely "rhetorical" in nature, meaning that it relates only to an argument's effectiveness to persuade, rather than to its "goodness" as a logical or correct argument.¹

In various developments since 1970, however, it has come to be more apparent that dialectical (acceptance-based) and epistemic (knowledge-based) models of argument can complement each other. Indeed, the idea that there is a very strong or constant opposition, an inherent conflict, between epistemic and dialectical concepts of argument is being revealed as simplistic and misleading more and more convincingly in the literature subsequent to Hamblin. Hintikka (1981) has come to analyze epistemic reasoning using a dialectical model of inquiry, where there is a dialogue being a questioner and a respondent. In Woods and Walton (1978, 1989) the Kripke tree structure of advancing states of knowledge is used as a dialectical model to analyze the fallacy of begging the question. In Walton (1989, p. 7), in a type of dialogue called the *inquiry*, the goal is to prove a designated proposition or to show that it can't be proven by moving forward on the basis of premises that are known to be true.

A more balanced and up-to-date point of view is that epistemic and acceptance-based (dialectical) arguments can conflict in some

instances, but that they are two different kinds or models of argument that also can function together in many instances. The main thing about many of the everyday kinds of argument associated with the traditional fallacies is that they go ahead as appropriate arguments when used in appropriate circumstances. They represent kinds of reasoning that are useful and appropriate in cases where there is an absence of definite or well-established knowledge that resolves a conflict of opinions, one way or the other.² Their use is to shift a burden of proof to one side or the other in a dialogue by raising critical questions. Actually, there are three models of argument to be considered. Each of them has its proper place and use in argument.

Three models of argument

In the field of fallacy study, and argumentation generally, there is a perennial ideological struggle among three models of argument, or three points of view on how one should study and evaluate arguments. One is the alethic conception of argument, which sees the truth or falsity of the premises and conclusion as being the primary concern in evaluating an argument. This is a semantically oriented conception of argument, which has fitted in very well to the deductivist orientation of traditional logic (syllogistic logic, propositional calculus, quantification theory, modal logic, etc.).

Another model is the epistemic conception of argument, which sees the primary focus as whether, or to what degree, the premises and the conclusion are known to be true. Hintikka's work on epistemic logic is a leading line of research here, followed in recent years by the concerns of workers in artificial intelligence with knowledge-based reasoning.

A good case in point here is the traditional fallacy of *petitio principii* (arguing in a circle), which does not seem to be an alethic or deductive failure. Generally, circular arguments, like 'A, therefore A,' are deductively valid - alethically, a deductively valid argument is always successful because it does not take you from true premises to a false conclusion. However, the shortcoming of such arguments can easily and plausibly be portrayed as an epistemic failure - the premise fails to give us a basis for saying that we can know the conclusion to be true independently of our initial doubts about the truth of this proposition (our lack of knowledge of its truth).³

The third model is the acceptance-based or dialectical concep-

tion, which sees the rational commitment of a participant in a dialogue to the premises or conclusion of an argument as being the main focus of evaluation. Here 'rational commitment' refers to the acceptance or plausibility of a proposition in a context where the proposition is not known to be true or false. In artificial intelligence, this kind of reasoning is called *nonmonotonic reasoning*, where a proposition is tentatively accepted, subject to default or retraction, should new information come in that refutes it or calls for a revision of opinions.⁴ This kind of reasoning is appropriate in contexts of argument where commitment to a course of action has to be made on a practical and provisional basis, even though the relevant knowledge that would enable one to derive a conclusion known to be true is not (just then) available.⁵

It seems that many of the fallacies fit into this third category as types of arguments. For example, *ad hominem* and *ad verecundiam* characteristically have to do with cases where the best available evidence is eyewitness testimony or appeal to expert opinion, both inherently subjective and fallible kinds of argumentation. The very quintessence of his third model of argument is the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, which states the basic principle of burden of proof lying behind the use of all nonmonotonic reasoning - if you don't know that a proposition is true (false), you are free on practical grounds to operate on the assumption that it can be taken to be false (true) for the purposes of argument.

Indeed, it seems that a good deal of the familiar kind of argumentation that occurs in everyday conversations is inherently presumptive in nature, but has an epistemic requirement built into it. Presumptive reasoning is a kind of hypothetical reasoning based on "soft" evidence, in the absence of knowledge; but once "hard" evidence comes in, it plays a decisive role in the reasoning. In other words, presumption is a kind of speech act that goes forward in a context of dialogue when arguers agree to provisionally accept an assumption as a tentative commitment, but also agree that should evidence that falsifies (rebutts) the presumption come in later in the dialogue, they will give it up as a commitment at that point.

Suppose, for example, that we are trying to find Bob, and you put forward the following inference: Bob's hat is not on the peg; therefore, he is not in the house. If we should find hard evidence that Bob is in the house—for example, if he appears on the stairs—we would give up our commitment to the conclusion of this presumptive inference. But if presumption is all we have to go on,

we might accept the presumptive inference for practical purposes of directing our actions in trying to find Bob.

In this case, the presumptive inference is based on the tacit (unexpressed) premise in the following conditional: If Bob's hat is not on the peg, then Bob has left the house. This conditional is not a strict conditional but a presumptive or default (nonmonotonic) conditional that is inherently defeasible and subject to exceptions as the particular circumstances of the case become better known. For example, it could be based on Bob's habit of wearing his hat when he leaves the house, taking it off this peg and putting it on his head. Bob may not always do this, but if it (that he usually does this) is a normal or typical expectation we have about Bob, then that could be a practical basis for drawing the presumptive inference above to conclude (presumptively) that Bob has left the house. Until we find otherwise, we could be practically justified in directing our search for Bob toward places other than inside the house.

What is especially interesting about presumptive reasoning as a species of acceptance-based reasoning falling under the dialectical conception of argument is that it actually presupposes and complements the epistemic conception of argument. It's really a misconception to see the two types of argument as competing against each other as single or separate accounts of the concept of argument. They have different domains and uses, each supporting the other. In fact, the presumptive, acceptance-based type of reasoning is useful precisely in those contexts of argumentation where the epistemic type of reasoning cannot be employed because of the lack of hard evidence to support a knowledge-based conclusion. By the same token, knowledge-based epistemic reasoning comes into use precisely where there is no need for presumptive reasoning, because we can know, based on hard evidence, that the proposition at issue is true or false. When we look at how these kinds of reasoning are actually used, we can see that there is really no inherent conflict among them, in the sense of one usurping one or both of the others as the exclusive holder of the title of "reasoned type of argument."

Dialectical commitment

Johnson's final conclusion, and most serious charge against Hamblin, is the allegation that Hamblin has replaced "the logical criterion of goodness with the rhetorical criterion of effectiveness"

(p. 285). Johnson's claim is that mere "acceptance" or "effectiveness" in causing a listener to accept something she did not accept before is too weak a standard to do the job of providing a normative model of argument to help with analyzing fallacies. According to Johnson (p. 285), "an argument might be accepted by its audience but contain tricks or cheats." This is a good point, in general, but as used against Hamblin, it is a straw-man argument: Hamblin has made it very clear that the concept of commitment that is the central building block of his theory of formal dialectic, put forward in chapter 8 of *Fallacies*, refers to a set of propositions conceded or accepted by a participant in a rule-governed, normative structure of dialogue.⁶

In various places, but notably on page 264 of *Fallacies*, Hamblin explicitly made the point that "a commitment is not necessarily a 'belief' of the participant who has it." According to Hamblin, the "purpose of postulating a commitment-store is not psychological" (p. 264). Hamblin saw commitment as representing a kind of rational acceptance - we judge what is in an arguer's commitment-store by examining the text of discourse that represents the record of his or her performance in a "system" or "game" of dialogue. A dialogue has rules - nowadays what we would call implicit Gricean maxims of politeness or "fair play." Thus, for Hamblin, commitment is not what Johnson calls "mere acceptance," but represents what Johnson calls (p. 285) "rational acceptance." The concept of commitment as rational acceptance in a context of dialogue has now gained the acceptance in the field of argumentation that it rightly deserves - see van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, pp. 96-97).⁷ And it is thanks to Hamblin that the notion of dialectical commitment has become a central building block of methods of discourse analysis in argumentation.

Of course, Johnson is quite right to raise questions about the concept of commitment, and to question which structures of rule-governed dialogue are the best ones to use in determining whether a given argument is fallacious. But by concentrating on an overly negative attack on chapter 7 of *Fallacies*, Johnson has failed to represent Hamblin's views sympathetically or fully enough to show the merits in them that have, thankfully, not been lost on others.

In line with current developments in the ongoing work on informal fallacies, it would seem wise to operate on the presumption that there is room for all three models of argument in helping to

explain various types of fallacies. But inasmuch as current work is tending to reveal that many of the major informal fallacies are based on kinds of arguments that are inherently presumptive and nonmonotonic in nature, we can expect that Hamblin's pioneering advocacy and analysis of the dialectical model will continue to find many applications, increasing its importance and acceptance in the field of argumentation.

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Notes

1. See section 3, "Dialectical commitment," below.
2. See Walton (1989) and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987).
3. Walton (1991).
4. Reiter (1987).
5. See Walton (1991) on practical reasoning, and van Eemeren and Kruijer (1987) on argumentation schemes for some of these practical types of arguments.
6. The formal structure of Hamblin's analysis of commitment was presented within a formal theory of dialogue in Hamblin (1971).
7. A very clear expression of the view that commitment should be seen as a normative, rule-governed concept has been presented by van Eemeren (1986).

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