ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Responding To Objections

1. *Background: The Intuition*

One important aspect of our argumentative practice is responding to objections. There is a commonly expressed intuition about arguments to the effect that a good argument is one that can withstand strong objections. The idea can be found in such theorists as Perelman (1969), Johnstone Jr. (1978) and Meiland who puts the idea this way in his *College Thinking*: "The fundamental idea behind all argumentation is this: a *possible reason* that *survives serious objections* is a good reason for accepting the belief in question" (1981, p. 26). I will phrase the intuition this way: one key indicator that an argument is a good argument is that it can withstand serious objections. A series of comments follows.

Comment 1. This intuition makes it clear that an argument is an object that wants a response; it is out there in what Govier and I call *argumentative space* (Johnson, 1997; Govier, 1999). An argument may thus be viewed is an invitation … not just to draw an inference (Pinto, 2001), but perhaps equally as an invitation to respond with appropriate reasons that indicate why one will not accept the invitation. The arguer hopes for such responses. Why? Because these may help further clarify the issue and the arguer's reasoning about it; and because they provide the arguer with a test of that argument (Johnson 2000, p. 161).

Comment 2. If it is correct to say that the arguer has indeed invited responses, then it seems the arguer has thereby incurred an *obligation* to respond to those responses. We need to clarify the nature and the source of the arguer's (and respondent's) obligations – I call them *dialectical obligations. What is the nature and the source of such obligations?*

Comment 3. This intuition also implicitly invokes a distinction between strong and weak objection. The test of the argument is a strong objection. The stronger the objection, the better the test. *But exactly what makes for a strong objection?* Indeed, just what is an objection? Govier (1999) takes up this question which has been largely left unaddressed in the scholarly literature. I don't entirely agree with her position, for reasons I take up in the next comment. The point to be

noted here is that Govier deserves credit for having raised this important question, which has received scant attention in the scholarly literature.

Comment 4. Though the intuition has been pitched in terms of an objection, its sense would be preserved if instead we were to substitute the word "criticism." An argument is a good one if it can withstand strong criticism. But this leads directly to a question alluded to in the previous comment: *Is there is a difference between an objection and a criticism?* While my research indicates that theorists – Govier among them – tend to use these terms interchangeably, I believe that there is a distinction that can usefully be drawn but will not take up that issue here.**[i]**

Comment 5. It is obvious that the way the above intuition is a *facon de parler*. An argument cannot respond to an objection. Only an arguer can respond to an objection. What's behind this intuition is that if the arguer can respond to an objection without having to change the argument in *any essential respect,* then the objection was weak and there is reason to think that the original argument was a itself a strong one. *But what are the possible responses to an objection, and what constraints govern them?* I shall say more about this shortly. Reflection on this intuition has brought to the fore the following series of important questions:

What is the nature and the source of our dialectical obligations?
What exactly is an objection?
What make for a strong objection?
Is there is a difference between a criticism and an objection?
What are the possible responses to an objection, and what factors determine the strength of a response to an objection?

Final Comment: For thousands of years, arguers have been engaged in practice of argumentation and must have dealt – if only at an intuitive or implicit level – with such questions. The strange thing is that there is very little in the scholarly literature about them. In this paper, I attempt to develop some conceptual apparatus for helping us to understand better one fundamental aspect of our argumentative practice which has thus far not been adequately studied: responding to an objection.

2. *Possible ways of responding to an objection*

The issue I address in this paper concerns how an arguer deals with an important dimension of his dialectical obligations (Johnson, 2003). The situation I have in mind is this. The arguer has put forth an argument**[ii]** to what Govier (1999,

p.183) calls the non-interactive audience (an editorial in the local paper, an article in a scholarly journal), and someone has responded by raising an objection.
In mapping out the possible responses an arguer may make to an objection, I leave open the question exactly what counts as an objection. I shall also assume that the arguer believes (whether rightly or wrongly is not relevant here) that the objection is on target; the arguer does not think the objection involves a misreading of the argument.

Suppose then that A (the arguer) has put forth an argument, Arg1 = (P1,P2,P3—C)**[iii]** and that B responds by stating an objection, O. There appear to be five possible responses for the arguer.

Response 1: Arguer denies that O has force, and consequently "dismisses" O.
The arguer will have to say something along these lines: O does not pose a problem because R.

Schematically: ArgA -> O -> Rsp (A = O is not a good objection &R) -> Maintain (ArgA)

To explain, the arrow here signifies the temporal sequence: ArgA is followed by a response [that the objection is not a good one with support], and hence ArgA remains in force.

Comment 1: It seems to me that we expect the arguer needs to provide some basis for rejecting the objection. Let me cite an example where I think it is clear that the arguer failed to satisfy his dialectical obligation. Searle is a well-known advocate of Speech Act Theory – an approach to the analysis of language that stems from Austin. One of the basic doctrines of that theory is the there are "illocutionary forces." Saying "I do" in certain circumstances brings it about that I become a married person – it has that illocutionary force. In "Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?" (1964), Cohen attacked this doctrine in great detail. He raised a series of objections, which collected around one fundamental objection – that the doctrine of illocutionary force is indefensible. He argued that with the notions of meaning and implication on board, the idea of illocutionary force becomes unnecessary and was indeed problematic in a host of ways.
This objection – which I have only barely summed up – certainly seems to warrant attention. It is carefully reasoned. Cohen supports his point with careful attention to the text and to Austin's position. And, it seems to be a strong objection. It goes

to the very heart of the viability of Speech Act Theory. Hence, it would seem to be reasonable to expect Searle to respond to it. Here is what Searle said in response to a question from a student who asked why he had not responded: "I did not think that Cohen's article was worth answering directly. I answered it indirectly in an article you have obviously not read called 'Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts.'"**[iv]** Searle's indirect response occurs in a footnote on page 408 of that 1968 article, which reads as follows: "Cohen unfortunately seems to conclude that there are no such things as illocutionary forces. This conclusion seems unwarranted." Full-stop; that's it. Searle has perhaps started the task of meeting his dialectical obligations here, but it seems clear that his response falls short of being adequate. We want to know *on what grounds* Searle holds that the conclusion is unwarranted.**[v]**

Comment 2: There are *constraints* on what the arguer may say in his response to the objection. That is, in making his response, R, the arguer is not free to use any material whatsoever. Thus, if Pri is an element of R, it may not contradict or be inconsistent with any element of ArgA. That is one obvious constraint, and I suspect there are others – but what are these other constraints? How are they to be formulated? These are important issues that, so far as I am aware, have received very little attention in the literature.

Response 2: Arguer admits O has some force but claims that it is a minor point.

Schematically: Arg A -> O -> ConcedeO -> Rev(ArgA) -> ArgA*

The arguer concedes the objection but proposes a revised argument A* that preserves what I will call the integrity of the argument. In other words, the arguer believes that he can accommodate the objection with no more than minor modification in the argument.

Response 3: Arguer admits O is a strong objection and that the argument requires revision.

Schematically: ArgA -> O -> ConcedeO -> Rev(ArgA) -> ArgB

where ArgB is related to but different than ArgA. When there exists such a sequence
<ArgA -> O ->ArgB>, I will say ArgB is the *dialectical successor* to ArgA, and that the above schematizes the *dialectical history* of ArgA.**[vi]**

Response 4: Arguer admits the O is a defeater and that the argument cannot be revised.

Schematically: ArgA -> O -> ConcedeO is a defeater -> Abandon(ArgA).

Response 5: Arguer asks for Time out!
This response will ultimately reduce to one of the other four.

Under the press of an objection, then, the arguer has five options. At one end of the spectrum is the situation where the arguer claims that the objection has no force; hence, no change to the argument is required. At the other end of the spectrum is the situation where the arguer finds the objection insurmountable, as for example apparently occurred when Russell (1960) says that he found Wittgenstein's objection to his theory of judgment paralyzing – and abandoned the theory.

The more typical cases occur in the middle of the spectrum. In one circumstance, Response 2, the arguer admits that the objection has some force but claims that it does not require anything more than minor changes (cosmetic changes) to the argument. Suppose that ArgA is "cosmetically" altered in response to O1 to yield ArgB. Here I want to say that although ArgB is not *identical* to ArgA (because the argument has been changed, but only slightly); still the "essence" of ArgA has been preserved in ArgB. I shall refer to this "essence" as the *integrity* of the argument (as distinguished from the *identity* of the argument). Shortly, I shall present a preliminary account of this notion of argument integrity.
Another typical circumstance occurs when the arguer concedes the force of the objection and seeks to revise the argument accordingly Response 3. If the arguer chooses this option, the arguer has in effect conceded that the original argument cannot be preserved as it stands. The arguer must modify that original argument so that it is no longer vulnerable to that objection. In this case, neither the identity nor the integrity of the original argument will be preserved, yet the revised argument will bear some (more or less obvious) relationship to the original argument. It may then be referred to as its *dialectical successor*.
Thus if we are to have an adequate global account of what is required when an arguer responds to an objection, it will be helpful to have on hand these three related concepts: the identity of the argument; the integrity of the argument; a dialectical successor to the argument.**[vii]** For the most part, we are here (somewhat surprisingly, I think) in uncharted territory. To be sure, there is a

literature on the issue of argument identity. Most textbooks treat the issue of how to identify arguments, but this is not quite the same as the issue of when two arguments (two argument tokens)**[viii]** are in fact identical. There is an important ambiguity here that needs recognition. In one sense, the issue of individuation concerns how we count arguments: Is the text in question one argument or two? Wreen (1999) deals with this issue. The second sense of identity – the one I am interested in – surrounds the question: When does a change to an argument result in its becoming a different argument? None of the three positions that Wreen discusses in his 1999 paper (Copi's, Beardsley's, his own) regarding identity strike me as illuminating with respect to the issue I am dealing with here. I do agree in part with Wreen when he states:

The essence of an argument is neither the premises nor the conclusion … It's an inference that makes a proposition a premise and this makes a batch of propositions an argument – and an argument as defined by both Copi and Beardsley: premises related to a conclusion in a certain way. I am thus led to individuate arguments by inferences. (p. 887)

Though Wreen is interested in a different issue than the one that concerns me in this paper, the idea that the essence of the argument consists (at least in part) in the inferences seems to me headed in the right direction. I begin in the next section by offering an account of *argument identity* that in line with what Wreen says, but then move on to introduce the concept of the *integrity* of the argument.

3. *The identity of an argument*

Suppose the arguer changes his argument in response to an objection: how much of a change can be tolerated before we want to say that as a result of the revision that the argument now of offer is different from the one with which you began?

The view I favour is that the identity of an argument has two components: One is its propositional content, the propositions expressed in its premises and its conclusion.**[ix]** Two arguments, Arg1 and Arg2, are identical when they have the same propositional content: the same propositions supporting the same conclusion in the same way. The second component of argument identity is the so-called the inferential connection.**[x]** Two arguments might have the same propositional content but have a different inferential connection: <P1P2—therefore it follows probabilistically that C> is different from <P1P2—therefore it follows necessarily that C>. These are clearly not the same argument, though their propositional content is the same.

The notion of proposition invoked here is well-known in the logical literature: two different statements (or assertions) may express the same proposition. Viz: "John loves Mary," and "Mary is loved by John" are two different sentences expressing the same proposition. To be clear, it is not my view that arguments consist of propositions; rather an argument consists of assertions (statements claims) (2000, p.149). Still in sorting out the issues here, I find it useful to draw on the traditional distinction between a proposition, a sentence, and an assertion.**[xi]** The proposition *that John loves Mary* is expressed in both of the above sentences, either of which may be used to make an assertion (statement, claim).

Looking now at the propositional content of an argument: If one takes an argument <P1,P2,P3—C> and changes the order of the premises <P2,P3,P1—C>, it remains the same argument; its identity has not changed – only its manner of presentation. Or, take that same argument and change one of the premises, P2, from active to passive voice–P2*, one will not have changed the identity of the argument. Or, suppose that P1 is a compound statement –a conjunction– which is broken up into P1a and P1b. My sense is that the resulting argument <P1a&P1b,P2,P3—C> is still the same argument.

The argument's *identity* is thus a function of the meaning of the propositions, and their inferential relationships. As long as these features are preserved, the argument has not changed. Schematically, then, P1,P2,P3—C1 (Arg1) is the same as P4,P5,P6—C2 (Arg2) just so long as the inferential relationships (however these are to be identified) are the same in both, and as long as the propositional content of (P1,P2,P3) is the same as that of (P4,P5,P6), and C1 the same as C2.

Let's look now at some examples. I am going to present a sequence of variations on an argument in order to flesh out the above intuitions about what counts as the same argument, and when a very similar argument has replaced the original.

4. *Some examples*

To begin, consider this argument (Johnson & Blair, 2006):

Background: On this occasion, Senator Martin rose to defend Windsor against a perceived slur contained in Arthur Hailey's novel about the U.S. auto industry, *Wheels.* Hailey wrote of "grimy Windsor" across the border from Detroit, "matching in ugliness the worst of its U.S. senior partner." According to press reports, Martin (then Senator) responded:

When I read this I was incensed … Those of us who live there know that [Windsor] is not a grimy city. It is a city that has one of the best flower parks in Canada. It is

a city of fine schools, hard working and tolerant people. (p. 108)

It seems natural to reconstruct this argument as follows:
(A1)
C: Hailey is wrong to think that Windsor is a grimy city.
P1: Windsor has one of the best flower parks in Canada.
P2: Windsor is a city of fine schools.
P3: Windsor is a city of hardworking and tolerant people.

Clearly the order does not matter here as far as the identity of the argument. Whether the argument is expressed as above C/P1,P2,P3) or the order of the premises and conclusion comes in slightly different C/P2,P1,P3) sequence, the identity of the argument is not affected. *Changes in the order of presentation do not affect argument identity.*

Consider now a slight variation of this argument:
(A2):
C: Hailey is wrong to think that Windsor is a grimy city.
P1: Windsor is a city of fine schools.
P2: Windsor has one of the best flower parks in Canada.
P3: Windsor is a city of hardworking and tolerant people.

Here the order of P1 and P2 has changed; but the propositional content and inferential relationships remains unchanged. A1 and A2 are the same argument. Even if we were to change the wording of P3 slightly, yielding
(A3):
C: Hailey is wrong to think that Windsor is a grimy city.
P1: Windsor is a city of fine schools.
P2: Windsor has one of the best flower parks in Canada.
P3i: Windsor is a city of *tolerant and hardworking* people.
or
(A4):
P3ii: Windsor is a city of *hardworking, tolerant* people:

My sense is that (A1) is the same argument as (A2) which is the same as (A3) which is the same as to (A4). I wonder if others will agree that such variations in expression and order do not affect the propositional content; and that hence the identity of the argument is not affected.

Thus far I have been focusing on what might be considered presentational or rhetorical changes that do not affect the identity of the argument. I want next to consider whether there can be changes in content which, though they change the identity of the argument, might be thought not to change its real content. Consider this variation on the argument we have been featuring:
(A5):
Suppose that instead of P2, we have P2i:
P2i: Windsor has Jackson Park, one of the best flower parks in Canada.**[xii]**

I am inclined to think that this is the same argument, just with a bit more information. A1 is the same argument as A5, even though the content has changed slightly.

What about the case where the change results in the argument becoming slightly more specific? Let A6 be the same as A1, except:
(A6):
P2ii: Windsor has one of the best rose gardens in Canada.

P2ii seems to me clearly a different proposition than P2; its truth conditions are different. Hence I think A6 is a *different* argument than A5. But for the purposes of the issues being addressed, that difference appears minimal. Some might think (and I would be one) that while clearly a different argument, the essence of the original argument remains unaffected. So while A6 is not identical with A1, A6 could be said to have the same basic idea or essence as A1. I want to say that although A6 is not the same as A5 (and its variant), yet the *integrity* of A1 is preserved in A6.

At this moment, I cannot give a precise definition of this notion of integrity. My purpose here has been to attempt to create awareness of this property and differentiate it from identity. I can say that unlike identity, which is an inherent property, the integrity of the argument is an emergent property; that is, it is a property that emerges only when the argument is tested by objections.
It does seem to me that this addition to our conceptual apparatus for analyzing argumentative exchanges is important because the position I wish to develop about responding to objections can now be formulated using this notion: so long as the arguer is able to preserve the integrity of the argument while responding satisfactorily to an objection, then that objection is not a strong one.
Suppose that in the case of the example we have been monitoring, someone were

to object as follows: O= [It is not proper to refer to Jackson Park as a flower garden, because it consists primarily of roses]. Suppose that in response to that objection, the arguer were modify P2i (by substituting P2ii). The fact that the arguer was able to override the objection by making this slight change indicates that the objection was not a strong one.
To put the matter another way: if responding satisfactorily to the objection would force the arguer to change, not just the identity (the wording, the order), but the essence (the integrity) of the argument, then that indicates that the objection is a strong one. It is the nature of a strong objection to force a reworking (or perhaps even the abandonment) of the argument, whereas an objection that can be accommodated by a minor change in the argument is weak.

If, to respond to the objection, the arguer has to delete some of the propositional content of an argument, he or she has changed not just identity but also what I am calling the integrity. Suppose someone were to object that P2 is false, that the schools in Windsor have been below provincial standards for the last 5 years. Suppose the arguer accepts this as a valid objection that she cannot override and thus deletes the premise in question, leaving A7:
(A7):
C: Hailey is wrong to think that Windsor is a grimy city.
P1: Windsor has one of the best flower parks in Canada.
P3: Windsor is a city of hardworking and tolerant people.

I think we will agree that A7 is indeed a different argument; it is clearly not the same argument as A1, nor does it preserve the integrity of A1. It can, however, be described as a *dialectical successor* to A1. That is, A7 is revised version of A1 that resulted from a modification to that argument required in order to deal with a strong objection to P2.
Sometimes when an argument precipitates an objection, the arguer will revise the argument. This new argument – the dialectical successor – will then be met with a new objection, which the arguer will respond to with a revised argument. In such a case, we may want to refer to an argument as having a *dialectical history*. Schematically this development can be represented this way:
ArgA ->O1 -> Resp(O1)=ArgB -> O2 -> Resp(O2) -> ArgC -> O3 -> Resp(O3) ->ArgD

5. *The fertility of an argument*
Let me summarize the paper up to this point. I am attempting to develop

appropriate conceptual apparatus for helping us to understand better a fundamental aspect of our argumentative practice – responding to an objection – that has thus far not been adequately studied. In this paper, I have put forth a series of arguments to test intuitions about argument identity, reflection on which has introduced a distinction between the identity of an argument and what I have called its integrity. The identity of the argument is a function of its propositional content and the inferential relationships; so long as these are preserved, then even if the order and expression are different, the identity of the argument is not affected. Different from identity is what I have called the integrity of the argument – which is more elastic (that is, slight changes in the propositional content can be tolerated). An objection that requires only a minor modification in the argument may be said to be a weak objection; the modification made to accommodate it does not affect the integrity of the argument. Thus, the integrity of an argument is a property that emerges as a result of that argument's being subjected to testing or criticism.

I hope these some notions that may help us in coming to have a better grasp of the whole process of responding to objections. How will they help? To answer that question, let me return to the intuition with which I began: a good argument is one that can withstand strong objections. If this is correct, then a good argument is one that has faced challenges and been able to respond to them. Thus a good argument is one that has been able to maintain its integrity through its dialectical history. This leads to the following suggestion: That an *argument has a dialectical history is one indicator of its value*. For, as we all know, not all arguments elicit a response. Some will meet the fate Hume complained of with respect to his book which, he says, "fell still-born from the press."**[xiii]** The very fact that someone responds with an objection "says something" about the argument. It says that the argument has caught the attention of the respondent and that the respondent was engaged enough with the issue and the arguer's position to issue a challenge.

Now it may be suggested that some good arguments will generate no response at all. But I wonder if this really makes sense. Can the real strength of an argument be known without our seeing how the argument responds under the pressure of objections? Its ability to withstand criticism is, it would seem, a crucial test of its real value.**[xiv]**

This line of reflection suggests to me that an important but hitherto undetected property of an argument is its fertility. Some arguments are more *fertile* than others; that is, they generate more by way of response, more objections, more

comments, more criticism. To judge the fertility of an argument, then, we need to consider the quantity, the quality and the type of objections and other responses it occasions. We can then say that the dialectical environment that surrounds a fertile argument will be one that it densely populated. (This situation can easily be represented visually.) Thus, Wittgenstein's argument(s) against private language have displayed this quality of fertility.

The area surrounding this particular argument is densely populated, beginning with Ayer and Rhees responses in 1954, continuing on through to Kripke's 1982 "interpretation" of it, and beyond.**[xv]** To cite my own experience, the argument in *Manifest Rationality* for a dialectical tier of argument has been fertile, while my argument – in that same work – that argument be conceived as an exercise in manifest rationality has attracted very little attention.**[xvi]** Another question issuing from this line of reflection is: what role should the fertility of an argument have in assessing its merits?

6. *Conclusion*

In this paper, then, I have been focused on one aspect of an arguer's dialectical obligations – the task of responding to objections. I have noted that the commonplace that a strong argument is one that can withstand strong objections leads to some interesting ideas. I have attempted to introduce some conceptual apparatus that I think will help further work on these matters: the notion of the integrity of the argument – which I have distinguished from its identity; and the notion of a dialectical successor and an argument's dialectical history. And now more recently, the idea of an argument's fertility. I hope these ideas may prove helpful in further work on the really important question I have not addressed: What must the arguer do to discharge his/her dialectical obligations successfully? What is dialectical adequacy? Better still, what is dialectical strength?

NOTES

* Thanks to Trudy Govier, David Godden, Christian Kock and Bill Rehg who read earlier versions and provided helpful comments. Thanks also to my Outstanding Scholar Student, Michael Baumtrog, for his invaluable assistance.

[i] I made this distinction in (2003) and will develop it and present a fuller expression of these matters Dialectical Adequacy, forthcoming.

[ii] I am here concerned with argument as product, typically a text, what O'Keefe (1977) thinks of as Argument-1.

[iii] This is my way of referring to a basic argument structure in which three

premises (P1, P2, P3) are offered to support the conclusion – C. I abstract here from the question of what type of argument: convergent or linked, or some other type.

[iv] Thanks to my former student, Costa Kalfas, for obtaining this information. He contacted Searle via his web-site, and asked Searle whether he had responded to Cohen's objections (which at that time we were taking up in our Philosophy of Language class) and got the response printed here.

[v] I have no idea how typical this sort of situation is: i.e., the arguer responds by simply asserting that the objection is not a good one, without providing reasons for the assertion.

[vi] This is diagrammatically crude. Much more sophisticated is the approach developed by Yoshimi (2004). I think the approach taken by Yoshimi (and others) could be helpfully deployed in the situations I am discussing in this paper. And there is no denying the attractiveness of having a diagrammatic way of representing such complex interactions as I am envisaging here.

[vii] In am using "dialectical" here in the sense developed in Manifest Rationality (2000, 161) to describe the situation in which feedback from the Other has the potential of causing a change in the argument.

[viii] I shall assume that the reader can extrapolate from the token-type distinction, long familiar in the case of statements, to the case of argument.

[ix] There is this complication that there is always more to any argument than its explicitly stated premises and conclusion: I refer here all the tacit material: the missing premises, presuppositions, and implications.

[x] In Manifest Rationality, I referred to this as the (P+I) conception (75) and argued for a different approach – one which, not unlike Toulmin's approach (1958), disappears the idea of an inference as a link.

[xi] We need to distinguish the proposition, from the sentence in which it is expressed, and both in turn from the statement or assertion made by it on a specific occasion (Lemmon, 1968).

[xii] Thanks to Jean Goodwin for pointing out a mistake in an earlier formulation of this statement.

[xiii] Hume wrote that his book, A Treatise of Human Nature, "fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots."

[xiv] I think of Ellie's line in Showboat: "I got virtue but it ain't been tested." But how can Ellie know she has virtue if she hasn't been tested?

[xv] A Google search in June 2006 for Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument

yielded 227,000 hits; for Anselm's Ontological Argument: 91,900.

[xvi] I find this strange, because this latter argument is, to my own way of thinking, much more important. As I develop it, the idea of a dialectical tier emerges from reflection on the idea of argument as an exercise in manifest rationality.

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