

Wohlrapp on the Criterial Side of Validity: Some Comments

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Abstract: Harald Wohlrapp's *The Concept of Argument* makes a significant contribution to argumentation theory by proposing a new approach to thinking about arguments and argumentation that centrally proposes a criterion of validity. In this paper, I will focus on some issues and difficulties with that criterion.

Résumé: *Le concept d'argument* de Harald Wohlrapp apporte une contribution significative à la théorie de l'argumentation en proposant une nouvelle approche de la réflexion sur les arguments et l'argumentation au centre de laquelle se trouve un critère de validité. Dans cet article, je me concentrerai sur certaines questions sur ce critère et certaines difficultés qu'il soulève.

Keywords: *thetic validity; objection*

1. Introduction

In *The Concept of Argument*, Harald Wohlrapp has proposed a new approach to argumentation analysis. His conceptual system features aspects that will be familiar to many argumentation theorists, but contains as well some important genuinely new or comparatively less familiar concepts, such as *orientation*, *frame*, and *thetic validity*. His theory is illustrated in great detail by its application to argumentation about issues such as the debate concerning the status of the fetus, the case made by Columbus for financing his voyage to India, the debate in the French parliament about what to do with the deposed King Louis XVI; and the controversy in modern chemistry about the explanation of combustion.

In my view, Wohlrapp has advanced not so much a new *concept* of argument as he has proposed an original *theory* of argumentation that has many layers and brings something new to the table, as they say. I will here focus on one dimension of the theory—what Wohlrapp refers to as “the criterial side of validity.”

2. Validity

Wohlrapp notes that the key elements of his notion of validity are justification, absence of open objections, understanding, forum and new orientation. His concept of validity clearly differs from the understanding of that term that most North American argumentation scholars would presumably have, namely: An argument is valid just when it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. For Wohlrapp, by contrast, ‘argumentative validity’ refers *not* to the validity of an argument, but denotes the *quality of a thesis* that is sufficiently backed by arguments:

Argumentative validity is the quality of a conclusion, acknowledged in the forum, of conveying or consolidating, as the result of objection-free justification, insights into a domain in question and thus of [being] suitable as a new orientation for action in this domain (p. 270¹).

Here the string following “and thus” may be read as a definition of ‘validity’, while the rest states criteria for being argumentatively valid. This criterial (or objective) side of validity constitutes but one aspect of a valid thesis; the other (subjective) aspect expresses that an objection-free justification for a thesis conveys, or consolidates, insight into a pertinent domain.

Importantly, according to Wohlrapp, both the objective and the subjective side must be acknowledged in the forum. Moreover, to whichever thesis the predicate “is valid” applies, it will not be the conclusion that was raised at the start of a discussion, but rather the conclusion that results from the dialogical interaction between a proponent and an opponent party. Finally, a thesis for which no justification is offered does not qualify as a candidate for a valid (i.e., objection-free) thesis.

Wohlrapp also proposes a criterion for what he calls “thetic validity”: “A thesis is valid relative to the state of arguments that have been introduced for and against it in the dialogue, if no open objection against it remains” (p. 280). Some may be uneasy about this terminology. For in logic and argumentation theory, the term ‘valid’ has historically been associated with formal deductive logic, where it designates an argument whose premises cannot be true while the conclusion is false. From this passage, we see that Wohlrapp’s theory takes as its default setting a dialogical situation in which one party advances and supports a thesis, and the other party raises doubts and questions. (Notice

¹ Page numbers refer to the pages of *The Concept of Argument*.

that his use of the term ‘validity’ is similar to that of Habermas (1984) in his *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. 1; pp. 23-42, esp. pp. 38-39.)

The crucial question here is: “What is an *open* objection?” Wohlrapp writes: “Objections raised by an opponent that have not been refuted or integrated by the proponent’s argument are called ‘open objections’” (p. 279). This indicates the kind of flow between the dialogue partners, with A putting forth a thesis and defending it with an argument, and B responding. It is envisaged that B will raise objections to the argument, and that A responds to these objections, in one of two ways. Either by “refuting” the objection—showing that the objection does not in fact impair the argument—or by integrating the content of the objection into a revised version of the argument or thesis (see pp. 233-235). In the case where this does not occur, the objection is said to remain open. An argument facing an open objection is not valid.

I now offer a series of comments on the proposed criterion.

Comment 1: As noted, the principle is formulated for the *dialogue* setting. However, a great deal of our practice of argumentation occurs in a different setting, where the audience is what Govier (1999) calls “the Noninteractive Audience.” The extension or application of this principle to this setting needs to be thought through. Let me enlarge a bit on this.

In a dialogue setting, the arguer will normally seek to respond to just those objections that were raised by his interlocutor. But when the arguer has directed her argument to this other type of audience, the situation becomes more complicated. After all, since there is no interlocutor to agree that the response to the objection is satisfactory, the arguer must herself undertake to bring into the dialogue the voices of disagreement, or opposition. This moment is typically signaled by some such phrasing as: “Now someone will object that....” And then the arguer herself offers a response. (Such material comprises what in *Manifest Rationality* I have called “the dialectical tier” (Johnson, 2000, pp.164-173).

But if there is no interlocutor who can say: “Yes, I agree that your response closes the objection (settles the matter),” can one still apply Wohlrapp’s principle? Indeed, one can, for Wohlrapp does not let validity depend on the agreement of the objector (to the effect that the proponent’s reply closes the objection). Rather, it suffices that the proponent does reply to the objection and the objector has no counter-reply, as long as the objection-

free justification of the thesis is acknowledged in the forum.

In cases where the proponent signals agreement with the objection, it seems important to recognize that *mere* agreement remains distinct from the other party's *reasoned* agreement. For instance, the respondent might well capitulate too readily, and so might agree that the objection has been removed, when a colleague standing close by says: "Not so quickly."

How well the arguer is able to respond to objections that have been raised (or to discharge his/her *dialectical obligations*, in my terminology, Johnson, 2000) will play a significant role in our judgement on the success of the argumentation. If it can be shown that the arguer has not responded to an objection she *should* have responded to, then her response is not satisfactory. In Wohlrapp's terminology: the objection remains open; hence, the thesis is not valid.

Comment 2: In Wohlrapp's formulation, I believe the term 'objection' must be understood to function as a *generic term* for various types of response that one may direct at an argument. For instance, the proponent of a thesis may be confronted not only with an objection, but a rebuttal, or a counterargument, or a refutation, or a criticism, etc. An objection, in this broad sense, constitutes an obstacle to the proposed thesis counting as valid. If that obstacle is removed (e.g., by refuting the objection, or by integrating the objection), then the thesis may be said to be valid. (The contrary is also possible: the arguer cannot defeat or integrate the objection into the argument, in which case the argument is not valid.)

On p. 279, we read: "On the opponent's side, we find the objections to the theses or to any of the proponents' arguments, as well as any possibly presented reasons for these objections." This seems to imply that something can be an objection in either of two ways: an objection (a simple assertion); an assertion supported by reasons.

On p. 280, Wohlrapp writes: "I anticipate three obvious objections and will try to refute them." Then there are three examples of what Wohlrapp considers an objection:

- O1 "*Objections are always possible.*"
- O2 "*Should there be an open objection, this is most likely only temporary.*"
- O3 *The absence of open objections is not so much a criterion for validity as an indication of a research monopoly.*

In the case of O1, the objection is an unsupported claim or assertion. With O2, the objection seems rather more like an explanation; and with O3 the objection seems to be an alternative possibility.

The term ‘objection’ is never defined, so far as I can determine. (This seems unfortunate since it plays such a crucial role in Wohlrapp’s theory). The closest Wohlrapp comes to a definition of ‘objection’ is on page 154: “Similar to a justification, a criticism may require a sequence of steps. In that case the single step is an ‘objection’.” This text suggests that a simple assertion can qualify as an objection. However, there are other passages where ‘objection’ seems to function differently. For instance, the heading on p. 153—“Section 4.4 Criticizing: Objection and Refutation”—suggests that ‘objection’ should be distinguished from ‘refutation’ and ‘criticism.’ But just how they would differ is far from clear to this reader.

These reflections lead me to the conclusion that Wohlrapp’s concept of objection may be problematic because no definition of this pivotal concept is provided. As well, I have argued that the term ‘objection’ has both a generic sense (as a term that refers to many types of response) as well as a more specific one. (Let me add that neither of these findings seems to me a grievous threat to Wohlrapp’s theory.)

Comment 3: An important question for Wohlrapp’s theory is: When is an objection closed? One way an objection can be closed is when its content has been integrated into the argument and/or thesis. Alternatively, it would seem that an objection that has not been integrated is closed under the following conditions:

- 1: The interlocutor has posed O (the objection);
- 2: The arguer responds: O is not a good objection because P1 & P2 & P3 (premises);
- 3: The arguer is entitled to assert P1, P2, P3.
- 4: The arguer’s response shows that O is not a good objection.

I now offer some comment on these conditions.

Regarding condition 2: I do not have a complete account here but, for starters, it seems clear that no premise can be invoked in the premise-set that presupposes the falsity of O or the truth of C (conclusion); otherwise, we would have a case of *begging the question*.

Regarding condition 4: The question here is how to operationalize this condition. What if the arguer claims that R shows that O fails, and has strong reasons in support but the Interlocutor demurs? What if the interlocutor is just plain stubborn and refuses? Can the acknowledgement of the forum suffice in the presence of such an interlocutor?

In the discussion of all these matters, I want to suggest that it might prove helpful to have recourse to the idea of the *integrity* of the argument. In my “Responding to Objections” (2009), I introduced the following idea: If, in order to respond adequately to the objection, the arguer has to delete (or change fundamentally) material, then he or she has changed not just the identity, but as well the *integrity* of the argument. It seems clear that for Wohlrapp’s approach to work, it must be the case that in responding to any objection, the arguer must preserve the *integrity* of the argument. If the arguer has to change not just the identity, but the *integrity*, of the argument in order to meet the objection, then that objection shows that the argument is not thetically valid.

Comment 4: In Wohlrapp’s theory, validity is not an *inherent* property of the argument (as with the traditional concept in formal logic). Rather, Wohlrapp’s conception is *dialectical*. A thesis may be valid relative to a particular state of argumentation, but can then lose its validity as a pertinent objection is raised, only to regain validity when a modification of the original argument and/or thesis integrates (or responds to) the objection. So validity here is a dynamic property, a function of the current state of discourse. An objection can be open at time t_1 and closed at t_2 . I believe that this feature of Wohlrapp’s theory captures nicely what in fact transpires in argumentative practice.

Comment 5: I move on now to a different issue: What happens if there are no objections, no responses? This is perhaps the most common outcome. Then it would be (trivially) true that there are no *open* objections, because there are no objections. Can such an argument therefore be valid? This seems to be rather counterintuitive. Indeed, one might as well conclude that such a thesis is just plain uninteresting, or invalid. To be sure, many arguments enter the marketplace of ideas and debate, but engender no response. One thinks perhaps of Hume’s *A Treatise on Human Nature*, which, he says, “fell still-born from the press” (though that situation has changed over time). This consideration suggests that, just as mere agreement by an opponent cannot suffice for argumentative validity in a strong sense, the

mere absence of objections cannot do so either. But in Wohlrapp's theory of argument, it seems that if there *are* no objections, then the thesis will be deemed valid. This seems to be an unhappy result.

3. Conclusion

The Concept of Argument makes an important contribution to our understanding of argumentation. I have offered some reservations, along with tentative suggestions for how they might be dealt with. Wohlrapp's proposal on the criterial side of validity is an important move in the right direction.

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