

The Johnson-Hamblin debate on the requirement that a good argument have true premises

Hamblin, *Fallacies*, p. 236: It is not enough for the premises of an argument to be true. (An argument with true premises is no use if no one knows whether they are true [supported by three examples]. The recipient of such an argument will rightly challenge it with 'How do you know?' This challenge reflects not so much the truth of the statement as its epistemic status.)

Johnson, *Manifest Rationality*, pp. 184-185: I am unhappy with Hamblin's argument that truth should be rejected as a sufficient condition for premiss adequacy. (His third example of an argument about orangutans is problematic for three reasons: it is incompletely described, without a description of the context that forms the dialectical tier; the Romans would reject the premiss for a different reason than Hamblin gives [because it is unintelligible to them, not because it is not known to them]; if the purpose of the argument is to persuade rationally, it is hard to know why the arguer would have put such a premiss in play in the first place.)

My comment: Johnson addresses only a small part of the argument, which is unaffected by deletion of the example about which he complains, since Hamblin has two other examples. Further, it is easy to construct an example that meets Johnson's criteria, with an argument given a context (i.e. a dialectical tier) and a reason why the arguer would use a true premiss when neither the arguer nor the addressee knows whether it is true. Further, Johnson actually agrees with the conclusion of Hamblin's argument, since he holds that in a good argument each premiss must not only be true but must also be rationally accepted by the arguer and the addressee(s). Hence for Johnson too truth is not a sufficient condition for premiss adequacy.

Hamblin, *Fallacies*, pp. 240-241: The condition that each premiss be known to be true is too strong (In practice we often proceed on less than knowledge that the premises are true. [We proceed on more or less strong belief or acceptance.] An argument that proceeds from accepted premises on the basis of an accepted inference-process is a good one in a sense more germane to the practical application of logical principles than the full alethic sense.)

Johnson, *Manifest Rationality*, pp. 186-187: Hamblin argued from the fact that participants often proceed on less than knowledge to the rejection of a requirement that the premises be known to be true, and thus to a requirement that truth of the premises is not a necessary condition of a good argument. His retreat from knowledge to acceptance opens him up to counter-examples, such as an argument that is acceptable to the addressee but is poor because it uses tricks like distorting an alternative position.

My comment: Saying that knowledge that the premises are true is too strong does not imply that truth of the premises is too strong, nor does Hamblin imply that it does. The objection that some arguments that proceed from accepted premises via an accepted inference-process are poor can be met in ways other than requiring that the premises be true, e.g. by requiring that the acceptance of the premises and the inference-process be rational.

Hamblin, *Fallacies*, pp. 242-243: Dialectical concepts have a certain claim to be considered as the fundamental ones in the description of arguments. (The raw facts of the dialectical situation are that the various participants put forward and receive various statements. [If a person constructs an argument for

his own edification, his own acceptance of premises and inference are all that can matter to him; to apply alethic criteria to the argument is to bring in the question of our own acceptance of it. If two or more parties are to be considered, a dialectical appraisal can be conducted on a different basis according to which group one has in mind; if we try to step out and adjudicate, we have no basis other than our own on which to do so. If Smith and Jones argue and I look on, my statement to you 'Jones's premises are true' is different from and irrelevant to what Smith and Jones accept; if Smith says 'S is true', he might as well say 'S': used by participants, these terms cannot have the same function as for onlookers; if I give Jones the news that his premises are true, I have become a participant and the words 'is true' have become empty stylistic excrescences for me.])

Hamblin, pp. 243-244: Basically a man who says 'S is true' might as well say 'S'. Possible functions of 'is true': to specify S by description rather than explicitly, to indicate acceptance of what Smith has announced he accepts rather than just his understanding of what Smith accepts. For an onlooker to say that Smith's premises are true is to say no more than 'I accept Smith's premisses'.

Johnson, pp. 195-196: Hamblin seems on firmer ground in calling truth an onlooker's concept that presupposes a God's-eye view of the arena, but he overlooks that only some forms of the correspondence theory of truth presuppose omniscience whereas other theories of truth (other forms of correspondence, coherence, idealist, pragmatic, instrumentalist, relativist) do not require omniscience.

My comment: Johnson seizes on a peripheral remark in Hamblin's argument, and misinterprets it as meaning that an onlooker who claims that something is true is claiming omniscience. He does not mention the argument that to say 'S is true' is no different than saying 'S', and does not recognize that Hamblin is arguing for a disquotational theory of truth.

Johnson, p. 196: In practical areas, the premises need not be true for the argument to be a good one.

My comment: Johnson does not explain why, except to say that it is not because the criterion of truth is inapplicable to human affairs.

Johnson, p. 196: "If every premiss of an argument must be true, then logic can say nothing about whether this virtue is displayed (since deciding whether a premiss is true takes us from logic to the specific field to which the premiss belongs). Hence logicians in the 20th century have nothing to say about premiss adequacy." But one can point out that a controversial premiss is undefended, and the whole issue of burden of proof comes up. So logicians need to deal with premiss adequacy.

Johnson, p. 196: In many circumstances we may find an argument quite strong without knowing that its premises are true.

Johnson, pp. 196-197: In some arguments with many premises the presence of one false premiss is not enough to wreck the argument if the other true premises are powerful enough to cover for it. (Example of a multi-premiss argument that all people need to help heal the earth.)

Johnson, pp. 197-198: It is hard to imagine doing the work of argument evaluation without recourse to the requirement that the premises be true. (Theorists who officially reject the requirement (1) make unofficial use of it, (2) rely on it implicitly in using terms like inconsistency, contradiction, assumption, validity, even acceptability, and (3) use the truth requirement in the metalanguage in which they set up their evaluation. [Example of (2): Johnson and Blair (1977) omitted truth of premises as a requirement because it was a substantive rather than a logical consideration. but lean heavily on it in discussing such

fallacies as inconsistent premises (premises that cannot be true together), in their test for determining relevance (does the truth of the premiss dictate a truth-value for the conclusion). and in their conditions for dubious assumption and popularity (that many or all persons believe a premiss to be true does not make it true).]

My comment: To test the force of Johnson's argument for (2), try Hamblin's deflationist strategy.