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# Commentary on Johnson

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# Commentary on Ralph H. Johnson: “Anticipating Objections as a way of Coping with Dissensus”

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## 1. ARGUING ABOUT OBJECTIONS?

In answer to the question, what are the arguer’s dialectical obligations, Johnson formulates three normative principles about the handling of objections. The first concerns strength: “the stronger the objection is, the stronger its claim on the arguer” (p. 13). The second concerns what Johnson calls proximity: “the closer it is to the arguer’s position, the stronger its claim on the arguer” (p. 13). The third concerns what he calls salience: “the more salient the objection in the dialectical environment, the stronger its claim on the arguer to respond” (p. 13). Combining these three principles and attempting to be clearer, I would say the following. An arguer has an obligation to anticipate objections, and the obligation is stronger for objections that are stronger, closer, or more salient.

In answer to the question, what is required for the successful dispatch of one’s dialectical obligations, Johnson formulates another triad of normative principles. “First, the arguer must accurately and faithfully state the objection ... Second, the arguer must make an *adequate* response; i.e., must argue that the objection is not on target, does not really damage the argument” (p. 13). And there is “a third requirement: the objection(s) anticipated must be appropriate” (p. 14). Johnson calls these principles criteria of dialectical excellence and seems to suggest that they are individually necessary and jointly sufficient.

Now, these two sets of principles, for a total of six, seem to be Johnson’s main conclusions in this paper; or we might say that he is advancing a six-part conclusion. However, if one looks for his justifying argument(s), one finds little more than the following. “The arguer take[s] the trouble to anticipate objections” (p. 2) for two reasons; first because argument has “the goal of rational persuasion” (p. 3); and second because argument “is an exercise in rationality in which the parties are interested in both the substance and the appearance of rationality,” that is, argument is an exercise in manifest rationality. And Johnson refers to his book (Johnson 2000) on the subject, since these assertions are obviously just the tip of the an iceberg. At this point I could refer to the analysis and criticism of Johnson’s arguments contained in my own writings (Finocchiaro 2005a, pp. 292-326). However, to leave it at that would, in the present occasion, be merely an invitation to stop our dialogue, which is the opposite of my intention here.

Thus, in the interest of further interchange, here I want to say that those arguments from Johnson’s 2000 book on *Manifest Rationality* pertain primarily and

directly to the desirability of *responding* to objections, whereas in this paper he is talking about *anticipating* objections. The same applies to some of the arguments which Johnson gives in his 2006 Amsterdam paper entitled “Responding to Objections” (Johnson 2006). Thus, if we stress that in the present paper he is discussing the *anticipation* of objections, then I don’t see that he has justified the six more specific claims described above. In short, Johnson’s paper contains essentially no argument for these six claims.

However, it would be naïve to object to this paper in this manner. Even a theorist of argumentation must recognize that there are other things in the universe besides argumentation. Before argumentation can get started, a certain amount of preliminary work is needed, and such preliminary work involves definitions, distinctions, concept formation, description of approach, etc. Now, in most, indeed in almost all, of the present paper Johnson is engaged in such preliminaries. These should be judged on their own merits, not by means of criteria applying to other things. So it would be a kind of category mistake to object to this paper for its scarcity of argumentation. Let us then switch to that other kind of analysis.

## 2. APPROPRIATENESS

Let me begin by focusing on the last of Johnson’s principles of dialectical excellence. In elucidating what he means by the appropriateness component of dialectical excellence, Johnson says that an appropriate response is one that deals with “a well-known and important objection (one that is salient [or] looms large in the dialectical environment” (p. 14). So the third principle of his second set seems to duplicate the third one of the first set. That is, his six points really reduce to five, which could be summarized as follows: an arguer should anticipate objections that are strong, close, and salient, and the response should be accurate and adequate. We don’t need to add that the response should be appropriate because that would only mean that the anticipated objections should be salient.

## 3. INTERPRETATION

My next comment stresses an aspect of Johnson’s first principle of dialectical excellence. It is the one that requires us to state the objection accurately and faithfully. Although the justification of this principle is another issue, I certainly accept the correctness and importance of this principle. But I want to point out that what is involved here is the *interpretation* of an objection, in a sense of interpretation that distinguishes interpretation from evaluation. In interpretation, one aims to understand what the objection is, what it is saying, what it is claiming. In evaluation, one is trying to determine whether the thing being evaluated (in this case the objection) is valid or invalid, relevant or irrelevant, right or wrong, and to what extent or in what sense it possesses these characteristics. Obviously, in the present situation, the evaluation comes later and is addressed in Johnson’s second principle. So it should be clear that when anticipating an objection, the process of stating it accurately and faithfully is an interpretive activity.

Now, all this would hardly need saying were it not for the fact that there is a widespread tendency in informal logic, critical thinking, and argumentation theory to neglect the interpretation and understanding of arguments. Johnson seems to be part of

this tendency. For example, in this paper, while elucidating his notions of rational space, argumentative space, and practice of argumentation, he gives the following definition: “by ‘the practice of argumentation’, I mean to refer to the socio-cultural activity of constructing, presenting, and criticizing and revising arguments” (p. 8). This does not seem to be merely an incidental remark, for the same exact definition is found in his book on *Manifest Rationality* (Johnson 2000, p. 154). Nor is it the case that this is merely a reflective pronouncement and that in fact he pays the proper attention to interpretation when working out the details of his theory of argument; this is not the case because there is not in fact a single chapter on the interpretation of argument, out of the twelve that make up the book on *Manifest Rationality*.

What I would say (cf. Finocchiaro 1980, pp. 311-331; 2005a, pp. 14-15) is that an important part of argumentative practice is the interpretation of arguments, as distinct from their construction, presentation, evaluation, criticism, and revision. Therefore, concepts and principles of interpretation should be an important part of the theory of arguments. One of these principles is precisely Johnson’s first principle of dialectical excellence.

#### 4. PRE-EMPTING OBJECTIONS

My fourth comment is an attempt to carry further the military metaphor introduced by Johnson and exploited by him to help him arrive at his formulation of the three principles of strength, proximity, and salience. He is well aware that the military metaphor does not constitute a justification but is merely a heuristic instrument, and that the results will have to be “translated out from the metaphor—a task for the future” (p. 13), as he says. The notion I want to examine, however briefly, is that of *pre-empting* an objection as distinct from anticipating an objection, and by analogy to the notion of a pre-emptive war or pre-emptive attack.

Now, Johnson may be viewed as having already distinguished between responding to objections and anticipating objections. The first involves a response to something that already exists, to an objection that had already been advanced, whereas the second involves thinking in advance of objections that could be formulated and taking the necessary precautions. Responding to objections is analogous to waiting until one has already suffered a military attack and defending oneself from such an attack, including perhaps with counter-attacks. Anticipating objections is analogous to building up one’s defenses before an attack has occurred, so that if and when it does occur one is well prepared to repulse it; anticipating objections is like building a Maginot line to defend France from a German attack, although of course there is no reason why such anticipation should be as flawed or incomplete as the Maginot line, which did cover the French-German border, but was not extended to either the Belgian-French border or the Belgian-German border.

The twenty-first century has brought into prominence the notion of a pre-emptive war. In a pre-emptive war one attacks and destroys the threat before one has been attacked. One does more than wait for the attack and then respond to it; and one does more than anticipate the attack and prepare the response; one counter-attacks before the attack. What would that be like in rational and argumentative space?

It seems to me that the analogue would be the formulation of objections to alternative positions. One question which would then arise is whether one needs to consider only existing alternatives, or whether one should take into account potential alternatives. Another question would be how this differs from anticipating objections.

In his talk of both responding and anticipating objections, Johnson seems to consider three main things: formulating an objection to one's own position (the formulation being presented by someone else when one is merely responding, or by oneself when one is anticipating); criticizing or refuting the objection; and/or revising one's own position. Is any of this equivalent to the formulation and strengthening of objections to alternative positions, be they alternatives that have already been articulated or that could be articulated? If an alternative is taken to be a contradictory of one's own thesis, and if objections are reasons against, then objections to alternatives become reasons against contradictories, and these are reasons for one's own thesis. Thus the activity of pre-empting objections to one's own argument or conclusion seems more akin to a strengthening of the illative tier of one's own argument. This instance of dialectical excellence becomes then a case of illative excellence as well.

## 5. STRENGTHENING OBJECTIONS

Fifth, I want to focus on the notion of a strong objection, or to be more precise, the strengthening of an objection. Obviously, Johnson speaks of strong objections, in the context of both responding and anticipating. He does not seem to take into account that the strength of an objection is not always or necessarily a material or objective property; and that work may have to be done to make an objection stronger than it was or appears to be. To stress this fact, it may be useful to introduce the notion of *strengthening* an objection, as distinct that of a *strong* objection. The question then becomes whether arguers have the obligation to strengthen objections against their own position. Some famous arguers have thought so.

One of these was John Stuart Mill. In his essay *On Liberty*, in the context of his argument for freedom of discussion, one of his subarguments tries to show that knowledge of objections is necessary if one wants to properly understand and appreciate the reasons supporting one's own conclusions (see Finocchiaro 2005b). His key point is that in almost all subjects outside of mathematics, "truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons ... [and so] he who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that" (Mill 1951, p. 128). Now, referring to such conflicting reasons, or objections (as we might call them), Mill holds that the arguer "must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty ... [for] else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty" (Mill 1951, p. 129). In other words, "that part of truth which turns the scale ... is [n]ever really known, but to those who have attended equally and impartially to both sides, and endeavoured to see the reasons of both in the strongest light" (Mill 1951, 129-130). Applied to the present context, I take this to be an eloquent plea for an additional dialectical obligation for arguers: whether responding to or anticipating objections, before refuting them an arguer should not only interpret objections accurately and fairly, but present them in their strongest possible light.

## COMMENTARY ON RALPH H. JOHNSON

Another famous advocate and practitioner of this principle was Galileo. In the winter of 1615-1616 he spent several months in Rome to defend the Copernican theory of the earth's motion from various objections, especially those based on Scripture, but also those based on the laws of physics, on astronomical observation, and on epistemological principles. Here is how a witness of these discussions described them in correspondence with an official from out of town:

We have here Sig. Galileo, who, often, in gatherings of men of curious mind, bemuses many concerning the opinion of Copernicus that he holds for true ... He discourses often amid fifteen or twenty guests who make hot assaults on him, now in one house, now in another. He is so well buttressed that he laughs them off; and although the novelty of his opinion leaves people unpersuaded, yet he convicts of vanity the greater part of the arguments with which his opponents try to overthrow him. Monday in particular, in the house of Federico Ghisilieri, he achieved wonderful feats; and what I liked most was that, before answering the opposing reasons, he amplified them and fortified them himself with new grounds which appeared invincible, so that, in demolishing them subsequently, he made his opponents look all the more ridiculous. [Quoted in Santillana 1955, pp. 112-113]

In saying that the opponents were made to look all the more ridiculous, this observer seems to draw a conclusion that is the opposite of the correct one; for Galileo's amplification and fortification of the opposing reasons would make the opponents emerge as intelligent and reasonable persons, who happened to be wrong. But this is not the time or place to elaborate (cf. Finocchiaro 1980). In any case, these references to Mill and Galileo are not meant to be arguments from authority, but rather they are made here primarily to suggest an additional reason why the argumentative practice of these thinkers would be well worth studying. Argumentation theorists, especially dialectically oriented ones, could find fruitful examples, formulations, and justifications of the principle that it is sometimes desirable for arguers to strengthen objections to their own arguments before responding to them.

### 6. DEFENDING ALTERNATIVES

This leads to my sixth comment, which involves a related principle or technique. That is, sometimes it may be a good idea to defend an alternative position from some objections, before one formulates others more damaging ones against it. By so doing, one displays what might be called open-mindedness and fair-mindedness, and to that extent one might perhaps be able to construct an argument in favor of this technique. Another line of argument could perhaps be gleaned, again, from John Stuart Mill's argument for freedom of discussion. His third subargument (cf. Finocchiaro 2005b) involves considerations about avoiding one-sidedness and appreciating partial truths. His key point is that in arguments about human affairs, the most common situation is one

when the conflicting doctrines, instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them; and the nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth, of which the received doctrine embodies only a part. [Mill 1951, p. 140]

However, for this principle, I must admit that I do not know of good examples from argumentative practice. It might be useful to undertake a systematic search. I have occasionally engaged in this technique (e.g., Finocchiaro 2006), as the beginning of this

commentary illustrates. But I leave it up to you to ponder the possibility and judge the results.

## 7. VIRTUES VS. OBLIGATIONS

Finally, the last two principles provide the occasion for exploring a distinction that might prove useful in a dialectical theory of argument. I shall label it the distinction between dialectical obligations and dialectical virtues. Johnson may have this in mind with his talk of dialectical adequacy versus dialectical excellence (although in this paper he introduces the notion of excellence primarily as a synonym of adequacy when the latter is meant in a broad sense, needed because the notion adequacy has both a narrow and a broad meaning and is thus ambiguous).

Here I would begin by admitting that I am hesitant to say that an arguer has an *obligation to strengthen* objections against his own argument and to *defend an alternative* position from some objections. I would be more comfortable in saying that it is a good thing for an arguer to do these things. In other words, if and to the extent that arguers do these things, that adds extra value to their arguments, at least on some occasions; but if one does not do them, I am not sure that not doing them is in itself a flaw or fault. In Johnson's language, one might say that following these two practices is a sign of dialectical excellence; not following them does make one fall short of excellence, but not short of dialectical adequacy, if and to the extent that the other more basic principles, pertaining to adequacy, are satisfied. In my own language, it is a virtue, but not an obligation or duty, to do them. Of course, this is a claim in argumentative or rational space, and so the virtues, obligations, and duties in question are cognitive or epistemic ones, not ethical or moral.

[link to response](#)

[link to paper](#)

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