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Commentary on Duncan R. Harkness: "Applying Argumentation Theory to Cultivate Academic Common Ground"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Duncan Harkness' proposal is within what van Eemeren and Grootendorst have called the "practical estate" of argument theory, the other estates being the philosophical estate, the theoretical estate, the analytical estate, and the empirical estate. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, pp. 11-37) Harkness' main conclusion is that the pragma-dialectical theory of argument "can be put to good use in the instruction of [academic] writing to non-native speakers." Much of his paper is devoted to supporting the claim that academic writing is a norm-governed, community-based "activity type," using this term in the technical sense found in the material he reviews. If Harkness' background assumptions are granted, then I find his core argument to be strong. My comments will primarily consist of (1) identifying and critiquing several of his background assumptions, and (2) addressing some implementation issues which deserve additional attention.

II. ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE SCIENCES AND IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

Based on the sources in Harkness' paper, teachers of English academic writing to non-native speakers have historically focused on writing in the sciences as opposed to writing in other academic disciplines, probably because the students involved were mostly majoring in the sciences. While the pragmatic justification for this focus on science is clear, it is an entirely different matter to assert the conceptual point that scientific argumentation is paradigmatic for all academic argumentation in general, using 'paradigmatic' in the sense of a unitary ideal to which all other academic argumentation should conform. Harkness writes that scholars in the Western academic tradition "tacitly agree to take a Popperian, critical-rationalist approach to the construction of knowledge." (p. 14) Harkness further writes that "claims must be verifiable and falsifiable, which relies, in essence, on the ability of other scholars to critically test averred claims." (p. 14) But falsification is Popper's (arguably unsuccessful) conceptual tool for demarcating science from pseudo-science and proto-science; falsification is not Popper's tool for demarcating critical-rational text from non-critical-rational text. Popper does write of a "close kinship" between scientific reasoning and the critical-rational method, but close kinship is not identity; and Popper makes a point of distinguishing what he calls "Socratic

reason" from scientific reason (Popper 1962, pp. 237-238). Harkness' reference to critically testing claims has an important ambiguity: "critically test" can mean test by observation and experimentation, as in science, or it can mean test by argumentation, as with critical discussion in general. Some sections of Harkness' essay are explicitly about scientific academic writing, but other sections seem to be about academic writing in all disciplines; and at times one is not sure whether the more generic or the more specific category is under discussion.

For one example of why Harkness' background assumptions in this area matter, let's consider his discussion of analogies and analogical argumentation in what he describes as Asian (really, East Asian) academic writing methodology:

> When Chinese writers do rely on arguments, it has been found that they are often arguments by analogy (Liu 2005). Instances of analogical argumentation, however, are at best extremely difficult, and at worst are inherently impossible, to verify or falsify. As such, analogical argument schemes are not preferred in the Western, critical-rationalist approach, at least not when the justification of claims is concerned. (p. 14)

Harkness' statement on the role of analogy in argumentation is interesting but may be an overstatement in some important respects. Western academic writing in such fields as law, administration, philosophy, business, and others often employs what Govier calls *a priori* analogical arguments in which it is not essential that the terms of the analogy be *actual* cases. (Govier 2005, pp. 366-367) Furthermore, analogies and analogical arguments are broadly used in theory building of all kinds, in science and otherwise. For instance, on page forty of *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*, we find an analogical argument in which the analogue term is five aspects of state governance and the target term is the five estates of argumentation studies. Clearly, analogical arguments are important in critical-rational argumentation.

In some sciences, *predictive* analogical arguments are widely used, perhaps the most famous being arguments involving medical experiments on animals which physically resemble humans in key respects, for example chimpanzees or rats. Academic journals contain extended explications of theories as well as arguments to the best explanation, and those texts can often involve analogies and analogical arguments that have inferential connections to testable claims at lower conceptual levels. As philosopher of science Larry Laudan writes, "...sophisticated analogies can be evidentially probative." (Laudan 1996, p. 67) Academic writing that contains few or no analogical arguments may simply be less theoretical in content than academic writing containing a relatively higher number of analogical arguments. Disputes in well established *normal science* (Kuhn's term) might indeed contain relatively few analogical arguments, at least in some fields; but not all science is normal science, thankfully.

Harkness also seems to assume that academic writing consists predominantly of argumentation as opposed to explanation; but it is easy to imagine valuable journal articles which are predominantly explanatory. The distinction between argumentation and explanation remains a difficult conceptual issue area. A comparative count of analogical arguments in Asian vs. western academic writing may be too coarse a tool for demarcating critical-rational texts from other texts. Using the example that most influenced Popper himself, Einstein's theory of relativity is falsifiable by virtue of its having some *risky* predictive claims, not by virtue of its having a *high count* of predictive

claims in texts that explicate and argue for Einstein's theory. So Harkness' demarcation between critical-rational and non-critical-rational texts needs some reconsideration, due to its implications for argument schemes as teaching tools.

III. APPLYING ARGUMENT AND EXPLANATION SCHEMES IN THE SCIENCES

Another of Harkness' background assumptions appears to be the claim that scientific argument schemes can be readily identified and applied in scientific academic writing. I say this because Harkness does not mention much in the way of unresolved complexities in current theory of argument, which leads to his not addressing some relevant and important practical issues raised by his thesis. In critiquing Harkness here, I will rely extensively on Douglas Walton's 2004 book, *Abductive Reasoning*.

The theory of argumentation schemes and explanatory schemes in the sciences is both complex and far from settled. According to Walton, "…problems in the philosophy of science can only be solved by extensive case studies showing how abductive reasoning is used in classic cases of scientific discovery and problem solving." (Walton 2004, p. 243) Walton identifies three distinct phases in the development of an area of science: (1) a discovery phase, in which the argumentation schemes are predominantly *abductive*; (2) a development phase, characterized by *inductive* argument schemes; and (3) a mature phase in which *deductive* argument schemes predominate. Walton writes that "The view that some single model could be used to evaluate all cases of scientific argumentation is absurd." (Walton 2004, p. 229) Other complex issues include the interweaving of argumentation schemes and explanatory schemes in scientific texts, the relevance of defeasible argument schemes for science, the existence of different argumentation schemes in *applied* science verses *theoretical* science, and so on. The point of bringing up this complexity is that argument theorists are bound by a tacit 'Hippocratic oath' to do no harm in applying theory of argument, where 'harm' means 'adding confusion.' The danger is that a student's intuitive knowledge of argument schemes in her field could be overridden by an erroneous application of argument theory by an English language instructor. Despite the complexity and unsettled nature of theory regarding argumentation schemes and explanatory schemes, particularly in the sciences, few writing instructors are likely to be philosophers of science or advanced theorists of argument (which is a good thing in some ways!). Perfection is not necessary, but acknowledging potential difficulties is an important step in planning for the wider application of a theory in the practical estate.

Perhaps a key factor in Harkness' understating some practical difficulties is that his paper mentions only one approach in theory of argument, the pragma-dialectical approach. If this important school of argumentation studies has done advanced work on argumentation schemes and explanatory schemes in the sciences, then Harkness needs to summarize or at least acknowledge the existence of this work. The work of other argument theorists might be relevant to Harkness' project. For instance, one thinks of Tim van Gelder's new argument-diagramming software tool, *Rationale,* which was created precisely to address the kind of extended argumentation found in academic journals and elsewhere. Walton's potential contribution has already been mentioned.

Arguments for new projects in the practical estate of argument theory usually benefit from having the outline of a plan for initial implementation and testing, which

Harkness provides only minimally. Perhaps Harkness is envisaging a very limited, supplementary course module designed as an add-on to the instructor's primary course materials on academic writing for non-native speakers of English. Such a module would contain comparatively little material on argument theory, incorporating perhaps the code of conduct for rational discussants, along with samples of basic argument schemes and perhaps a few argument diagrams. Intuitively, the idea should work, providing we can define what 'working' means here. There might be interesting commercial possibilities for such a module. How, and to what extent, the courses Harkness discusses already typically incorporate some theory of argument is not addressed in his paper and may not be clear to audience members outside his profession.

Within the proposed module, relevant issues involving comparative cultures could be addressed quite directly and explicitly. In a 1914 book entitled *America Through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat*, Chinese diplomat Wu Ting-Fang wrote that the Chinese are tightly bound by protocol, whereas the Americans are hopelessly blunt. The phrase 'hopelessly blunt,' does ring true. As Peirce pointed out, knowledge is inherently collaborative. Perhaps the West needs to learn from the East as well.

IV. CONCLUSION

Harkness' ideas will very likely serve to expand the *presence*, in Perelman's sense of the word, of the theory of argument in the minds of teachers of western academic English writing to non-native speakers. The practical estate in theory of argument needs more attention from argument theorists. One potential action step within the broader project is assuring that one's local campus recognizes courses in argumentation theory/informal logic/critical thinking as officially fulfilling college or university *general education* requirements, where that is not the case already. Grammar, logic and rhetoric were the original core of classical education; but logic fell out of that core, called the '*Trivium'* (Latin for 'three ways')*,* with the advent of modern mass education. Logic, reconceived as argumentation theory/informal logic/critical thinking, needs to be returned to the *Trivium* core on a widespread basis, perhaps using the label 'practical logic' to distinguish it from symbolic-mathematical logic. Duncan Harkness is to be congratulated for creating the present significant thesis and arguing well for it.

link to paper

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