Shedding Dialectical Tiers: A Social-Epistemic View

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ABSTRACT: Is there a duty to respond to objections in order to present a good argument? Ralph Johnson argues that there is such a duty, which he refers to as the ‘dialectical tier’ of an argument. I deny the (alleged) duty primarily on grounds that it would exert too great a demand on arguers, harming argumentation practices. The valuable aim of responding to objections, which Johnson’s dialectical tier is meant to satisfy, can be achieved in better ways, as argumentation is a social-epistemic activity.

KEY WORDS: aims of argument, argumentation as a social-epistemic practice, costs of inquiry, demandingness, dialectical tier, division of epistemic labor, duty to respond to objections, economize, feasibility, Ralph Johnson, rational persuasion, second-order reasons

1. THE (ALLEGED) DUTY TO ANSWER OBJECTIONS

In his comprehensive study Manifest Rationality, Ralph Johnson (2000) argues that there is a dialectical tier to the defense of an argument. (The main thesis of his book is that argumentation is a form of manifest rationality. My discussion does not address this intriguing proposal.) The dialectical tier requires that an arguer respond to objections to his argument, including at least the standard or well regarded ones (2000, pp. 327–333; all page references without citation are to Johnson, 2000). The options of only addressing objections that the arguer knows how to defuse or that the audience wants addressed, Johnson rejects as too weak. Instead, the stronger requirement, treated as embracing the previous ones (332), is imposed:

The arguer should address The Standard Objections. (328)

Johnson admits that this final proposal is highly indeterminate, and so ‘the issue of how to specify the arguer’s dialectical obligations deserves further study’ (333). Nevertheless, the dialectical tier is incorporated into Johnson’s theoretical proposal for the very understanding of argument:

An argument is a type of discourse or text – the distillate of the practice of argumentation – in which the arguer seeks to persuade the Other(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons that support it. In addition to this illative core, an argument possesses a dialectical tier in which the arguer discharges his dialectical obligations.
In a recent lecture ‘The Dialectical Tier Revisited’ (2002b), Johnson develops this defense by responding to three kinds of criticisms: logical, dialectical, and rhetorical. In this article, I press a set of closely related social-epistemic criticisms of Johnson’s position. Despite the overtly social character of Johnson’s conception of argument (‘persuade the Other’), the spirit of my criticisms is that his conception is not nearly social enough. In the Appendix, I sketch an example which offers a concrete application and test of these criticisms.

2. ASSUMPTIONS GOVERNING CRITICISM OF THE ALLEGED DUTY

The criticisms I develop depend on three assumptions:

a. Central to argumentation is its role as a form of inquiry that aims at establishing new, interesting truths or knowledge.

b. Costs of inquiry – time and resources allocated – are epistemically relevant to prescriptions for rational arguers.

c. Argumentation, as a form of inquiry, involves a division of epistemic or cognitive labor.

Assuming a–c, I argue that the dialectical tier cannot represent a duty. Since these assumptions are either no more than mildly controversial [(b) and (c)] or not in need of full concession for my criticisms [(a)], my defense of each will, accordingly, be brief:

(a) An argument is presented as cogent (sound and providing strong or conclusive reasons for its conclusion, subsequent to regimentation or standardization). Its premises are asserted, and the relation between them and the conclusion is supposed to justify accepting the conclusion as true. On this basis, one can come to know that the conclusion is true.

For the purposes of this paper, you need only accept my criticisms of Johnson restricted to arguments that do fit assumption (a) – they aim at truth or knowledge. Below in section 3 I provide further defense of (a) as capturing a basic purpose of argumentation.

(b) As a form of inquiry, recommendations for how argumentation should proceed must take account of common limits of arguers, and the universal need for economizing on efforts, time, and resources. An arguer may be required to defend some (factual) premise by citing support from two or three respected empirical studies. But if the premise is not the focus or crux of the argument, and the argument is not part of an authoritative report, but a more everyday argument, the arguer need not engage in an extensive survey of the literature. Arguments under such a weak restriction are often considered good or cogent in the strong sense noted in (a) above – they yield knowledge of their conclusion.

Undoubtedly, for certain theoretical purposes, the costs of inquiry can be idealized away. In particular, representing argumentation as an explicitly rule-governed dialogue, permits such an idealization. (See, for example,