

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - How Critical Is The Dialectical Tier? Exploring The Critical Dimension In The Dialectical Tier



## *1. Introduction*

About two years ago, one of the authors of this paper [i] once wrote another paper discussing the dialectical approach within Pragma-Dialectics and Blair and Johnson's informal logic theory. In a section of that paper, he made the following two points about Johnson's notion of dialectical tier: "The dialectical tier within an argument marks that the thesis is critically established, and a dialectical history of an argument reveals that the argument is critically developed." And "the requirement of manifest rationality can be regarded as requiring a process of critical testing for seeking the strongest or the most appealing reasons and better arguments" (Xie, 2008). Both points, unfortunately, brought back Johnson's negative comments in their later correspondence. Johnson's remark on the first point is "This is not clear to me", and on the second, "Not sure of this".

Besides the author's disappointment, still there are interesting topics emerged for further investigation. Why does Johnson disagree with this interpretation of his dialectical tier? And what is the relation between the dialectical tier and the critical scrutiny function in argument? In this paper we would like to dig deeper on these issues. We will begin with explaining the critical view of argument, and then re-examine the above two points based on a careful reading of Johnson's own views on the dialectical tier and manifest rationality. On that basis, we will then try to further explore the critical dimension within dialectical tier by bridging together the critical view of argument and Johnson's theory of argument. After that, we conclude with some remarks on exploring the critical dimension within the study of argument.

## *2. Critical View of Argument*

As preliminaries for the discussions in the remainder of this paper, we will start

by making it clear what we mean by “*critical*”. By this term we want to refer to a view of argument, which claims that arguing for a thesis involves taking into account not simply the reasons *in favor of* it but also (some) reasons *against* it. To further articulate this *critical* view of argument, we will unpack it into three specific but related levels in our understanding of argument.

First, it is nearly superfluous to say that arguments need to take into account reasons in favor of the conclusion; and this has already long been well recognized in our understanding of argument. However, there has also been another strand which values arguments as taking into account of reasons against the conclusion. As Keith has observed, “only the participation of the other in resisting, contesting and challenging the claims” can make argument distinguished from persuasion (Keith 1995, p. 172). And Meiland put forward a similar idea in this way, “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” (Meiland 1981, p. 26). These ideas, as we understand, could be phrased more briefly as this: arguments are *intrinsically or conceptually critical*.

Second, besides the reasons in favor of the conclusion, why should we bother to take into account reasons against it? The most natural answers are, to improve the strength of argument, by testing and detecting possible flaws in our ways of arguing, or/and to make a better case for the thesis defended in the argument, by rejecting opposing points of view and by weighing and balancing positive and negative considerations. To cite Scott’s words, arguments “must be extended in testing, not only for consistency, but also toward completeness” (Scott 1987, p. 68). That is to say, more specifically, to function persuasively or to better achieve its pragmatic and practical goals, the act of arguing should involve a process of critical scrutiny to seek for the strongest or most appealing reasons and better argument. Hence, not only the criticisms and other forms of reasons against the conclusion “relate to the creation of argument and the being of argument” (Scott 1987, p. 70), but also the arguments themselves are *generically and functionally required to be critical*.

Third, it has also been long acknowledged that a key indicator of argument’s cogency is how well or adequately it can, or actually does, take into account of reasons against its conclusion. Toulmin has endorsed this idea when he claimed that “a sound argument, a well-grounded or firmly-backed claim, is one which will stand up to criticism” (Toulmin 1958, p. 8). So does Perelman when he makes it

clear that “the strength of an argument depends...upon the objections; and upon the manner in which they can be refuted” (Perelman 1982, p. 140). The idea underlying these views is that arguments are *normatively appreciated to be critical*.

All these three points, that arguments are intrinsically or conceptually critical, generically and functionally required to be critical, and normatively appreciated to be critical, are the embodiment of the critical view of argument we are going to discuss in this paper. They are closely interrelated, but can be endorsed separately and differently by scholars in their diverse theories of argument. But, are we here just confusing, as many might be wondering, the famous distinction of argument as process and argument as product? We believe this is a fair but misleading question, but still some further clarifications are indispensable. Firstly, the critical view of argument we explained above is not some new conceptualization of argument, but, to some extent, a general and overall view or perspective, from which we could understand our practice of arguing by specifying or emphasizing some of its particular aspects or characteristics. In particular, the critical view of argument gives prominence to the critical scrutiny function of argument (i.e. through taking into account both reasons in favor of and reasons against its conclusion), and stresses some specific features related to this function (e.g. normatively appreciated to be critical). Given this clarification, we might say that a critical view of argument could be comparable to a *rhetorical* view of argument or a *dialectical* view of argument, which also focus on some particular function of argument and its related characteristics. Secondly, the distinction of argument as process/product is another, nevertheless quite different conceptual framework to understand our practice of arguing. It has a special focus on the different stages or phases of the production of our argument. Therefore, it is now easy to see that these are two distinct theoretical ways of analyzing argument. They are overlapped or interlaced framework since they are all about understanding our practice of arguing, but they could not be confused as the same. More specifically, the critical view of argument could be embodied in both the product and the process level of argument, as we have just spelt it out in this section. **[ii]**

### *3. How Critical is the Dialectical Tier?*

After a general clarification of what we mean by “critical”, now we turn to Johnson’s original notion of dialectical tier. According to his pragmatic theory of

argument, a complete or paradigmatic argument has an “illative core-dialectical tier” structure. Based on this new concept, an argument needs not only an illative core, in which the arguer puts forward the reasons that support the thesis in argument, but also a dialectical tier, in which the arguer anticipates and defends against existent or possible objections and deals with the alternative positions that are incompatible with or threatening to the establishment of the thesis (Johnson 2000, pp. 164-169). Moreover, within this dialectical tier, the arguer discharges his/her dialectical obligations and fulfills the requirement of manifest rationality, and thereby exhibits himself/herself as a competent practitioner of argumentation.

Considering that objections normally present challenges, difficulties or possible impediments to the argument’s achieving its purpose, and given that alternative positions usually bring the arguer some counter-considerations about his/her argument or conclusion, we can easily tend to understand both of them as materials negatively relevant to the argument, i.e. both of them function as reasons/considerations *against* the tenability of the conclusion in argument. Given this understanding, it will be so natural to link the dialectical tier with the critical view of argument. We can easily think that including the dialectical tier within an argument indeed shows that the conclusion is *critically* established, since it indicates so obviously our taking into account not only the reasons *in favor of* the thesis, but also (some) reasons *against* it.

This interpretation also appears to have some plausibility within Johnson’s own articulations in his theory. Firstly, Johnson claims explicitly that arguer must take account of objections and opposing points of view when constructing arguments (Johnson 1996b, p.107), holding that “they are not supererogatory efforts”, but some kind of “dialectical obligations” (Johnson 2000, p. 157). It is in this way that the need to discharge these obligations renders necessity to the presence of dialectical tier within the concept of argument, and consequently, arguments without dialectical tier are suggested to be regarded as “unfinished, incomplete” (Johnson 2000, p. 166). So it seems reasonable to say that Johnson has endorsed the view that arguments are intrinsically or conceptually critical. Secondly, Johnson also holds that “criticism and revision are both internal to the process of arguing. They are not externalities that may or may not happen...they are integral parts of the process of arguing” ... and “[in the practice of argumentation] ... the strength of the better reasoning, and that alone, has determined the outcome”

(Johnson 2000, pp. 157-160). So it seems likewise to be the case that Johnson approves the idea that arguments themselves are generically and functionally required to be critical. Thirdly, Johnson also believes that “a controversial thesis can not be adequately supported if its supports failed to surpass its objections and alternative positions” (Johnson 1996b, p. 107), and sees the ability of an argument to withstand objections and criticisms as a crucial test of its real value, “the test of the argument is a strong objection, the stronger the objection, the better the test” (Johnson 2007b). From this we could find as well that Johnson is apt to accept the idea that arguments are normatively appreciated to be critical. Based on these observations, can we then conclude, as we expected, that the notion of dialectical tier indeed embodies or manifests the critical view of argument? Here Johnson’s own answer is a negative one, as already hinted in our introduction, “not sure of this.” We might wonder, however, for what reasons does he think it is not sure? And where and why do the dialectical tier and critical view of argument go apart?

To answer these questions, we need to further reveal another part of the story in Johnson’s theory. That is, Johnson indeed intends to require that “the arguer responds to all materials, if possible” (Johnson 2001). By “all materials”, he requires the arguer to deal with positive and neutral materials which are simply questions or which only aim at clarification or understanding (Johnson 2001). Moreover, he still claims that “the arguer must respond even to criticisms which he believes (or knows) are misguided” (Johnson 1996b, p.108), or he/she must respond to all those objections “the audience is known to harbor, whether reasonable or not” (Johnson & Blair 2006, p. xv). Besides, he also believes that the arguer is obliged to respond an objection “even though he might well be justified in not responding to it.” (Johnson 2001) Or, “we would expect to hear how an arguer handles a well-known objection, even if it is not likely to cast serious doubt on the cogency of the argument” (Johnson 2000, p. 333).

By revealing these possibilities that in dialectical tier the objections which are neutral, misguided, unreasonable or unlikely to affect the cogency of our argument will all be dealt with, we have to admit, contrary to our expectation, that Johnson’s notion of dialectical tier does not embody our critical view of arguments, neither does the presence of dialectical tier really indicate that the conclusion is critically established. Within the critical view, although we value the process of critical scrutiny intrinsic in argument and truly appreciate the

constructive merits of reasons against the tenability of the thesis in question, only those reasons which are relevant to the establishment of our thesis or to the improvement of the strength of argument require and deserve our concern. In other words, we need to take account of reasons against our thesis, but we only do that subject to the purpose of seeking the strongest or most appealing reasons to make a better argument for our thesis in question. More specifically, the process of critical scrutiny only consists of weighing and balancing positive and negative reasons from which we can directly or indirectly gain improvements or revisions for our argument. However, materials like misguided, unreasonable objections and those which are unlikely to affect the cogency of our argument are essentially irrelevant, thus they have no constructive values with respect to the improvement of our argument. Therefore, within a truly critical view of argument, those materials do not require or deserve our concern to deal with in the process of critical scrutiny. Given this clarification, now it could be confirmed that, in spite of their *prima facie* similarities, Johnson's notion of dialectical tier does not accord with the critical view of argument.

But, we may still wonder, why does Johnson intend to include responses to those materials as internal to the process of arguing, even though responding to them would bring no revisions and betterments to our argument? Moreover, the efforts of dealing with those materials would even possibly and easily turn out to be a risk of wasting arguer's energy and cognitive resources, but why does Johnson still want to regard those efforts as obligatory but not supererogatory? To resolve these doubts, we need to further investigate Johnson's understanding and justification of dialectical tier. And by probing into these issues, we can also better reveal the deep discrepancies between dialectical tier and critical view of argument.

#### *4. Why the Dialectical Tier is not Critical?*

The notion of dialectical tier, needless to say, is one of the most controversial topics in recent argumentation studies, "no other concept in the recent literature on argumentation has attracted so much notice" (Leff 2003). Among a lot of disputes surrounding it, Johnson took pains to clarify, revise and justify his own ideas. We will in this section investigate his justification of arguer's dialectical obligations, which emerges as pivotal with respect to our current discussion. If there are no obligations incurred to the arguer to respond dialectical materials, there will obviously be no inclusion of dialectical tier within argument. And what

kinds of materials are in need of response in such a tier will surely depend on why and how these obligations are incurred.

In the development of his theory, Johnson used different strategies to justify dialectical obligations. At the very beginning, dialectical obligations come from the requirement of *sufficiency*. It is initiated from the consideration of, or the need of “defending your (own) argument” when constructing arguments (Johnson & Blair 1983, p. 195). Later it is required explicitly as “obligations” when he (and Blair) started to treat argumentation as dialectical (Johnson 1996b, p. 100). As he puts it, it is an “*aspect of sufficiency*” which makes arguer obliged to include defenses against actual and possible objections. Otherwise an argument will not only fail to be a good one because of being “in violation of the sufficiency requirement”, but will also be regarded as “incomplete” (Johnson 1996b, p. 100).

However, a few years later, Johnson proposed “*dictates of rationality*” as a related but slightly different justification for dialectical obligations. “If the arguer really wishes to persuade the other rationally, the arguer is obliged to take account of these objections, these opposing points of view, these criticisms”, and “if she does not deal with the objections and criticisms, then to that degree her argument is not going to satisfy the dictates of rationality” (Johnson 1996a, p. 354). But what kind of rationality is coming to dictate? Johnson believes that a “bare-bones specification of rationality” will be adequate and could allow him to develop his own theory of argument. It is “the disposition to, and the action of using, giving and-or acting on the basis of reasons” (Johnson 2000, p. 161). Based on this understanding, rational arguers are those who have “the ability to engage in the practice of giving and receiving reason” (Johnson 2000, p. 14). Accordingly, following the dictate of this rationality, arguers are required, obviously and naturally, to give (good) reasons, and only use (good) reasons, to justify or defend their thesis in the practice of argumentation. However, but why do we still need to, and even be obliged to, consider negative reasons, or to deal with objections and alternatives? Considering and dealing with them are obviously not only efforts of giving and using reasons, but indeed efforts of providing *more* reasons, and efforts of giving and weighing *different kinds of reasons*?

The answer was finally given, a few years later, when Johnson realized that “the idea of rationality alone cannot illuminate the practice of argumentation” (Johnson 1996b, p. 114). He then started to construct his new idea of argument as *manifest rationality*, with which he tried to characterize argument as “patently

and openly rational". More specifically, "it would not only be rational, it must also be seen to be/appear rational". By this characterization, he claimed that "participants in the practice of argumentation not only exercise their rationality but they need to be seen to be so doing" (Johnson 2000, p. 164). Furthermore, arguers are required to care about both "the inner reality and the outward appearance" of argument, and to "exhibit what it is to be rational" in a way of "to give reasons; to weigh objections; to revise over them or to reject them", because "all of this describes a vintage *performance* of rationality" (Johnson 2000, p. 163). This articulation of manifest rationality provides Johnson a better way to justify dialectical obligations: "if the arguer were obligated only by the dictates of rationality (rather than those of manifest rationality), then one might ignore criticism" (Johnson 1995, p. 260). Finally, "manifest rationality is why the arguer is obligated to respond to objections and criticisms from others, and not ignore them or sweep them under the carpet," because otherwise "it would not only not *be* rational; it would not *look* rational" (Johnson 2000, p. 164, italics original), and it would become "in most contexts, a failure not just of rationality but to make that rationality manifest" (Johnson 2007a).

At the end of this brief detour on Johnson's justifications of dialectical obligation, we come to the finding that his ultimate explanation and justification of dialectical obligation rely on his characterization of *manifest rationality*. It is by this requirement that we can incur dialectical obligations upon arguer and explain the necessity of dialectical tier. Moreover, based on these observations, our primary issue of probing into the discrepancies between dialectical tier and critical view of argument could also be better illuminated now. As Johnson has made it clearly, "The constraint I call manifest rationality requires that the arguer respond to all material, if possible. If there is an objection and the arguer doesn't respond to it, then even though he might well be justified in not responding to it, the argument will not have the appearance of rationality" (Johnson 2001). And it is "from the perspective of the requirement of manifest rationality, the arguer is obliged to respond even to criticisms that are regarded as misguided, because to ignore such criticisms compromises the appearance of rationality" (Johnson 2000, p. 270).

As indicated by Kauffeld, Johnson has assigned, by his characterization of manifest rationality, "the priority to rationality as the primary internal good realized through the activity of argumentation", thus "supposes *a priori* that



argumentation is governed by an overriding commitment to rationality which identifies its practitioners and dictates their probative obligations” (Kauffeld 2007). We agree with this analysis, and will further demonstrate that this is where Johnson’s dialectical tier and the critical view of argument start to diverge from each other. In our practice of argumentation, while the critical view of argument assigns the uppermost importance to the seeking for the strongest or most appealing reasons and better argument, Johnson gives priority to making manifest our rationality over the improvement of argument quality. In his theory, arguing means not only to persuade the other, but to “rationally persuade the other”. And “rationally persuade the other” requires not only the arguer to use good reasons or better argument, but at same time, to cherish rationality and to increase the amount of rationality in the whole world. In other words, in the process of arguing there is a more important underlying presumption that “the arguer and the critic have each *exercised reasoning powers*” (Johnson 2000, p. 162, italics added). Accordingly, it is by this reason we can better understand Johnson’s inclusion within dialectical tier of the responses to materials which are not directed or relevant to the betterment of argument. Because, “if the critic’s objections have been found wanting, then the arguer will have to exercise his reasoning powers to show this...” (Johnson 2000, p. 162). As a result, a judgment that an objection is misguided may have been well established, from which not only the arguer makes his rationality/reasoning power exercised and manifest, but also that his critic will learn something thereby improve his own rationality/reasoning power. As Johnson has envisaged, “if it turns out that criticism is easily responded to, then the critic will have learned that the criticism was not so good”, or “the respondent realized that the point of her criticism is not able to devastate the opponent, nor yet the argument” (Johnson 2001). And in this way, more importantly, “the participants are more rational and the amount of rationality has increased,” and in the end “the world becomes a slightly more rational place” (Johnson 2000, p. 162).

##### *5. Why not Make Dialectical Tier Critical?*

Although manifest rationality counts as the most essential groundwork for Johnson’s articulation and justification of dialectical tier, many argumentation theorists, strangely and interestingly, are apt to discuss Johnson’s notion of dialectical tier while brushing aside his idea of manifest rationality. Given that this idea actually explains where and why his theory and the critical view part their company, in this section we intend to scrutinize it further with a critical eye.

Johnson's justification of dialectical obligation by conceiving argument as manifest rationality is unique and theoretically coherent. If argument is really an exercise of manifest rationality which requires its participants to make their own rationality manifest and improved, and to make the amount of our rationality increased, then a dialectical tier is undoubtedly needed for our conceptualization of argument. And so do the arguers have obligations to respond all materials where there is any possibility to get our rationality manifest, exercised and increased. However, in order to make this line of justification more persuasive and adequate, we think still more developments or even revisions are needed. To achieve this goal, we will try to bridge and integrate the dialectical tier with the critical view of argument, in the following two respects.

The first aspect on which we want to cast our doubt is concerning the *rationality* at play in Johnson's theory. Johnson understood rationality as "the disposition to, or ability of using, giving, and-or acting on the basis of reasons", and accordingly "to be rational means to be able to engage in the giving and receiving of reasons" (Johnson 2000, p. 14). On that basis, argumentation is seen as an exercise of manifest rationality which is valued by its *virtu* of embracing, cherishing, increasing and exhibiting rationality (Johnson 2000, pp. 162-3). However, when we take into considerations of dialectical materials, no matter they are relevant or irrelevant, and no matter whether dealing with them leads ultimately to the revision of argument or to the exercises or improvements of someone's reasoning power, but do these efforts really make manifest the above kind of rationality and result in our being more rational in Johnson's sense? We suspect that by dealing with dialectical materials we do much more than that. First, as Ohler has observed, in considering criticisms and objections we are actually "putting *more* reasons at play" (Ohler 2003). Second, we would like to add, in responding them and revising our argument accordingly, we are not only making manifest our ability to give and receive reasons, but are also exhibiting our ability to *weigh, compare and balance* among different reasons. In other words, if there is some kind of rationality that has been embraced, cherished and exhibited in argumentation, it is definitely not just the disposition or ability of using, giving and acting on the basis of reasons. Therefore, for better capturing the reality with Johnson's notion of manifest rationality, we propose a richer sense of rationality as "the disposition or ability to be *responsive to reasons*". By this term we want to refer to a sense of rationality which is much more complex than Johnson's bare-bones specification of giving and receiving reasons. It will further include those

abilities of *quantifying* reasons, of *measuring* the quality/force of reasons, and of *regulating* the interaction among reasons. These are, in our view, what we really manifested in our dealing with dialectical materials. In particular, when arguers are required to make manifest their ability to be responsive to reasons, it is obvious that they will firstly be responsive to the *varieties* of reasons. This means they will not only provide reasons of their own, but also take into account reasons from the others (i.e. taking account of dialectical materials), and specifically, they will have to consider both reasons in favor of and against the thesis (i.e. dealing with objections/criticisms/ alternatives). Furthermore, they will in this process also be responsive to the *quality/force* of reasons, and to the *interaction* between different reasons. This means they will be able to weigh the force of different reasons, to value them differently with respect to strength, and to accept, improve or reject them accordingly, and at last, to balance among these reasons thereby to find the strongest or most appealing reasons and better arguments (i.e. revising and improving his arguments).

The second aspect we think in need of further development is related to the *normative* requirements generated by manifest rationality. Johnson has made great efforts, in his recent works, to specify what the arguer is actually obliged to do in order to make rationality manifest, i.e. the Specification Problem, and to resolve in which way we can judge that the arguer has adequately fulfilled these obligations, i.e. the Dialectical Excellence problem. Undoubtedly, Johnson's exploration on these issues is profound and elaborate, and his achievements are valuable. But a meticulous critic can still find something wanting in his solutions.

Firstly, Johnson ignores, to our understanding, the exploration on a more general normative aspect with respect to the ways of fulfilling the requirement of manifest rationality. That is, in argumentation it is required that rationality "must be seen to be done", but can we do that in an *unreasonable/irrational* way? Or, what is the right/acceptable way of making rationality manifest? This is a reasonable question. It was well hinted by Ohler's accusation that responding to criticisms which are believed or known to be misguided is "in one important sense of the word quite *irrational*" (Ohler 2003). And it was also perfectly embodied in van Eemeren's suspicion that we can even try to fulfill the requirement of manifest rationality "by arguing in what Perelman calls a 'quasi-logical', and sometimes fallacious way...[or] there may be techniques of purporting to deal with all criticisms while responding in fact only to those that are most easy to answer. You

can pretend to deal with all objections without actually treating them satisfactorily” (van Eemeren 2001). However, Johnson does not propose any *general* norms governing our ways of making manifest our rationality. We believe that this is an important issue in need of development, and more importantly, it is where many others started to misunderstand manifest rationality and thereby interpreted or criticized it as a *rhetorical* requirement (Hansen 2002, van Eemeren 2001). We will not here accuse Johnson of not providing any ideas on this issue, for you can find some relevant basic ideas underlying his recent discussions, that is, “firstly, choose the right dialectical materials, and then deal with them in an adequate way”. Nevertheless, what could count as *right* and *adequate* still leaves room for different interpretations and misunderstandings. And we suspect that, based on his own articulation of manifest rationality, he is not able to exclude those misunderstandings. If rationality only means an ability to engage in giving and receiving reasons, then an elaborate selection and arrangement of responses to some insignificant, unimportant or easy criticisms can still exhibit our being able to give and receive reasons. Moreover, when we use some sort of techniques to successfully pretend that we’ve already satisfactorily dealt with all objections, it likewise has the same effect that our arguing *appears* to be rational, or that our rationality is *seen to be done*. The point we want to indicate here is that there is a lack of normative constraints intrinsic to the ways of fulfilling the requirement of manifest rationality. And we believe a solution can be found if we bring closer Johnson’s dialectical tier and manifest rationality with the critical view of argument. If we could understand manifest rationality as essentially a similar requirement of seeking most appealing reasons or better argument, we will have to recognize that the process of arguing is not simply an accumulation of different or more reasons, nor is it a subtle construction by dealing with materials which are faked, deceitful or not genuine with respect to our thesis or argument. In other words, through such integration we can understand dialectical tier as an embodiment of critical scrutiny function, which will intrinsically set out some inner constraints for its process, and in this way it will help us to build up a better and clearly fixed fence that could keep many misunderstandings and interpretations away.

Secondly, Johnson’s specification of arguer’s dialectical obligations seems to be problematic. In his recent works, Johnson wants to develop a specific method which does not “all depend on context” (Johnson 2007a) to determine the arguer’s dialectical obligations. To realize this goal, he seems to have set out two

principles. On the one hand, it appears that he endorses the principle that arguer's obligations are incurred with respect to the dialectical material's capacity/strength to undermine the argument. This principle is incarnated in his ways of prioritizing dialectical materials (Johnson 2001) and in his ways of unpacking of "The Standard Objections" by the criteria of "proximity/strength/salience" (Johnson 2007a). The underlying motivation for this principle, obviously, is to detect the strength or viability of argument and thus to revise it for a better one. On the other hand, he also seems to endorse another principle that arguer's obligations are incurred with respect to the requirement of *making rationality manifest*. This principle is perfectly embodied in his requirement of dealing with neutral, positive, misguided and unreasonable materials, which might only be request for clarifications or with no effect on weakening or threatening the argument. The motivation for this principle, as we have already indicated, is to make our rationality exercised, exhibited and improved. But can these two principles be well integrated together in his theory? By requiring the responses to neutral, positive and misguided materials, it appears that Johnson explicitly makes the latter principle outweigh the former, for those materials are obviously not qualified as having any effect on detecting the strength and viability of the arguer's argument. Nevertheless, by claiming that "the intervention of the other is seen to lead to the *improvement of the product...a better argument, a more rational product*" (Johnson 2000, p. 161, italics added), and by explaining the reason for dealing with neutral and positive materials as 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*" (Johnson 2001, italics added), it seems that he has also reversely put his first principle over the second.

Despite this vague combination of two principles, many scholars also regard his second principle as misleading or harmful. As Adler has complained, it is "imposing excessively burdensome costs on arguers" (Adler 2004, p. 281). Similar to them, we are not well persuaded on this principle either. Firstly, we also have suspicions about the meaning or uses of dealing with misguided and unreasonable materials in the process of arguing. Secondly, even if dealing with neutral and positive materials can possibly result in our argument's being a better one, it is definitely not what usually and frequently happens in reality. And here again we want to urge an integration of Johnson's theory with critical view of argument. In doing so, we will suggest a hierarchy for those two principles, and thereby to

eliminate the vagueness and to revise his specification of dialectical obligations. Within a critical view, an argument is an embodiment of the process of critical scrutiny for the truth/acceptability of a thesis, thus we will take the arguer's foremost concern to be the seeking for most appealing reasons and better arguments. With this in mind, we should elevate the first principle over the second. That is, we should incur dialectical obligations only with respect to their relevance and capacity to our potential revisions or improvements of argument. Accordingly, we would like to suggest that we narrow down the scope and contents of dialectical obligations, by discarding those irrelevant, unreasonable, misguided or neutral materials, with which if we deal we can only make some clarifications or corrections of the others, or can only make our rationality exhibited, exercised. In other words, by the act of arguing we rationally and critically justify our thesis, and in the same process at the same time, we also make our ability manifest and the whole world more rational. But this *manifest aspect* comes as spontaneous and secondary. We do not need to intentionally exercise or perform that ability by taking every chances or possibilities, especially when some of them will bring no benefits with regard to our argument under consideration, and some of them will sometimes even result in detours and hindrance. To be brief, the search for more appealing reasons or better argument should outweigh the exhibition of our ability to reason and argue, and the justification of one thesis in question should surpass the desire of *manifestness* of our rationality. Actually, realizing the former will simultaneously realize the latter, while asymmetrically, realizing the latter will normally and easily go beyond the scope of the former.

#### *6. Conclusion: Exploring the Critical Dimension within Study of Argument*

In this paper we started with a curiosity to probe into the relationship between dialectical tier and the critical scrutiny function in argument. By a careful reading of Johnson's theory, we disconfirmed our conjecture that the inclusion of a dialectical tier in argument means the thesis is critically established. However, we also urged to bridge Johnson's theory and the critical view of argument, and thereby to make dialectical tier critical in nature. It is, to some extent, a promising proposal for the improvements of his theory, as well as the resolutions of some theoretical problems.

Based on this case study of Johnson's theory, we will conclude this paper by claiming that the critical view of argument is important and promising, and more

serious and thorough study should be done on the critical dimension within our study of argument. Here by *critical dimension* we refer to those theoretical aspects that are developed from the endorsement of critical view of argument. What are those aspects? And what are the issues which will emerge as pivotal in those aspects? Bringing forward a comprehensive framework will go beyond the limit of this paper, here we can only sort out some important theoretical questions which deserve our better reflections.

What are the underlying assumptions or justifications of the critical view of argument? The arguers as fallible? Or/and with a fallibilist attitude? Or/and every thesis is fallible? Or/and every argument is vulnerable? What are their implications in our theories of argument?

How is the function of critical scrutiny performed? What is the mechanism underlying the interaction of different reasons, especially, between reasons *for* and *against* (such as in conductive argument)? By what principles or methods can we judge some of them outweigh the other?

How is the critical dimension embedded differently in different theories of argument? For what reasons? How can we use critical dimension as a better perspective to further indicate their theoretical divergences, and also to better bridge them?

## NOTES

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**[ii]** Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions for our revisions here. And we would also like to respond to their criticisms with regard to our 'mischaracterizing' of Johnson's theory. That is, it seems that we are using our process-oriented understanding of argument to unjustly misinterpret and criticize Johnson's ideas, which are, as he himself has clearly claimed, product-oriented. Our responses will consist of the following three points. First, as we have already clarified in the second section, the critical view of argument which we proposed and articulated in this paper is not process-oriented or a process-conception of argument, but a general view or perspective of argument which could be embodied in both the process and product of argument. Second, although Johnson's view of argument, generally speaking,

could be regarded as product-focused, we believe that his theory has also clearly and inevitably involved “an appreciation of argument as a process” (Johnson 2000, p. xi). Even though Johnson himself does endorse explicitly the argument as process/product distinction, and claimed that his theory is product-oriented, his discussions of many issues within his theory are still falling back on the process level of argument. For example, his articulation of manifest rationality is unpacked into the process of arguing, and his resolution to the fundamental Specification Problem (of dialectical obligations) is based on a division of the process of arguing into “phases of constructing argument and revising argument” (Johnson 2001). Third, in this paper the topics we mainly discussed are the idea of rationality, the justification of dialectical obligation, and the normative requirements of incurring dialectical obligations, none of them are restricted to the product or process level of argument. Neither do our comparison and integration between Johnson’s ideas on dialectical tier and the critical view of argument. Therefore, given the above three points, it is now easy to see that it might be inappropriate or misleading to consider the merits and arguments in this paper using the framework of argument as product/process distinction, since it is a different or, to some extent, irrelevant framework. And it is not really the case that we are just reading Johnson’s argument-as-product ideas from an argument-as-process view

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