

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Problem Of Truth For Theories Of Argument



## *I. Introduction***[i]**

### *A. The historical background*

In the beginning, as I like to tell the story, there is Aristotle. His *Prior and Posterior Analytics* present what might be thought of as the original theory of argument.

According to it, a good argument must satisfy two conditions. First, the argument must be valid; that is, the conclusion must follow logically from the premises. Second, the premises must be true.**[ii]** In modern logic, much the same story is told by combining truth and validity in the ideal of soundness which becomes enshrined in the logic doctrine of the 20th century. (In (1986), I baptized this theory as FDL, an abbreviation for “formal deductive logic” and shall continue to so refer to it.) There are those who object that the idea of soundness was never intended to be the whole story of what counts as a good argument. That may be true. Yet the fact remains that many logicians and philosophers have presented it as such (Lambert & Ulrich 1980) and continue to do so (Solomon 1989).

For centuries, FDL reigned supreme as the theory of argument, until it was challenged by theorists like Toulmin and later Hamblin and later still informal logicians, and others who take the view that FDL does not provide an adequate theory of argument. Some, like Toulmin (1958), challenged the architecture of FDL; others like Hamblin (1970) challenged the truth-requirement; still others (Barth 1985) and Govier 1987) have challenged the deductivism they believe is implicit in FDL.

A kind of standard critique of FDL has emerged which goes as follows. Soundness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for goodness in argumentation. It is not necessary because there are good arguments which do not satisfy this requirement, such a good inductive arguments. It is not sufficient because there are argument which satisfy this but are not good arguments. An example would be an argument which begs the question yet has true premises. I am sympathetic to the first line of argument though not to the second, the reason being that the

example used to make the point (typically “p p”) strikes me as an implication rather than an argument.

In this paper, I am interested only in the issue of what has come to be called premise-adequacy: What requirements must the premises of a good argument satisfy? **[iii]** Must they be true, as FDL theorists have insisted? Or is something “less” – acceptability – adequate, as some informal logicians have held (Govier, 1996)? Or should we embrace both sorts of requirement, as both Allen (1997) and I (1996) have argued?

### *B. The significance of the issue*

The issue is an important one. For one thing, the old ideal promoted the notion that the only really good arguments are conclusive arguments – a dangerous doctrine tending toward skepticism and so well worth challenging. My concern is that the alternative suggestion – that the premises of an argument must be acceptable – is in some ways so problematic and weak that it may promote an unhealthy relativism and so well worth challenging.

### *C. My position*

The position I defend in this paper is that logicians and argumentation theorists should include truth as a requirement for premise-adequacy. I begin by examining the arguments for including it. I then examine the arguments against. I then put forth what I believe is a decisive line of reasoning for including it. Then I review the dialectical situation, draw some conclusions, and end.

## *II. Arguments for a truth-requirement for premiseadequacy*

The truth-requirement was accurately stated by Hamblin (1970): “The premises of an argument must be true.” Let’s briefly review the main arguments for including truth as a requirement for premise-adequacy.

First, the imposition of such a requirement has much history on its side. Going right back to Aristotle, we find logicians embracing the idea that the premises must be true in order for the argument to be a worthy one. This requirement for premise-adequacy is part and parcel of FDL’s approach.

Second, it seems a natural enough method of dealing with arguments. That is, quite apart from what our theories of argument may dictate, it seems an intuitive and natural move to criticize someone’s argument on the grounds that one of the premises is not true. We all do it, even a sophisticated philosopher like Dennett, who in responding to a suggestion by Stich, says: “This is just not true” (1987:95).

Third, if we conceive of argumentation as a method for getting at the truth (again I say this seems a natural enough interpretation of what argumentation is about),

then it is difficult to see how we may hope to arrive at that destination if we do not require that the premises of our arguments satisfy that requirement. Those, then, are some of the more prominent lines of argument for truth as a requirement for premise-adequacy.

### *III. Arguments against a truth-requirement for premise-adequacy*

There seem to me to be at least six main opposing lines of argument. First, it can be notoriously difficult to determine what is true.

William James says that “no concrete test of what is true has even been agreed upon.” As one moves away from science and towards other spheres of reasoning – the practical sphere of human decision-making, the areas of morals, ethics, politics and everyday human affairs – it becomes more and more problematic in its application. This is not because the criterion of truth is entirely inapplicable to human affairs, but rather because as one reviews the nature and functions of argumentation in this arena, it seems that the premises need not be true in order for the argument to be a good one (See Blair and Johnson, 1987).

Second, it can be argued that the truth-requirement is not a necessary condition, because the mere presence of a false premise does not in and of itself mean that the argument is a bad one, if the other true premises are sufficiently powerful to “cover” for it. Here is an example. The arguer begins with this premise: January 1998 has begun, with all major cities throwing parties with fireworks and people breaking in the new year with hopes of a better life.

The arguer proceeds to argue that all people need to get involved in the process of helping to heal the earth. Now suppose that P1 is false because one or two major cities (Tokyo and Madrid) did not throw such parties; suppose however that all others did. As matters stand then the premise is false. Will this falsity be enough to cause a rational person to reject the argument? Not necessarily, it seems to me, especially if

- i. the other premises of the argument are strong enough to compensate for this weakness; and
- ii. the premise is just barely false.

Third, and related to the first, even if one decided to impose the truth-requirement on the premises of an argument, it will be asked which of the many versions of theories of truth will be selected? Will we define truth in terms of correspondence, coherence, reliability, or what? The objection from this direction is that there is a severe theoretical obstacle in the way – choosing one particular

theory of truth rather than some other.

Fourth, there is Hamblin's argument which more or less directs itself to the correspondence theory of truth, arguing that to impose truth as a requirement is unwise, since truth (and validity) are "onlookers' concepts and presuppose a God's-eye-view of the arena" (242).

Fifth, there is the objection that the ideal of truth has been notoriously abused, pressed into service of the most heinous ideologies. Given the abuse historically associated with this requirement, it is thought that we are better off not invoking it.**[iv]**

Sixth, there is Stich's challenge (1990) to truth as an epistemic value - a challenge not developed with argumentation in mind but which surely would apply to any theory of argument that opted for truth. Stich argues that the appropriate epistemic value is not that our beliefs be true but rather that they satisfy our purposes. His alternative, broadly described as pragmatic, is both pluralistic and relativistic, though not, Stich argues, in any pernicious way.

These are, then, some of the reasons that have been cited for rejecting the truth-requirement, at least in any primitive form. Before we move on, a couple of observations:

First, the above is admittedly sketchy but it contains in germinal form a point of great importance for argumentation theory: there can be good arguments on both sides of a proposition. As I have argued before (1992), this realization (found in Hamblin) is fatal to those who promote FDL as a theory of argument, because FDL cannot accommodate this requirement.

Second, now what happens? Some of my students would urge that because there are six arguments against and only three for the truth-requirement, we should conclude against it. But we know that there are better ways to handle this situation than simply counting noses. We could, for example, proceed to determine the strength of the various reasons. Some, (Grennan (1986) and Bowles (1990)) would do this by assigning some numeric value to the premises. Or we might proceed to burrow deeper into the individual arguments. Or we may wish to cast about for additional reasons on one side or the other. Which is the option I choose here.

#### *IV. Further arguments for the truth-requirement*

I want to introduce a line of argument for the truth-requirement that I take to be very strong. It is that it is virtually impossible to engage the work of argument

evaluation without some recourse, whether explicit or implicit, to the truth-requirement. Let me refer to this as Johnson's Conjecture:

Even when a logician (or a argumentation theorist) explicitly dismisses truth as a requirement for premise adequacy, the truth-requirement will continue to perform important work in that theorist's evaluative apparatus in any or all of the following ways:

1. by making unofficial use of it even after they have discharged it;
2. by continuing to rely on it by using terms in their theory of evaluation which themselves presuppose some commitment to the truth-requirement. This happens when a theorist assigns an evaluative role to such notions as contradiction, assumption, validity, consistency - all of which seem to require that truth be assigned a normative role. It is further questionable whether a term like acceptability (often put forward as an alternative to the truth-requirement) can be rendered intelligible without recourse to the truth-requirement. The same can be said for relevance.
3. by using the truth-requirement in their metatheory, that is in the metalanguage in which they set up their theory of evaluation. The second situation is by far the most common and the one I will illustrate here. I shall cite four cases.

Case I: *Logical Self-Defense* by Johnson and Blair.

In LSD (1993), Johnson and Blair embrace acceptability rather than truth as the appropriate logical requirement for the premise adequacy. They do not exclude truth as an appropriate criterion in many cases, where the arguer is attempting to establish "the way things are in the world ... for such arguments ... the premises must be true" (62). But they maintain that truth is not a *logical* requirement. This is part of their larger view that criticizing a premise for not being true is a substantive rather than a logical criticism. So Johnson and Blair acknowledge the role of truth in argument evaluation but do not regard it as a *logical* criterion for premise-adequacy.

Still when it comes to the discussion of some of the fallacies, their account seems to clearly presuppose the truth-requirement.

For example, when they discuss the fallacy of *inconsistency*, Johnson and Blair rely heavily on the truth-requirement. They claim that two premises are inconsistent if they cannot be true together.**[v]**

This seems correct but not compatible with their position that a fallacy is a violation of one of the (logical) requirements for a good argument. The truth-requirement makes its presence felt elsewhere. Look, for example, at their

account of the test they propose for determining relevance: "Let me suppose that P is true; does the truth of P dictate a truth value for C (the conclusion)?" (54-55). Now if truth is required in order to explain relevance, and relevance itself is a criterion for the evaluation of the premises of an argument, would that not suggest that truth should be included as a criterion?

The truth-requirement also makes an appearance in their formulation of the conditions for *popularity* (173-75) and *dubious assumption* (206), among others. It is hard to imagine any account of the fallacy of popularity which would not invoke as a norm the following claim: that many or all persons believe a premise to be true does not make it true.**[vi]**

Thus, although truth is not included among the logical criteria which the premises must satisfy, still it appears to be highly functional in their theory of evaluation.

Case 2: *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies* by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992).

Noteworthy here is the attempt on the part of pragma-dialecticians to carefully avoid reference to the truth-requirement. The word does not appear in their Index except under the entry "logical truth"! Instead they use the notion of acceptability (5,7,9), or acceptance (96). It is clear from what they write on page 96 that acceptance is meant to play a role in pragma-dialectics similar to the role truth plays in logic. However, van Eemeren and Grootendorst have not, so far as I can see, offered a clear account of acceptability/acceptance that differentiates it from truth and shows that it can stand independently of the truth-requirement.

Moreover, when we examine the critical apparatus they use, we see the continuing influence of the truth-requirement. If we look at page 95, we find the authors noting "the general importance of avoiding contradiction" and they quote Frits Stall: "No rational human being would claim that 'The telephone is over there' and 'The telephone is not over there' can both be true at the same time." Clearly, pragma-dialectics will not tolerate inconsistent premises.

On page 270, the authors state: "The most obvious type of inconsistency is when two premise are contradictory. This is the case if they contain proposition that can neither both be true nor both be false at the same time." Thus it seems that pragma-dialectics wishes to expunge inconsistency and that it understands this fundamental relationship in terms of the truth-value of the respective propositions. (It is possible that inconsistency can be spelled out in terms of acceptability, though I am skeptical that such an analysis can be provided.) Here again we see the influence of the truth-requirement in their critical apparatus.

Perhaps even more noteworthy is its behind-the-scenes presence in the notion of validity. Rule 8 appears to restrict the argumentation schemes to those which are valid or a capable of being validated. I say “would seem” because van Eemeren and Grootendorst want to avoid equating validity with deductive validity. They say “we do not want to take a specific and definitive stance on the question of exactly what kind of logical validity criterion is to be preferred” (60). They appear to reject Rescher’s idea that an inductive inference is a failed deductive one, and they are sensitive to Govier’s critique of deductivism. Yet in their treatment of unexpressed premises, they commit themselves to propositional logic and first-order predicate logic as the vehicles for fleshing out missing premises. On pp. 70-71 they embrace argument forms from propositional logic. To the degree that they are willing to embrace the traditional concept of validity as having some role to play in their evaluative apparatus, to that same degree, it appears, that they too have no choice but to embrace some form of the truth-requirement – unless validity can be explained without recourse to the truth-requirement. Further evidence of the role of the truth-requirement in pragma-dialectics can be found in we consult Rules 5 and 6 both of which are formulated with the adverb “falsely”. And so it appears that the truth-requirement plays a significant, if unacknowledged, role in pragma-dialectics.

Case 3: *Reasoning* by Pinto, Blair and Parr (1993).

In telling their story about how to evaluate inferences, the authors adopt acceptability at the appropriate criterion: “a premise is acceptable just in case it is reasonable to accept it” (122). They go on then to discuss acceptability and the first point they make is that “acceptability is not the same thing as truth.” A premise can be reasonable to believe and yet fail to be true.**[vii]**

Still the criterion of truth continues to play a significant role in their metatheory. On the very same page that they introduce the criterion of acceptability, they say: And no matter how strong a link there is between the premises and the conclusion, if the premises are unacceptable, the inference is defective. [Example omitted.] Here the premiss is so tightly linked to the conclusion that if it is true .... the conclusion must be true too. (122)

Notice that when they explain what a strong link looks like, they invoke truth. In other words, their metatheory makes reference to a truth-requirement. Again my point is that if the concept of truth is good enough for the metatheory it is good enough for the theory of evaluation itself. Indeed, it is difficult to get on with the business premise evaluation without invoking it, as becomes clear later in the

text. For when the authors present a strategy for testing the strength of an inference, they rely heavily on the criterion of truth (128-129). Thus, in order to test the strength of the inference, the premise(s) are evaluated with respect to their truth-potential; but when it comes to evaluating the premise itself, the truth-requirement is discharged and the acceptability requirement is imposed.

Further use is made of the truth-requirement in Chapter 5 in which the authors discuss logical notions of entailment, incompatibility, consistency and contradiction. I think that other elements of the critical apparatus introduced in this text (e.g the notion of credibility) likewise lean upon the truth-requirement. So although Pinto, Blair and Parr appear to discharge the truth-requirement, it continues to play a significant role in their theory.

Case 4: *A Practical Study of Argument* by Govier (1997).

In her articulation of the conditions for a good argument, Govier discusses the truth-requirement:

In addition, the concept of truth in the traditional account of soundness poses problems. In arguments, what is really important is not so much that the premises be true but that we know them to be true, or, if, knowledge is not obtainable, that we have good reasons to believe them. Many important have premises that are plausible and accepted by the arguer and the audience but that we would hesitate to say are true in an absolute sense. (74)

But how can we understand the idea of a premise's being plausible or having good reasons to believe something without some notion of truth in the background? In her definition of argument, Govier invokes the concept of truth. She states:

In effect, an arguer putting forward an argument does these three things:

1. She asserts the premises.
2. She asserts that *if* the premises are true (or acceptable), the conclusion is true (or acceptable).
3. She asserts the conclusion. (65)

When she discusses relevance later she states:

Premises are positively relevant to the conclusion when, if true, they constitute some reason to believe the conclusion is true. (165) Here again we notice the theorist tacitly relying on the truthrequirement. If my sample is representative[viii] and if my reasoning is good, then it follows that even those authors who wish to avoid the truth-requirement are in some sense committed to



it. The conclusion that I draw from these sordid tales is that the truth-requirement should be included as a requirement for premise-adequacy.[ix]

#### V. *Dialectical Pause: Where Are We?*

Have I persuaded you then that the truth-requirement belongs in the set of requirements for premise adequacy? Let's see where we are dialectically. I began by reviewing the reasons for; then we looked at "the other side" – the reasons against; and most recently I have introduced yet another line of reasoning to support my claim. But there are a number of things I have not done. So I hope that you have not yet been persuaded because, as I think, my argument is radically incomplete. What I need to do, it seems to me, and what I shall not be able to do here, is return to the original arguments that oppose my position and show why, on the grounds that I have developed, I find them unsatisfactory. I have not made any argument that the reasons for the truth-requirement are stronger than those against it. Nor have I responded in detail to Hamblin's objections.

Nor have I addressed alternative positions, for example Allen's proposal (1997) for combining truth and acceptability. The failure to do these things constitutes a severe lapse in argumentation. For it means that I have thus far failed to discharge my dialectical obligations (Johnson, 1997).

I acknowledge the validity of this assessment. Alas, in the time that remains I cannot discharge these obligations. I can however refer you to a location where you will find them dealt with (See my *Manifest Rationality*, forthcoming).

#### VI. *Conclusion*

I suspect that many informal logicians abandoned the truth-requirement for two reasons. First, they saw it as part of the FDL which they were criticizing. Second, they were persuaded by Hamblin's case against the truth-requirement. I certainly belong to that tribe; or better, belonged. For I now believe that abandoning the truth-requirement is a mistake and that "for better ... for worse," in something very like a marriage vow, informal logicians and argumentation theorists should embrace the truth-requirement.

#### NOTES

- i. I am grateful to Gordon Plumer for his criticisms of parts of this paper.
- ii. This is not Aristotle's terminology. He speaks of the demonstrative syllogism rather than argument, the term 'validity' is not known to him, and it appears that his requirement for the premises is even stronger; the premises must be

necessary truths. In recognizing Aristotle as the original theorist, we must be cognizant that he makes room for other types of argument in *Topics* and *De Sophisticis Elenchis*.

**iii.** In putting the matter this way I want to make it clear that I am not accepting the conventional account of argument according to which an argument is composed of premises plus an inference from the premises to the conclusion. But this is not because I find Toulmin's proposal for the architecture of arguments much better. I don't care for the term 'premise-adequacy' because in fact we want our premises to be not just adequate but good or strong. 'Adequate' is too weak.

**iv.** The truth-problem for us is in some respects like the truth-problem for Nietzsche. He saw clearly many of the unwelcome consequences of the ideal of truth (i.e., that it was bound up with a metaphysical faith and otherworldly hopes, that it lies at the core of the Judaeo-Christian religiosity which he so strongly attacks) and yet he was himself unable to critique those views without at various points leaning heavily on the very notion of truth.

**v.** It is possible, though not likely, that the requirement of consistency can be unpacked without truth but using for example the concept of acceptability. However I think this is not likely, because I think it is possible and may well be rational for a given person to accept both P and not-P.

**vi.** Notice what happens if instead of truth we invoke acceptability. This fallacy will disappear. For the fact that most or all accept a premise does mean that it is acceptable at least on some versions of acceptability.

**vii.** I abstract from the issue of whether an account of acceptability can be given without invoking the truth-requirement at some point.

**viii.** I have selected here four texts whose authors are more or less sympathetic to informal logic and who have distanced themselves from the truth-requirement. In other words, these are, in my opinion, hard cases.

**ix.** I also believe that acceptability should be a requirement. I want them both. Whether I can develop a line of argumentation that rationally supports this desire is another matter that I cannot deal with in this paper.

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