

The Concept of Argument-Hamblin

Summary: Hamblin tries to give an account of what an argument means. He makes an important distinction between argument and implication (229). However, instead of explicating what an argument means, he goes on to discuss the criteria for evaluating arguments for he thinks it is pointless to “mak[e] a frontal assault on the question of what an argument is” (231) and instead it is better to discuss argument evaluation. Further, his central point seems to be that contrary to formal deductive logic, there are various criteria delineating the worth of an argument and those criteria may conflict from person to person or from one group to another (231). There is no absolute way of resolving the issue of what counts as a good argument and what standards we ought to use to judge an argument. Hence, Hamblin states that theory of argument is distinct from formal logic, and that a theory of argument should not be understood as a theory of formal logic. For Hamblin denies that an argument can be valid by its mere formally valid structure and despite its false premise (232). He sees that this completely misrepresents the nature of argument. In practice, we like our premises to be true and we do not consider an argument good if it has false premises. Even good true premises and good inference process do not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The acceptability of an inference process is not a knock-down guarantee of the acceptability or truth of the conclusion. For there are good inference patterns that lead to unacceptable conclusions (230-1). In fact, there are no knock-down arguments for anything, because there are always good arguments for and against any issue (232). Hamblin also sees a problem with how deductive logic proceeds in terms of hypothetical situations. Deductive arguments are hypothetical ones because the argument “if P then Q” is not a real argument, only a hypothetical one (233). He argues that most examples in logic books are hypothetical ones.

Hamblin then goes to discuss the criteria of arguments. He explain that there are three criteria to evaluating arguments: the alethic criteria formulated in terms of what is true, the epistemic criteria which deals with what is known to be true, and the dialectical criteria which is understood in terms of what is accepted. He argues that alethic tests are not sufficient and in certain cases unnecessary (236). That is, there is no use to an argument that has true premises but whose premises are not known to be true. He brings up the epistemic criteria to address this problem, for the epistemic criteria deals with what is known to be true. However there is also a problem with the epistemic criteria, for in practice we often proceed with less than knowledge (140). So he thinks that the dialectic criteria best serve argument evaluation. That is, concepts of truth, validity and knowledge are best understood in terms of acceptance—acceptance arising from a dialectic of the participants in the argument. For when there more than one party involved, an argument is considered acceptable in different degrees to different people and groups.

Reflection: I think it is better if Hamblin started with the notion of argument instead of skipping that and discussing argument evaluation. I was also not clear as to why he thought this would be more effective since a theory of argument evaluation requires an understanding of argument, which is missing in Hamblin’s account. I also find it problematic that Hamblin does not address how formal deductive logic talks about soundness. Because the criteria of soundness of an argument deals with how we talk about arguments in terms of true premises, which is part of Hamblin’s problem with formal deductive logic. Hamblin ignores an important part of deductive logic, namely the criteria of soundness. I also think that the criteria of soundness in formal logic

could address Hamblin's problem with formal logic's use of hypothetical statements. Further, Hamblin needs to clarify the notion of dialectic as it was not too clear.