

CRRAR Summer Institute 2009
Reflective Summary #4 – Johnson’s *What Makes a Good Argument? Toward a
Theory of Evaluation*

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In *The Concept of Argument*, Hamblin claims that “[t]ruth and validity are onlookers’ concepts and presuppose a God’s-eye-view of the arena” (242) and that “the words ‘true’ and ‘valid’ have become... empty stylistic excrescences... [because] to another onlooker, [the] statement that so-and-so is true is simply a statement of what I accept” (243). Hamblin essentially dispenses with the use of *alethic*, or truth, criteria when it comes to the practice of argument evaluation and instead suggests that *acceptance* is the criteria according to which arguments are evaluated.

In Chapter 7 of *Manifest Rationality*, Johnson also takes on the task of proposing a theory of argument evaluation. Johnson takes issue with Hamblin’s criticism of alethic criteria and instead suggests that acceptance is too weak a standard (189) and that truth, as well as relevance, sufficiency, and acceptance ought to be the four criteria for argument evaluation.

I think that Johnson’s criticism of Hamblin’s failure to recognize truth as a criterion of argument evaluation is strong and effective. When I read Hamblin’s article, it seemed highly questionable that his statement that “[t]o another onlooker, my statement that so-and-so is true is simply a statement of what I accept” ought to be accepted without further support. Hamblin does not provide any further statements to support this assertion. Additionally, it appears as though it is anecdotal evidence drawn from his personal experience or impressions of the function of a truth claim in regular conversation. Anecdotal evidence is considered to be highly suspect in informal logic and thus if this is indeed an anecdote, and this anecdote is the only support for his conclusion, the conclusion ought not to be accepted without further support.

Johnson says that he believes that “there is at least a *prima facie* case for including truth among the criteria” (190-191) for argument evaluation because it is “natural” (191) for someone to criticize an argument by claiming that a premise is false. If a premise in an argument is false, argues Johnson, “it would not be rational to accept it as a basis for accepting the conclusion” (191). Johnson seems to be questioning whether or not acceptance can serve as a *replacement* for truth, as Hamblin seems to suggest. If acceptance is indeed a replacement for truth, then Hamblin’s criteria seems to capture “rhetorical value” (189) in arguments as opposed to “logical virtue” (189) according to Johnson.

Where Hamblin seems to want to equate a ‘good’ argument with one that is effective and persuasive to the audience, Johnson seems to want to move acceptance (i.e. being effective and persuasive to the audience) from being both a necessary and sufficient condition of ‘good’ argumentation to being just a necessary condition. Johnson instead says that truth, relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability are both necessary and sufficient conditions of a ‘good’ argument.

Johnson's criteria appears to be superior to Hamblin's criteria because it guards against the possibility of an argument with false premises being deemed a 'good' argument whereas Hamblin's allows for that possibility.