

# Johnson on the Metaphysics of Argument

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper responds to two aspects of Ralph Johnson's *Manifest Rationality* (2000). The first is his critique of deductivism. The second is his failure to make room for some species of argument (e.g., visual and kisceral arguments) proposed by recent commentators. In the first case, Johnson holds that argumentation theorists have adopted a notion of argument which is too narrow. In the second, that they have adopted one which is too broad. I discuss the case Johnson makes for both claims, and possible objections to his analysis.

**KEY WORDS:** deductivism, formal deductive logic, kisceral arguments, natural language deductivism, Ralph Johnson, the metaphysics of argument, visual arguments

Ralph Johnson's *Manifest Rationality* is an impressive book. It is notable for its breadth, its mastery of the argumentation literature, and its ambitious attempt to formulate a theory of informal logic which overcomes the problems he identifies in alternative accounts. The heart of Johnson's theory is a definition of argument that distinguishes an illative core (composed of premises and a conclusion) and a dialectical tier. These two components are distinguished because Johnson wants to expand informal logic's traditional focus on the illative core and provide an account of informal logic that better recognizes the dialectical features of argument. Johnson's own commitment to dialectical obligations continually informs his own discussion, which pays a great deal of attention to competing views, to objections to the views that he defends, and to possible objections he anticipates. Johnson's willingness to engage so many other commentators is one of the principal strengths of his book, which is a major contribution to both informal logic and argumentation theory more generally.

In the present paper, I want to contribute to the dialectic in which Johnson participates by responding to two aspects of his discussion.<sup>1</sup> Though I agree with many of his claims, the two aspects I will focus on are aspects I want to take issue with. The first is his critique of my own defense of deductivism in Groarke (1992). The second is his theory's failure to make room for species of argument which are far removed from the paradigm which is the focus of his own definition. As Chris Tindale has already noted in his contribution to this discussion, they include visual,



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gestural and kisceral arguments, which have been proposed by commentators like Gilbert (1997), Birdsell and Groarke (1996), and Willard (1989).

The two aspects of Johnson's theory I will address might both be described as concerns about a 'metaphysics of argument' understood as an attempt to establish what kinds of arguments there are (as metaphysics proper is an attempt to establish what kinds of things there are).<sup>2</sup> In the first case, Johnson's discussion suggests that deductivism assumes a metaphysics of argument which is too narrow, reducing all argumentation to one kind of argument (in this way embracing 'monism'). In the second case, Johnson's theory implies that argumentation theorists adopt too broad a metaphysics which countenances too many kinds of argument (and in this way embrace an untenable pluralism). Johnson's own theory can be seen as an attempt to find a middle point between these two extremes which countenances more species of argument than deductivism but fewer than theories like Gilbert's (which allows many arguments which radically diverge from his written verbal paradigm). While it is impossible to definitively settle the issues that Johnson's discussion raises here, I will argue that there are good reasons for doubting his account, and that much more would have to be said to establish (or to definitively refute) his point of view.

#### 1. DEDUCTIVISM, FDL AND NLD

This is not the place for a detailed elaboration of deductivism. For that, the reader is referred to Groarke (1992), which Johnson discusses, to Gerritsen (1994) and, more recently, to Groarke (1999b). The most striking feature of Johnson's critique of such views is the extent to which he associates deductivism with 'FDL' – Formal Deductive Logic. There are obvious historical reasons for this, but it is important to recognize that this connection is not a necessary one. One must expect a deductivist to have an interest in FDL, but the deductivism that I and other argumentation theorists (most notably pragma-dialecticians) have embraced cannot be assimilated with the deductivism which has sometimes characterized the history of FDL, for two important reasons. First, because this deductivism replaces a technically defined account of validity with a non-formalized understanding of the meaning of validity. Second, because it does not propose soundness as a sufficient criterion for distinguishing good and bad arguments.

This second point warrants further explanation. Historically, formal logic has been associated with the notion that a good argument is (i) valid and (ii) 'sound.' An argument is valid if it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false (if the conclusion 'follows necessarily' from the premises). An argument is sound if it is valid and has true premises. There is something to soundness when it is proposed as a theoretical ideal

which approximates good argument, but it is a concept which is of very limited practical utility in the assessment of natural language argumentation, for the premises which are employed in such reasoning cannot usually be separated into two clear sets of statements, one we label 'true' and one we label 'false.' More frequently, natural language arguments in real life contexts employ premises that are only probable, plausible, or acceptable. Sometimes when one deals with contexts like labour disputes they may be acceptable from one point of view and not another, though it is difficult to definitively decide between these opposed points of view.

In view of the complexities of natural language argument and the differences that distinguish FDL and the deductivism I and some other argumentation theorists have defended, it may be useful to call the latter 'Natural language Deductivism,' making it a species of NLD rather than FDL. In view of this distinction, one cannot undermine NLD by pointing to the limitations of present-day FDL. It would be difficult to dispute Johnson's judgment that the standard formal accounts of validity and soundness do not, at least in their present state of development, constitute an adequate theory of good and bad natural language argument (and may never do so), but this does not undermine NLD, for it is not defined by the technical accounts that FDL implies.

The defense of deductivism that Johnson criticizes – Groarke (1992) – was written as an answer to Govier's (1987) rejection of deductivism. In his answer to my critique of Govier, Johnson criticizes my own failure to respond to all of her examples. This was not, however, necessary, for the NLD approach to argument is a completely general one which can *in principle* be applied to all examples. Given any argument composed of premises P and a conclusion C, it interprets the argument as a deductively valid argument. In cases where this is not obvious, NLD ascribes to the argument an implicit premise which makes the argument deductively valid (thus the NLD that I and others have defended is, in Govier's words, a 'reconstructive' deductivism). The implicit premise is determined in the same way that one determines implicit premises in other cases – by asking what it is plausible to suppose has been assumed in the context in question (something which can be assessed using pragma-dialectical rules of communication, as elaborated in Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992)). If no other implicit premise seems appropriate, NLD includes as an implicit premise the conditional 'If P, then C.' In such a case it can be said that this is a statement the arguer must be committed to, for they could not conclude C on the basis of P if they reject it.

In the process of identifying the deductive form of an argument, NLD will often identify an argument schema it instantiates, though the schemata in question are defined informally rather than formally, and tend to be more complex than schemata which are defined formally (as in the case of two wrongs reasoning, which is discussed as an example in Groarke (1999b)). Once NLD has identified a deductive version of an argument and any

standard schema it instantiates, its assessment of the argument is founded on the principle that a good argument is a deductively valid argument with acceptable premises, a principle which suggests that the argument that has been identified must be assessed by assessing the acceptability of its premises. In practice, the assessment of everyday reasoning which NLD promotes tends, therefore, to emphasize the assessment of premise acceptability rather than validity. This means that the argument assessment NLD promotes must, at the practical level, deal with a great many complexities which lie beyond the kinds of considerations which are formalized in standard FDL.

An example may illustrate how NLD works in practice. Consider the following argument, which Govier originally suggested as a counterexample to deductivism: 'Roses are red, violets are blue; therefore Ed loves Sue.' In keeping with Johnson's point of view, this is an artificial argument precisely because it is difficult to imagine it having a place in dialectical exchange, but that is another matter. In the present context, it is enough to suppose that someone does propound the argument seriously (and not as a joke or a piece of nonsense). In such a context, the NLD approach suggests that we reconstruct the argument in a way that recognizes it as a deductive argument, and that we do so by trying to identify some implicit premises that we can attribute to the arguer. Given the peculiarity of the case, there is no obvious link between the premises and the conclusion that the arguer depends on, other than the belief that 'If roses are red and violets are blue, then Ed loves Sue.' NLD will thus identify this as an implicit premise in the argument.

Once this implicit premise is recognized, the argument is a deductive argument which can be judged by considering the acceptability of the premises. Of course the problematic premise in this case is the implicit premise 'If roses are red and violets are blue, then Ed loves Sue.' This is on the face of it an unacceptable premise and it is difficult to imagine why anyone would accept it. In Groarke (1992) I could only think of one possibility: that the arguer is a logician who believes in a material implication theory of conditionals and that the consequent of the conditional ('Ed loves Sue') is true. In such a circumstance, one might defend the conditional 'If roses are red and violets are blue, then Ed loves Sue' as true (and thus acceptable), and the argument as a good argument that illustrates some of the peculiarities of propositional logic. One might imagine a dialectical context for such an argument in an introductory course in logic.

If this analysis seems strained, its artificiality is due to the artificiality of the example Govier used to try and disprove deductivism, not the nature of NLD. If someone in real life does forward the argument 'Roses are red, violets are blue, so Ed loves Sue,' then they must be implicitly committed to the claim that 'If roses are red and violets are blue, Ed loves Sue' and it is entirely appropriate that one ask why one should accept this condi-

tional. I suggested a possible reason which does not justify Johnson's suggestion that:

Here one wants to say, 'Just what in the deductivist policy requires us to undertake an investigation of the arguer's theory of implication?' That is far from clear. In order to pursue a deductivist policy (a la Groarke), one must first of all investigate the arguer's beliefs about the theory of implication. This is likely to make the task of evaluating an argument almost impossible. The task of argument analysis is difficult enough without adding to the critic's burden the task of deciphering the arguer's theory of argument (76).<sup>3</sup>

In answer to these remarks it can be said that NLD does not suggest that someone evaluating an argument must always investigate an arguer's theory of implication. Rather it suggests that one must always assess natural language arguments by asking whether the explicit and implicit premises/assumptions of the argument and the arguer are acceptable. In the case sketched, this entails questions about an arguer's theory of implication, but this is only because this is what seems to explain why they accept the implicit premise which has been identified. This is an appropriate issue to address in the context in question, though it will normally be otherwise.

Of course, it is one thing to explain NLD and provide this example of NLD analysis. It is another to elaborate the theory in detail and convincingly show that it should be accepted. It is not difficult to generalize its approach so that it can be applied to all arguments – including so called 'inductive' arguments (see Groarke (1995) and Louis Groarke (2000) for an argument that this was Aristotle's approach to induction). But even if one grants that the approach can be generalized, one might still question whether it is the best approach to argument. In answer to this question I have argued elsewhere that NLD has a number of advantages over alternative approaches to the assessment of ordinary arguments (see Groarke, 1999a and 1999b). Among the most prominent, I would list its ability to avoid thorny questions about the deductive/non-deductive distinction which arise when one develops different methods for dealing with these two kinds of argument. Because such methods often leave it unclear whether a particular natural language argument should be interpreted as deductive or not (because such arguments are often open to both interpretations), they often make it difficult to determine how argument assessment should proceed. Another advantage of NLD is its reconstructive commitment to implicit premises which serve the dialectical goals of argument by unearthing key assumptions that need to be weighed in establishing or criticizing an argument. A third advantage of NLD is its ability to show the affinities between natural language argument and variants of FDL (though not in a way that establishes FDL as an adequate theory of natural language argument).

But these are matters for discussion elsewhere. In the context of *Manifest Rationality*, the important question is whether there are adequate answers to Johnson's objections to the NLD I have proposed. It is in this regard

worth saying that one of the strengths of Johnson's book is his attempt to clearly delineate adequacy conditions for theories of argument (see pp. 52–56), conditions which can then be used to judge the various theories which have been proposed. In the case of NLD, he argues that deductivism is an unsatisfactory theory because it fails to recognize that there can be good arguments for and against a given position (and so violates adequacy condition 3), and fails to recognize that arguments exist in a continuum from weak to strong (and so violates adequacy condition 4).

Putting aside the question whether these are legitimate criticisms of FDL, the summary I have already elaborated should make it clear that they don't apply to NLD. The problems with Johnson's claim that deductivism violates adequacy condition 4 can be illustrated with the argument, 'X must be guilty of the crime because witnesses have testified that they saw X commit it.' NLD, which is a reconstructive deductivism, will identify this argument as the deductive argument:

Premise: Witnesses have testified that they saw X commit the crime.

Implicit premise: The witnesses are telling the truth.

Conclusion: X is guilty of the crime

This makes the strength of the argument variable, for the acceptability of the premise and the implicit premise will vary, depending on the circumstances. If there are few witnesses or unreliable witnesses then the implicit premise will be weak and its weaknesses will be reflected in the strength of the conclusion. If the witnesses are many or extremely reliable then the argument will be strong (but not definitive, as dishonesty is always a possibility). How well it establishes the conclusion will vary depending on the plausibility of the premises. Because NLD makes the strength of an argument a function of the acceptability of its premises and acceptability is variable, it allows for a spectrum of strengths that extend from weak to strong.

The same example can illustrate how NLD allows for circumstances in which there are good arguments for and against a given position. Thus we can easily imagine a circumstance in which we have good reasons for believing that Louis and Paula are both credible witnesses (neither has even been convicted of a crime, both are admired in their communities, etc., etc.) though Louis says that he saw X commit the crime and Paula says that she saw Y. In such circumstances, the following two arguments have contradictory conclusions, though they are both plausible, for both are valid and have premises which are acceptable:

1. Paula says that she saw Y commit the crime and her testimony is reliable, so Y must have committed the crime.
2. Louis says that he saw X commit the crime and his testimony is reliable, so X must have committed the crime.

In natural arguments we are often confronted by circumstances in which there is plausible evidence for contradictory points of view, so this kind of

situation is not unusual from an NLD point of view. In view of this, NLD cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it violates conditions 3 and 4 of Johnson's conditions for an adequate theory of argument.

## 2. THE METAPHYSICS OF ARGUMENT

Johnson's concerns about deductivism are tied to concerns about the metaphysics of argument. Thus Johnson's principal criticism of deductivism is the claim that it is not able to accommodate other species of argument (69). At times, he elaborates this criticism in term of a distinction between 'monistic' and 'pluralistic' theories of reasoning. This is a distinction he outlines on p. 42, where he writes that:

. . . a monistic theory holds that there is but one type of argument. Thus monism is a position in the theory of analysis. The classic example of this position is Deductivism – all arguments are deductive in character. Deductivism first appears as a theory about types of argument. It is part of the theory of analysis. The pluralist, on the other hand, does not impose one model of good reasoning. Pluralism holds that goodness in argument is not to be exhausted by any one criteria or set of criteria, for example, soundness.

A number of themes inform this passage. One is a distinction between theories of analysis and theories of appraisal which I leave for elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> In the present context I want to discuss what is right and what is wrong with the notion that deductivism is monistic.

Because NLD is committed to the view that all arguments should be understood as deductive arguments, it is monistic *if* one categorizes arguments in terms of *the kinds of connection that tie together the premises and conclusion of an argument*. But this does not mean that deductivism is monistic *simpliciter*. There are many other ways to categorize arguments – indeed, many other ways – and it is in view of them that it is misleading to say that deductivism is committed to the view that there is 'but one type of argument.'

A few examples may illustrate the point that NLD is not necessarily monistic (in the sense that it suggests that it would be useful to approach argumentation on the basis of the notion that there is only one type of argument). For even in the case of deductive arguments, it is possible to distinguish different kinds of argument. This is what one does when one distinguishes instances of different kinds of argument schemata, though there are more radical distinctions that deductivism can accommodate. One may, for example, distinguish arguments that are expressed in fundamentally different ways. Visual arguments – arguments expressed in visual images rather than verbal propositions have important affinities to verbal arguments but there are differences as well. NLD implies that they should be analyzed as deductive, but not in a way that denies that they must be understood in terms of different conceptions of meaning and expression. The differences are so significant that it is misleading to call them and

verbal arguments ‘one type of argument,’ even though they can both be analysed in deductive fashion (for examples, see Groarke, 1999a).

An even more radical departure from paradigmatically verbal arguments is found in the visceral and kisceral arguments discussed in Gilbert (1997). While NLD is not compatible with all of Gilbert’s theory there is no reason why it cannot argue that these are distinct kinds of arguments which need to be considered with this in mind. One might add that natural language contexts contain many layers of meaning that can be separated in a way that distinguishes between other types of argument. Statements can argue by implication, as can narratives, film and even sitcoms. Argumentation of this sort is rarely explicit, but it can still be distinguished as a kind of argument that needs to be analyzed, discussed and assessed appropriately.

An example may illustrate this last point. Consider Johnson’s own remark (p. 42) that ‘The pluralist, on the other hand [i.e. in comparison with the deductivist], does not impose one model of good reasoning.’ This is, on the face of it, a statement. But the word ‘impose’ is evaluative and the statement carries with it the suggestion that the pluralist has a better theory to offer than his opponent, for it allows good reasoning to encompass the diversity of forms it naturally adopts (and a theory that does so is better than one that doesn’t). Here one can locate an argument, though it would be misleading to describe it as the ‘same’ type of argument one finds in the explicit examples of reasons and conclusions that tend to characterize logic texts and argumentation contexts.

Such examples show that the deductivist, faced with the task of classifying arguments and creating a possible typology, need not be a monist. In the context of argument appraisal, NLD may distinguish different kinds of argument because they must be understood in different ways, because they instantiate different argument schemata, or because they contain premises which must be assessed in different ways. Looked at from this point of view, NLD (at least as I have developed it) is a form of pluralism. Indeed, the metaphysics it countenances is in many ways more pluralistic than the one that Johnson endorses, for the latter is constrained by his definition of argument which (as Chris Tindale points out in his contribution to the present discussion) excludes many kinds of argument that other argumentation theorists commonly count as argument. Such arguments are, in contrast, quite compatible with an NLD point of view.

### 3. A FINAL COMMENT

In closing it might be noted that Johnson’s restrictive account of argument in part explains his dissatisfaction with contemporary culture, which he sees as fundamentally unsympathetic to argumentation as a practice. As he puts it: ‘. . . logicians in the 20th century (following Russell and Whitehead) largely abandoned argumentation as a practice. To make matters



worse, I find the practice has been besieged in the broader intellectual (and commercial) culture' (27). There is something to be said in favour of these sentiments, but one might also question the extent of Johnson's doubts about both FDL and ordinary argument. In the first case, it is probably true that FDL did to some extent abandon argumentation as a practice, but it is a mistake to think that what they studied and developed has no affinities to it. NLD is one way to bring out these affinities, demonstrating, as it does, that deductivism can have a life beyond the narrow bounds of proof theory in formal logic and mathematics.

In the second case, anyone committed to the practice of argumentation is likely to share some of Johnson's concerns about the way in which advertisements, television, and other forms of media fail to respect the principles of good argument. But there are reasons to doubt that the situation is as bad as he suggests. Television and many of the narratives he discusses have not replaced argumentation so much as traditional cultural activities which were also narrative in form. We should not expect argumentation to replace such activities and it is debatable whether this would even be desirable. In the one instance where argumentation did achieve such prominence – in the heyday of the Second Sophistic – little was gained from an argumentative point of view, and argument gained, to its detriment, the trappings of entertainment rather than serious inquiry (to see what this entailed in practice, see Russell (1983)).

Even when we consider the kinds of cultural phenomena which raise Johnson's concern, there is more hope for argumentation theory than he suggests, because they can frequently be understood as rich in argument, provided that we adopt a theory which is willing to embrace the many different kinds of direct and indirect arguments expressed by narratives, visual images, television, and discourse which is not explicitly argumentative. Provided we adopt the broad metaphysics of argument this implies, we can (whether we adopt NLD or some other theory of argument) find that our times are characterized by a much more extensive commitment to argument than Johnson has suggested.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Though I cannot address them, I would in passing like to note that there are other aspects of the book which seem to me important: most notably, its discussion of the development of informal logic as a discipline (written from the vantage point of one of the discipline's founders); its detailed discussion of a variety of objections to informal logic (e.g., the charge that it is sexist); and its account of the discipline's outstanding issues and a research agenda which would systematically address them. Whether or not one is sympathetic to its approach to argument (or to Johnson's own take on it), these aspects of the book make it an essential read for anyone interested in informal logic.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'metaphysics of argument' is not Johnson's but my own. I use it because I think it best explains the connection between the two aspects of Johnson's views I want to discuss in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> All page numbers in the text refer to Johnson (2000).

<sup>4</sup> I'm not sure the two can be so nearly separated – primarily because our commitment to a particular typology of argument is often (and appropriately) grounded in prior commitments about what categories are useful in distinguishing between good and bad instances of reasoning.

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