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# Commentary on Johnson

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**In Response to:** Ralph H. Johnson's *More on Arguers and their Dialectical Obligations*

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### ***1. Prioritizing the settlement of dialectical obligations***

A question all of us presumably would like to answer definitively is when exactly a piece of argumentative discourse may be called “dialectically adequate.” Among those who have actively been involved in developing the theoretical tools for dealing with this question are such prominent scholars as Paul Lorenzen, Charles Hamblin, Nicholas Rescher, Jaakko Hintikka, Else Barth, Erik Krabbe, James Mackenzie, John Woods, and Douglas Walton. When Rob Grootendorst and I set out to develop our pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation in the late 1970s, we followed, as a matter of course, in their footsteps. In a concerted stream of publications, Ralph Johnson has now added his own contribution to the dialectical theorizing, no doubt being stimulated in the process by the constructive comments of other informal logicians, most notably Trudy Govier's. The interesting paper Johnson presented today is his latest, but certainly not his last, contribution in this endeavor.

The main problem Johnson is concerned with in his paper is how we can develop a rational policy for determining an arguer's dialectical obligations and the order in which they are to be settled. He starts from an argumentative situation in which the arguer has already put forward his case and various sorts of “dialectical material” have gathered, or may have gathered, around it. As a principle, Johnson proposes that the arguer has a *prima facie* duty to respond to all the dialectical material directed at the argument. A problem occurs, however, when the arguer receives too many responses to handle. Johnson seeks to develop a rational policy to guide the arguer, concentrating on the role that the different “types” of dialectical material play in such a policy.

The typology of dialectical material Johnson develops is aimed to provide a starting-point for prioritizing the treatment of the various types of dialectical material by the arguer in a rational way. On empirical grounds, Johnson first distinguishes between (1) objections (a challenge directed against the argument), (2) alternative positions (arguments developed to support a conclusion that is incompatible with the arguer's conclusion and may “exist” independent of the arguer's argument), (3) reasoned criticisms aimed at some specific part of the argument, and (4) “other” dialectical material (observations, questions, requests for clarification). According to Johnson, “a priori reasoning” can then help us to see the “underlying structure” that gives rise to the desired typology: (1) most responses are either positive or negative (sometimes they are neutral), (2) a response is either reasoned, i.e., supported by an argument, or not. Putting these two features together, Johnson divides the dialectical material into five categories: (1) positive and unreasoned, (2) positive and reasoned, (3) negative and unreasoned (objections, challenges, etc.), (4) negative and reasoned (criticisms, alternative positions, etc.), (5) neutral (whether reasoned or not).

As a rational policy for prioritizing dialectical material, Johnson now proposes a principle that limits the arguer's obligations. Complying with this principle is, in his opinion, in the interest of both parties and justified by the purpose of rational persuasion. It rests on the idea that the stronger the argument the more revealing it is, because the strength of an argument is a function of its capacity to withstand criticism. The principle Johnson therefore recommends is

that the arguer has a *prima facie* obligation to respond to *all* material directed at, or relevant to, the argument in proportion to that material's capacity to jeopardize or undermine the argument. Given this principle and his typology of dialectical material, Johnson concludes that a rational prioritization of responses to dialectical material should be as follows:

I *Negative critique*. This critique, which is part of *category 4*, poses the strongest challenge, because it has the greatest potential to undermine the argument and the arguer has a greater responsibility to deal with reasoned responses.

II *Specific criticisms directed at the argument*. These criticisms also belong to *category 4*. The "most serious" criticisms have to be answered first, because they have the greatest possibility of defeating the argument.

III *Objections and other negative and unreasoned reactions*. These reactions are all part of *category 3*. Objections come first: although they themselves have often not the form of an argument, they can still present a significant challenge.

IV *Alternative positions*. In spite of the fact that they belong to *category 4* they are low on the list because they often have an existence independent of the argument, are less proportioned to this particular argument and make a greater demand on the arguer.

V *Positive critique*. These are the positive and reasoned reactions represented in *category 2*.

VI *Positive and unreasoned reactions and neutral reactions, whether reasoned or not*. These reactions belong to *category 1* and *category 5* respectively and are least likely to reveal significant defects in the argument.

According to Johnson, the value of his typology of dialectical material is that it allows us to develop a rational policy to prioritize the arguer's dialectical obligations in the way he has described – or in some other way. At the same time, the typology gives us a better view of the content of what Johnson calls the "dialectical tier."

## 2. Some questions regarding Johnson's exposé

It is my dialectical duty today to pick holes in Johnson's spacecraft for entering argumentative space. Before trying to do so, I shall make a few remarks concerning some points in his exposé that are not yet fully clear to me. What, to begin with, is the theoretical meaning of his "empirical" classification of dialectical material? I would certainly not say that this classification is not based on interesting observations, but it is not embedded in any kind of systematic theory of language use. This is in my view regrettable, because a description of the various categories in terms of "speech acts," or some similar theoretical framework, would allow for a functional definition of each category or subcategory that makes the different types of material more easily identifiable and distinguishable. For the present, for instance, the precise distinction between category 1, the objection, and category 3, a criticism, is in fact not so obvious to me. And adding a category just called "Other" is never a really strong move in developing a classification. The answer to the question whether the categories that are distinguished in the classification are indeed "sufficient" is then, by definition, always yes.

And what exactly is the rationale for moving from an "empirical" approach to the classification of dialectical material to an "a priori" approach? I could imagine that the difference that is made between "positive" and "negative" responses would lead to leaving aside the

“positive” responses in the typology because they do not have a real role in the continuation of the dialectical process, but this is not what happens. I also fail to see the significance of the second distinction, i.e., between “reasoned” and “unreasoned” responses. Although Johnson tells us that there is “a greater obligation to deal with reasoned responses,” this is an additional observation I do not automatically agree with. It is also premature, because this consideration does not play a role until we have reached the stage where we develop a “policy of prioritizing dialectical material.”

My last preliminary remark is that Johnson’s reasons for justifying a “prima facie” obligation are so heterogeneous that I wonder whether they can serve their purpose. A first reason is “politeness”: when somebody says something to you, you have to respond. In most circumstances this seems true, but is it a *dialectical* obligation or a social one? Politeness may force you to respond even to reactions that are totally irrelevant. A second reason Johnson mentions is to achieve the goal of rational persuasion, which can clearly be perceived as dialectical. Third, however, there are in his opinion reasons of “manifest rationality.” If I understand this notion correctly, these reasons have more to do with what I have earlier called “going through the motions” than with dialectical reasonableness. The big deal is that the arguer must try to appear reasonable. He can even do so, however, by arguing in what Perelman calls a “quasi-logical,” and sometimes fallacious, way. Anyway, it seems to me that we are dealing here with a psychological mechanism and I wonder whether one can just assume that manifest rationality is always served best by responding to all objections that are made. Such behavior might just as well be counterproductive because it creates the impression that one jumps at any reaction, whatever its quality. There may be techniques of purporting to deal with all criticisms while responding in fact only to those objections that are most easy to answer. You can pretend to deal with all objections without actually treating them satisfactorily. If manifest rationality therefore is not a sufficient criterion for dialectical adequacy, why then is it mentioned in this connection?

### **3. What does a typology of dialectical material involve?**

For most purposes, a general requirement of a sound typology is that its categories are clearly defined, well-delineated, mutually exclusive, and, if possible, exhaustive. This means, at least, that questions such as what belongs to a certain category and why not to any other category should be answerable, albeit sometimes perhaps only after careful consideration. A problem with Johnson’s typology seems to me that not all these conditions are fulfilled. It is in fact hard to check whether or not this is the case, because it has not yet been indicated how specific dialectical reactions may appear in the actual practice of the performance of speech acts. In this respect, it might be helpful if Johnson provided some more information concerning the different types of relevant reactions that are associated with the various dialectical categories. This could result in a functionally differentiated typology consisting of categories of reactions that create different kinds of dialectical obligations on the part of the arguer, i.e., different kinds of rejoinders. I think that it would also be helpful to make a preliminary division between reactions aimed at achieving a better *understanding* of the contents of the discussion and reactions that pertain to the *acceptability* of certain elements in the discourse.

In this connection, there is in my opinion, every reason to re-examine the “neutral” a priori category 5, which is now somewhat diffuse, and contains for instance questions and requests for clarification. In Johnstone’s typology, questions appear in the neutral as well as in the positive

category. Why aren't there also negative questions? And should questions then not also be included in category 3 ("negative and unreasoned") instead of only in category 1 ("positive and unreasoned")? But this would perhaps not do much good, for as a rule it is not a sign of strength of a typology if the same phenomenon can be subsumed under different labels. Viewed dialectically the phenomenon is after all maybe not the same in these cases, so that a further differentiation is recommendable.

A different type of question, to which I already alluded, is why anybody would be obliged to respond to positive criticism that supports that person's argumentation. Just for the sake of politeness? As Johnson himself acknowledges, in view of the need to convince by removing criticism there is no need for it: "Typically, this sort of dialectical material will not weaken or threaten the argument but only support it." Johnson also says, however, that "still there are times when this material will result in the arguer's having to modify or clarify the argument, which will result in its being a better argument." It is dubious, however, whether going by Johnson's own principle answering positive criticism, whether reasoned or not, can be counted among the arguer's (prima facie) dialectical obligations. It is also dubious whether support that leads to a change in someone's standpoint or arguments can only be regarded as uncritical support.

In my opinion, the notion of 'dialectical adequacy,' which Johnson at the beginning of his paper so aptly defines as responding adequately to "challenges and objections" directed at your arguments, and the accompanying idea of dialectical obligations, lose much of their theoretical and practical value if the dialectical obligations are supposed to pertain to everything put forward, whether positive or negative, that has something to do with your arguments. In the latter case the notion threatens to become something of an oxymoron because it then covers also alternative positions and other positive or negative, "direct" or "indirect," material that, according to Johnson, exists also independently of the argument concerned, varying from criticism to requests for elucidation.

#### ***4. What use is the typology to solving the problem of prioritizing?***

In developing a policy for prioritizing dialectical material a problem of choice is made into a priority problem. This problem can, of course, be solved in various ways. The most fundamental, the most general, the most specific, the potentially most damaging reactions can be given priority, but one can also opt for a procedural way out by giving priority to the critical questions pertaining to the use of a certain argument scheme or some similar approach. Johnson's criteria, which are based on the principle that comprises the protagonist's dialectical obligations, appear to be the following. The first criterion is whether the reaction "has really been put forward with a view to the argument under consideration," so that it may be called "directed at the argument," or exists also "independently" of this argument and may be called "relevant to the argument." His second criterion appears to be that the most undermining reactions are to be dealt with first, albeit that he also seems to rely on other criteria such as, albeit somewhat loosely, on a criterion of efficiency – as an ad hoc reason for placing alternative questions lower on the list of steps, he refers to their dialectical complexity, which confronts the arguer with a difficult job to deal with.

The first criterion is hard to agree with, without any further qualification. Why would standard objections that are already familiar to the protagonist be less important than new objections advanced to the argument on the spur of the moment? Johnson does not really distinguish between the actual discussion with a particular person or group of people and a

potential discussion with everybody that has earlier expressed his view on the matter. I wonder whether it is not the protagonist's first obligation to respond to all standard objections when entering into a discussion where it is already clear in advance which objections have determined the discussion. In the way the criterion is stated by Johnson as an obligation to respond to all material directed at, or relevant to, the argument, it could even be the case that direct criticism to the argument, although totally irrelevant, should be given priority to relevant standard criticisms.

How can this be justified if your ambition is, like Johnson's, not merely rhetorical?

My main concern, however, with the proposed priority system is the unbalanced relationship that exists between Johnson's policy for prioritizing and his typology of dialectical material. Johnson makes clear that he acknowledges that there is a problem here. At a certain point in his elucidation he says: "It would seem that next in line would be alternative positions," while this is not the case in the priority system. Another problem is, in my view, that a further differentiation is to be made within the dialectical categories of the typology that corresponds with the hierarchical ordering of the various kinds of reactions in a certain category in respect of their force. In Johnson's system, some categories from the typology need to be split up in different (sub)categories in order to get their right place in the priority system. Although he does not really specify his criteria, Johnson rightly distinguishes between forceful and less forceful dialectical reactions *within the same category* (see, for example, category 1). As a consequence, parts of the same category appear in different places in the list of steps. This, however, is not in agreement with the rationale for developing the typology. It seems obvious that the various categories are not so "fitting" as they should be.

In other respects too, I am sometimes surprised by the order of steps favored by Johnson. In some cases, what, viewed reasonably, should in my opinion come first is postponed until later. This applies, for instance, to questions aimed at clarification, which come last in the priority policy (and are in a confusing way put together with "challenges"). And sometimes a move that is potentially more undermining to the arguer's position than a move attributed to an earlier stage in the priority system is "structurally" placed in a later stage. How "threatening" a certain reaction is, i.e., how serious it is to be taken in the priority system, depends in Johnson's approach roughly on whether it is positive or negative and whether it is supported by an argument or not. In my opinion, however, still other factors play a part. It seem clear to me that very strong but unsupported criticism poses a greater threat than a weak but supported argument. A simple observation, statement, or counterexample, for instance, can be more disastrous to the argument than a weakly reasoned objection or criticism. As a matter of fact, Johnson's comments on category 3 make it clear that he is also fully aware of the fact that criticism that is not supported might be supported later if required.

### ***5. An alternative position***

Johnson is amazed that the priority problem he wants to solve is not treated in the argumentation literature. I do believe, however, that the omission could perhaps be explained by saying that the problem is, as Johnson himself observes, to some extent prevented from coming into being by dealing with argumentation in a different fashion. When in developing dialectical procedures argumentation is viewed as part of a systematic process of critical exchanges, whether real or projected, the order of steps follows in several respects from the specific relations of the particular antagonist. Ideally, the person or group of people that act as antagonists will in

all stages of the discussion first try to achieve optimal clarity and understanding. Confrontations that have already taken place under exactly the same conditions and have been decided in one way or the other may not be resumed. And if no possibility exists to achieve some joint point of departure that can lead to a constructive discussion, the protagonist may refrain from opening the discussion. When a discussion reaches the argumentation stage, what the dialectical obligations of the parties are depends on whether the dispute is mixed or non-mixed, and multiple or single, and on the division of the discussion roles. The relevant dialectical reactions of the other party can then be responded to according to their place in the development of the resolution process, the kind of argumentation structure they appear to be part of, the type of argument scheme in which they occur, et cetera, until a joint conclusion is reached. It goes without saying that in a revision process of an argumentation that is presented in an oral or written monologue, the arguer will in many of these respects have to make his own estimates.

I hope that you have noticed that I have made serious effort to make use of all Johnson's categories in my dialectical reactions to his paper. I am looking forward to learn which points will get priority in his response.