

Reflective summary: What Makes a Good Argument? Toward a Theory of Evaluation.

In this chapter Ralph Johnson begins by explicating and criticizing C.L Hamblin's position, in particular Hamblin's rejection of the alethic and epistemic criteria in favour of the dialectical one, which is based on acceptance. Johnson rejects Hamblin's reasons for rejecting the alethic criteria, specifically the example Hamblin gave of someone making a claim with true premises that are not yet known, which he claims is not sufficient since even if it's true, the person would still need to know it. I agree with Johnson's criticism of Hamblin because it is true that it seems odd that an arguer present a premise that his audience does not understand(185)? Johnson's point is that the speaker always uses premises that his audience understands. Johnson makes this claim under the assumption that the purpose of argument is rational persuasion. His critique does not hold because Hamblin is not working with this purpose in mind. Further Johnson and Hamblin are not only working with different purpose of arguments in mind, but also with two different approaches. Hamblin's approach is a descriptive approach of how we argue, and Johnson's approach is normative approach of how we ought to argue. Hence, I think it's unfair to judge Hamblin's account from a normative perspective when he was not in fact interested in such a thing. Further I also think that Hamblin has more reasons for rejecting the alethic criteria. Hamblin rejects the alethic criteria not because having truthful premise is not enough, but also because he does not think that the concept of truth accurately represents what we do with arguments. Hamblin is focusing on how we use the concept of truth and from there he concludes that we use it in a way that is not a correspondence theory of truth. Rather we use it to mean acceptance without further reference. Hamblin does not think truth concepts play a role in how we argue, acceptance does of course, but that's not the same as truthfulness.

Johnson again rejects Hamblin's rejection of the epistemic criteria based on the grounds that it's not serving the goal of rational persuasion, namely that one may win an argument by having his audience accept the conclusion, without giving good reasons for it (187). Again here Johnson operating with an assumption (purpose of argument) that Hamblin does not accept. Further, Johnson rejects Hamblin's appraisal of the dialectical criteria because it contains numerous problems. First, acceptance, as Hamblin utilizes it in his approach, is an empty concept, especially because Johnson wants to approach argumentation with the purpose of rational persuasion, and mere acceptance empty of truth does the opposite of that. Johnson points out that Hamblin fails to make clear what he means by acceptance, for Hamblin in one instance uses the word acceptability, and in another acceptance (188). I agree that Hamblin's notion of acceptance is an empty one, and more importantly I would argue that it presupposes a notion of truth behind it.

Johnson then goes to discuss his criteria for a good argument. Johnson's theory of evaluating arguments contains two criterions, the illative core (which has four sub-criterions) and the dialectical tier which has three sub-criterions. The first important requirement Johnson discusses in the illative core is the acceptability requirement; i.e. each premise of an argument have to be acceptable to the audience. Johnson defines acceptability in terms of rational

acceptability. Johnson wants to bring back to truth to the notion of acceptability, and rightly so. However, I am not sure what notion of truth is operating behind this. Moreover, how does Johnson define acceptability in terms of truth? How do you determine whether someone accepted a belief because they believe it is true, or because they merely grant the reasons without being able to say what those reasons are? The second criteria I found interesting is relevance because Johnson defines it in terms of Hamblin's dialectical criteria. However, I think that relevance could fall under the alethic criteria. Because when you take something to be relevant to the argument, you also assume that it is true. It is not clear to me why Johnson doesn't define it in terms of truth. Johnson also includes the sufficiency requirement which states that the premises must provide sufficient support to the conclusion. I found it problematic that the fact there is little work done on this criterion, and yet it is still used in evaluating arguments. What standard/criterion is used to determine whether a premise is sufficient? This criterion seems too subjective to me. Further, I found that with dialectical criteria, the emphasis on anticipating and responding to objections may open room for the idea that argument is not in fact rational persuasion, but just winning and losing.