

HAMBLIN ON THE STANDARD TREATMENT OF FALLACIES

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Johnson (1990) has accused Charles Hamblin, the author of *Fallacies* (1970), of critical failures - some of which could even amount to allegations that Hamblin himself committed fallacies - in his treatment of textbook writers on the fallacies prior to 1970. According to Johnson (p.165), Hamblin's treatment of the Standard Treatment of the fallacies in the textbooks up to that time exhibits "lack of argumentation," as well as "misstatements of fact, unfairness to some of the authors, and a failure to give textbooks credit for the innovations they made." In this paper I will show, however, that Johnson's negative appraisal of Hamblin stems from a basic misconception Johnson exhibits concerning the nature of the book *Fallacies* as an intellectual endeavor as a whole.¹

In another paper, Johnson (1990a) has also criticized chapter 7 of Hamblin's book. This paper argues against Hamblin's argument in chapter 7 that alethic and epistemic criteria for the assessment of argument are seriously flawed. While some of Johnson's arguments in this paper are reasonable and interesting, nevertheless, here, too, he shows a lack of sympathy for Hamblin's general approach of using dialectical structures for the normative evaluation of arguments. This paper (1990a) raises many substantive points in its own right, and deserves a separate, detailed critique elsewhere. I shall not comment on it further here.

Johnson's criticism mostly centers on chapter 1 of *Fallacies*, where Hamblin outlined and criticized the Standard Treatment of the subject of fallacies in the logic textbooks, both current (up to 1970) and historical. I believe that Johnson's misconstrual, and unsympathetic and unfair interpretation of this chapter, is based on a misconception of the scope, nature and purpose of the book

Fallacies as a scholarly enterprise in relation to the current state of knowledge in 1970.

Johnson defends these textbook writers, arguing that they "kept the interest in fallacy alive" at a time when logicians were abandoning it (p. 165). My objection is that I think that Hamblin would never have denied this, and that a careful reading of his book as a whole shows he did not deny it. From personal conversations with him in Sydney in 1975, I know that he had a keen and well-informed interest in the tides of fashion in the history of logic, and was in fact very sympathetic to those who supported practical logic during periods when it was unpopular to do so in the academic community. I believe that a proper appraisal of his book will show that it was meant to convey this philosophy as well.

1. A Misconception of the Standard Treatment

A basic misconception of Hamblin's chapter on the Standard Treatment appears to have gained wide currency in the informal logic world. The feeling is that Hamblin was denouncing the traditional way that the subject of fallacies was dealt with in the logic textbooks, and therefore that he rejected everything about it, including the traditional way of distinguishing between the major, important, recognized or "baptized" types of fallacies. For example, it seems to be inferred that since Hamblin criticized the standard type of classification into the usual eighteen or so major fallacies, therefore any adequate treatment, by Hamblin's standards, must invent some radically new way of dividing up the fallacies, denouncing or rejecting the standard classifications like *ad hominem*, *ad verecundiam*, and so forth. This view is a misconception. What Hamblin was criticizing was the lack of proper, scholarly, adequate, or rigorous analyses of the informal fallacies. What worried Hamblin, and what he complained about, was the superficial nature of the Standard Treatment. He would have thought it premature to either reject or accept the traditional modes of classification, given what was currently known.²

One can easily appreciate why it is easy to jump to the conclusion that Hamblin was condemning the Standard Treatment *per se*, claiming that it was worthless, and ought to be thrown overboard entirely. But this interpretation is inconsistent with what Hamblin actually wrote in the remaining chapters of *Fallacies*. He paid serious attention to both the historical evolution and the logical analy-

sis of traditional fallacies like begging the question (pp. 271-274) and equivocation (chapter 9). Hamblin was clearly open to changing or re-orienting our ways of viewing these traditional fallacies. But on the whole, his own proposals for beginning the task of analyzing these fallacies pretty well went ahead on the presumption that, for the present anyway, the traditional divisions into the various fallacies were, by and large, worth preserving.

For example, on pp. 271-272, Hamblin searched around for some rules of question-asking and answering that would ban circular arguments from the dialogue. However, he did not conclude from his discussion that the traditional category of begging the question (*petitio principii*) ought to be forthwith rejected or thrown out as a working category of fallacy. His discussion was much more careful, and much more subtle than that. He carefully commented that some of the rules he put forward for discussion are "rather drastic," even though they successfully ban the fallacy of begging the question (p. 272). He advanced various hypotheses, like regarding a circular argument as "satisfactory" if it could be re-stated without the circle (p. 272).

Hamblin looked at alternative systems of rules and studied their implications for our understanding of the fallacies. His discussions, though invariably useful and insightful, were qualified, scholarly, and tentative. So far as I can see, even when they are negatively critical, his discussions do not leap to the conclusion of throwing any of the major traditional categories of fallacy overboard. What they do is to grapple with the problem of seeking out clear and useful guidelines for analysis of the fallacies, probing beneath the Standard Treatment for better ways of proceeding.

2. The Context of Hamblin's Contribution

Anyone who sets out to write a philosophical treatise on a subject that has been important as a topic of intellectual inquiry, has to begin by setting out the given conventional wisdom on the subject as a base line for considering departures. How does her new conclusion or thesis depart from what she presumes is the current or traditional climate of opinion? This is an important question for judging the importance of any new work of philosophical research as an intellectual contribution.

Hamblin's book, *Fallacies*, was a pioneering contribution, as virtually everyone in the growing field of argumentation now con-

cedes. It was the first full-length scholarly book on the subject, since Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*, except for the treatises on fallacies in the Middle Ages, and Alfred Sidgwick's book, *Fallacies* (1884). Nevertheless, most logic textbooks, continuing into the twentieth century, had a section (often a short section) on the fallacies. Hamblin had to give some account of the state of knowledge on fallacies current up to 1970 as a base line for the pioneering contribution he was to make on this subject.

Those of us, like me, who were asked or told by their departments to teach a section of logic on the subject of fallacies before or during the early seventies felt the impact of the current state of knowledge in this area quite dramatically. Our more serious and gifted students pointed out to us, with some regularity and sometimes with satisfaction, that the examples of "fallacious" arguments we were using were just not convincing. This was a sobering challenge to young and serious instructors, armed only with the given knowledge in their field. How could you convince your students that here was a field worth taking seriously? The ease with which the better students could shoot holes in it convinced the others that here was plenty more proof (if anyone needed it) that philosophy was "subjective."

Hamblin's exposure of the superficial nature of the Standard Treatment came as a cathartic relief. Now we could treat the very interesting subject-matter of the fallacies as a legitimate intellectual challenge and field of pioneering research. We were freed from the intolerable situation of having to presume indefensibly that a field of knowledge existed when clever students could shoot holes through it with impunity. For those of us working and teaching in informal logic at the time, Hamblin's book was an intellectual revolution and a liberation, offering hope and promise of new respect for the subject.

To evaluate what Hamblin accomplished, you have to see what he was trying to overcome. He was trying to challenge a climate of opinion, a way of approaching and treating the fallacies, that had been pretty well set in place as the conventional wisdom for two thousand years. With the rise of mathematical logic, this attitude was even more firmly hardened. In the first chapter of his book, Hamblin was not trying to compile a *complete* list or encyclopedia of what *all* of the textbooks wrote about the fallacies. He was trying to formulate a given horizon of opinion, a point of departure. But, as a scholar, he had to give some specific examples. He

had to cite some actual cases from textbooks exemplifying the kind of approach he was out to challenge.

3. How Fair was Johnson to Hamblin?

In his criticism of Hamblin's chapter on the Standard Treatment, Johnson asked questions like the following. Did Hamblin miss any important textbooks in his sample? Is his list of fallacies complete? Even the asking of these questions gives evidence of a basic misconception of the scope and nature of the project of Hamblin's chapter 1. Hamblin clearly did not intend to give a complete list of the fallacies, or to cover the treatment of the fallacies in all the major textbooks. Fortunately, he did not attempt an encyclopedic task of this sort at all. He was up to something different, and much more valuable. He went on, after sketching out the general approach represented by the Standard Treatment, to show us exactly how to go ahead with the work of improving on it. By developing the foundations of a new theory or dialogue logic, he pointed the way to a founding (or re-founding, after Aristotle) of a new field.

In light of Hamblin's real objectives and accomplishments then, Johnson's criticisms that he was unfair to the textbook authors can be seen to miss the main point of what Hamblin's book was all about. In setting forth an account of the Standard Treatment, Hamblin had to state how his objectives in writing *Fallacies* were situated within the context of the given state of knowledge in his area at the time, in order to explain how his book would advance knowledge.

Hamblin had to deal with the given situation in the best way he could. He took a sample of several representative textbooks that could be used to give the reader an idea of the state of the art. He was not trying to be inclusive, to comment on all the textbooks, or even a majority. He did not deny that those textbooks he commented on, as well as those he did not, had good points. He did not deny that it was valuable for them to keep up interest in the fallacies by at least having a section, or some material on the fallacies, even if this section was not as good as it could, or should ideally be.

Thus Johnson misconstrued the whole nature of the intellectual enterprise when he criticized Hamblin for omitting some texts, or of not taking a wide enough sample into account in chapter 1 of *Fallacies*. Hamblin needed to show whether, how, where, and why the given state of the art, with its current methods, findings and

approach, could be improved on or advanced. I believe that by taking a representative sample of the methods and findings that were current at the time, along with a historical examination of how the subject arrived at its current state, he did a fair and reasonable job of laying out a point of departure for the work carried out in *Fallacies*. Chapter 1 of *Fallacies* was not the appropriate place for an extensive survey of all or even many of these textbooks, or for praising their innovations or good points. To judge the enterprise carried out in chapter 1, you have to look at the book *Fallacies* as a whole.

As criticism of Hamblin's account of the *argumentum ad misericordiam*. Johnson (p.164) suggested that the "dichotomy between a proposition put forward for assent and one put forward to guide action seems slight and certainly in need of development." Is Johnson aware that Hamblin was also the author of an important book on this very distinction, *Imperatives* (1987), which was published after Hamblin's death? Recent studies on the logic of practical reasoning (propositions put forward to guide action), have acknowledged the seminal nature of Hamblin's contributions to this area.³

Johnson (pp. 160-161) accused Hamblin of violating "logical neutrality" by criticizing a textbook author, Oesterle, of "paying lip service to a principle" and "enlisting the authority of logic" in support. Johnson called this criticism "unsettling" and "an awfully strong indictment." But in fact, Hamblin did not attack Oesterle personally in the way Johnson suggested. If you look carefully at the text of Hamblin's *Fallacies* (p.257), he is criticizing the inadequate account of the fallacy of *secundum quid* given by the broad majority of the textbooks. The Standard Treatment offers inadequate guidance, with the result, correctly and justifiably pointed out by Hamblin, that the textbook writer can fill in his own personal views or prejudices on the matter, while ostensibly seeming (to the uninitiated or uncritical reader or student) to be reaching a logical conclusion based on some clear and coherent logical theory. Hamblin was not attacking Oesterle personally for being biased. He was attacking the inadequate and superficial Standard Treatment that allows, indeed forces, any textbook writer to go out on a limb and venture his personal opinions in criticizing arguments. Hamblin argued that such subjectivity was due to the lack of any well-established or even well-argued scholarly account of the normative structures of the kinds of argumentation associated with the fallacies.

With regard to the fallacy under discussion, the *secundum quid* (*para to pe*, or "in a certain respect") fallacy, unfortunately, all the evidence was on Hamblin's side. The traditional accounts given in the textbooks were (and still are, largely) unconvincing and unhelpful, bound up in tradition-bound terminology that is not only of little or no use to a student-it is positively obfuscatory. *Secundum quid* is a serious and important area of study that still cries out for serious study. It remains a gap that needs to be filled in informal logic-a mess that badly needs to be tidied up before serious research on it can go forward. We are still far from understanding how or why errors of argumentation arise from overlooking legitimate exceptions to rules when pressing forward with a case.

Johnson has missed the forest for looking at the trees. By seeing Hamblin as blaming individual textbook authors for shortcomings, he overlooked the much more important and central target that Hamblin was aiming at.

4. Was Hamblin Fair to the Standard Treatment?

Hamblin alleged (1971, p.12) that we should admit that the Standard Treatment is "worn-out," "dogmatic" and "tradition-bound." Much of the Standard Treatment, he alleged, came from Aristotle through a long process of evolution and changes, with the result that the textbook accounts disagree, both with one another, and with the Aristotelians (p. 13). Criticizing this criticism, Johnson (p. 155) attacked Hamblin using the tactic of dichotomous questions, alleging that Hamblin's criticism is a case of "damned if you do and damned if you don't": "If our modern logicians agree with the tradition, then they are accused of being tradition-bound; if they disagree with it and with one another, then they are being criticized for that." (p.155). Ironically, the author of *Fallacies* is himself being accused of having committed a fallacy. Is the accusation justified?

Johnson's criticism of Hamblin is, in principle, a reasonable kind of allegation. It is fair enough to accuse the author of a book on fallacies of having committed a fallacy himself. But in fact, the criticism is not well enough supported to stand up, and it is based on a sophistical black-and-white accusation of dichotomy.

Every researcher of a philosophical subject has to begin with some assessment of the conventional wisdom, the given climate of opinion on his subject (including, of course, Hamblin himself).

The problem with the authors of textbooks in logic having a section on the fallacies, according to Hamblin, was that the accounts of the fallacies were too superficial. They took too much for granted, wrongly presuming that many arguments peremptorily dismissed as instances of fallacies could (justifiably) be so easily dismissed. One problem in particular is that the texts were copied uncritically from other texts in a long chain stretching back to Aristotle's original account. The result, well documented by Hamblin (especially in many specific instances carefully presented in chapter 3 of *Fallacies*) was a proliferation of idiosyncratic accounts, inconsistent with each other and with Aristotle's original treatment of sophistic refutations. The study of fallacies, therefore, foundered as an intellectual or scholarly discipline or well-established field of inquiry. The texts "failed to establish any account for longer than the time it takes a book to go out of print," (Hamblin, 1970, p. 13 quoted by Johnson, p. 155).

The problem pointed out by Hamblin here was not just the failure to agree with tradition or with each other, but concerns the nature of these disagreements. Any writer has to agree or disagree with traditions in his or her subject, and to agree or disagree with the other previous writers on the subject. Such a writer is free to do so, but will be judged on the reasons he or she gives. The problem with the Standard Treatment was that the idiosyncratic and superficial accounts given of the fallacies showed no unity of direction, nor any justification of how or why they followed or disagreed with tradition. The tradition itself had become chaotic and directionless, proceeding largely by misdirection. While brilliant suggestions and inspired insights may have burst forth occasionally, the development of the field lacked underlying direction. The tradition itself showed no clear, well-argued line of development. Lacking any well-developed or coherent theory,⁴ the tradition was one of *ad hoc* commentary based on time-worn examples, mostly descended from Aristotle, but lacking coherent usefulness as cases of fallacies that would convince students or anyone who might venture to disagree.

Fortunately, the deficiencies of the Standard Treatment are now well on the road to being overcome, and to Hamblin must go a large share of the credit. The kind of contribution made by Hamblin to research and scholarship is very rare indeed, in any field. Writing on fallacies was not a trendy topic for research in 1970. Virtually going it alone, Hamblin went into his chosen sub-

ject in extraordinary depth, producing a work that will affect scholarship in this area for a long time to come. It was a rare and striking accomplishment, and it must have taken unusual intellectual courage to pursue such a lonely path of scholarship, with very little support or encouragement from colleagues in the field at the time, or even after the book appeared. To judge Hamblin's treatment of the Standard Treatment fairly, you have to look at it in a larger context of discovery, in light of Hamblin's project in relation to the situation of knowledge at the time.

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Notes

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2. See Hamblin (1970, p. 231) and the comments in Walton (1990a, p. 399).

3. Walton (1990).

4. See Johnson (1987).

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