Reflective Summary:  Johnson

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In Chapter 7 of Manifest Rationality, Johnson attempts to outline a theory of argument evaluation.  His point was to figure out a theory that would allow us to judge good arguments from bad.  Key to his theory is the view that "arguments cannot be understood apart from the process that produces them" (p. 181).  Similarly, he wants to incorporate the arguer.  For him, a good argument depends upon the purpose for which it was created.  A good argument is one that achieves the goal of not just persuading someone, but persuading them *rationally*.

He identifies a set of criteria that the core of any argument must satisfy in order to rationally persuade.  These criteria are four:  1) acceptability; 2) truth; 3) relevancy; and 4) sufficiency.  He admits that each of these criteria are questionable and require further work themselves.  However, he offers a core set of points for each from which his theory begins.

Of acceptability, he says it will have to be understood in terms of "the interplay between arguer and the Other" (p. 195).  What is acceptable will thus be determined with each individual argument.  The truth requirement is fully discussed, but the main reason for its inclusion seems to be that many "theorists continue to rely on the truth requirement" (p. 197) even while saying that they do not.  Johnson seems to be saying that the truth requirement is so deeply inherent in our dialectic processes that we cannot completely remove it, and so it a fuller understanding of its inclusion needs to occur.  Relevance is a similarly controversial property to explain.  Although there are many reasons for its inclusion, it seems that the key reason is that it is basic to a set of premises.  Finally, sufficiency is included as a property of premise sets that should also include the dialectic tier, wherein the arguer is expected to supply replies to anticipated consequences, objections and implications of the argument.

He concludes by listing adequacy conditions for any theory of evaluation that is produced.  Included are definitions of argument and its elements; accounts of how to display structure; a theory of appraisal;  recognition of levels of argumentative strength; an ability to be user-friendly; an allowance for criticism; and a justification of its own appropriateness.

Reflection:

Wow!  There's a lot of information in this chapter, and a great deal of detail.  I think that the two most controversial elements are the introduction of the truth requirement and the requirement for the dialectical tier as necessities for an argument.  Johnson himself points out the inherent difficulties with both of these.

While I agree with his intuition about our inability to separate ourselves from the truth requirement, he points out himself that there are many ways to understand the truth.  I'm concerned (as I think he is) about allowing completely relativistic truths free reign in argument, and yet, if he is right about our underlying reliance on a truth that is presumed in spite of our disavowal of it, is it really necessary to struggle with getting the "truth" accounted for in argument?  In other words, if we get the theories of relevance and acceptability correct, perhaps we won't need to venture into "truth".  Both relevance and acceptability seem like big enough issues to tackle themselves.

And, of course, there is the big question about truth requirements:  Who (or what) decides just exactly what the truth is?  Is it just another name for what is agreed upon (which means it is

really an acceptability criterion), or must it appeal to greater, absolute, capital-T "truths"—which are few and far between.  How will we all come to know truth when we "intuit" it?

The dialectical tier is something that I do believe has a required place in argument.  But, again, as Johnson himself points out, anyone who has ever tried to construct a good argument knows about the difficulty in ever reaching an end point with possible consequences, implications and objections.  If we are going to include the dialectical tier as an evaluative requirement, then we must be clear and indicate to what depth the arguer is required to go in its construction.