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**Developing Standards for Argument Evaluation:
Epistemology, Evidence and Psychology of Reasoning**

Project Objective

The objective of this research project is to provide a set of criteria that prescribe the relevance of psychological considerations to standards of evidence. Such criteria would contribute to the development of epistemically sound standards of argument evaluation.

My dissertation “Epistemology, Semantics and the Psychologism Debate” demonstrates that psychologistic accounts of logic make epistemically significant properties such as truth, necessity and validity relative to contingent facts about human psychology. Weinstein (1994) describes the evaluation of argument as “applied epistemology”, from which it follows that our standards of argument evaluation should be based on sound epistemological theory. Yet the contemporary trend towards studying arguments as situated cognitive artifacts has prompted many theorists to allow psychological considerations to determine their evaluative theories. My thesis research implies that such approaches are based on epistemological mistakes which threaten to relativize our standards of argument evaluation.

Theoretical Background

Should our norms for evaluating arguments be dependent upon psychological facts about reasoners? In an argument, we accept a claim on the basis of reasons. Our concept of a reason is explained in terms of evidence. So, our norms for evaluating arguments are based on standards of evidence. Evidential relations such as relevance and soundness are objective and independent of the psychology of reasoners. Thus it would seem that psychological facts should not influence evaluative theories of argument. Yet reasons have a regulative function in the acquisition and revision of our beliefs. Belief change is the result of a psychological process and is partly determined by our cognitive limitations. As such it is frequently held that our standards of rational evaluation ought to take account of psychological processes effecting belief change. On such a view, standards of evidence are dependent on the psychology of reasoners. This

dichotomy represents a fracture in our theory of evidence which spills over into our evaluative models of argument. Our resolution of this question influences not only our assessment of arguments and our theory of rationality; it also has considerable social implications for our communities which are organized around, and governed by, rational systems and institutions.

The current project builds upon my dissertation research on the topic of psychologism, applying the conclusions of my thesis to the practical problem of argument evaluation. Psychologism in logic is the view that logic is dependent on psychology - that the ultimate foundation for logical laws are contingent facts about the human mind. Blair and Johnson have written that argumentation theorists have overcome their "obsessive fear of psychologism" (1987, 149), yet the result of this overcoming seems to be complacency rather than avoidance (Godden 2001). Within epistemology, Quine's semantic holism claims that logical laws do not have any special status or function in the web of belief (1952) and he argues that epistemology should be naturalized and replaced by a psychology of belief revision (1969, 1992). The argument of my dissertation establishes that views like this not only fail to account for the uniquely necessary status of logic, and its uniquely normative function, but they misrepresent the relationship between logic and mental processes. As such, they misconstrue the contribution logic makes to our notions of rational justification and evidence as these are applied in the evaluation of arguments and the revision of belief.

Like Quine, Harman (1973, 1986) claims that logic does not have any special contribution to make to a theory of reasoned belief change. Instead, he proposes that rational belief revision ought to be evaluated according to a set of heuristic principles, the foundations of which are psychological. That is, Harman claims that psychological considerations ought to inform, determine and ultimately ground the standards of evidence employed in the evaluation of reasoning and argument. Harman's view is representative of a broader tradition of the psychology of reasoning (Wason & Johnson-Laird 1972; Rips 1994, 1982). In my view the epistemological consequences of this attitude are largely unexamined and unappreciated in the theory of argument. While psychological considerations may have a role to play in our *description* of situated arguments (Godden 2003), I claim that they make no contribution to our notion of evidence and hence have no epistemologically significant role to play in the *evaluation*

of argument. I recognize a plurality of non-equivalent standards of evidence, and further that the considerations involved in the assessment of particular arguments may be field-specific or even situationally relative. As such, my research is general with respect to these discipline-specific models of evaluation, and is prescriptive concerning the kinds of considerations which ought to be admitted as relevant to the assessment of particular arguments (not to the specific considerations themselves).

Method & Approach

Research for this project begins with a (1) *literature review*: a comprehensive investigation of the extent to which psychological considerations ground or inform contemporary theories of argument evaluation. Various competing models of argument will be surveyed including: informal logic, Pragma-Dialectics (van Eemeren *et. al.* 1993), other dialectical approaches, rhetoric and epistemological approaches. Having characterized the spectrum of approaches in the discipline, I isolate those theories which take a psychological approach to grounding standards of evidence. I then proceed to a (2) *historical analysis* where I identify the theoretical origins of these psychological approaches. My working hypothesis is that these origins are to be found in naturalised epistemology (Quine 1969; Goldman 1999, 1986) and the psychology of reasoning (Wason & Johnson-Laird 1972, Harman 1986). The project's next phase is a (3) *theoretical analysis* and makes explicit the contribution of naturalised epistemology and the psychology of reasoning to the psychological approaches of argument evaluation. From here I move to an (4) *evaluative phase*, where I assess (i) the adequacy of the grounds offered in support of psychological approaches, and (ii) the epistemological consequences that result from taking a psychological approach to grounding standards of evidence. This aspect of the project draws directly on my dissertation research on psychologism. The final phase of the project is the (5) *resolution phase*, where I prescribe a set of positive theoretical criteria for determining the relevance of psychological considerations to our standards of evidence. Preliminary results of my research will be presented at the McMaster conference in Argumentation in 2005, and at the 2006 international conference in Amsterdam. Ultimately, the project will culminate in the publication of several papers in refereed journals.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH PROJECTS
POST-DOCTORAL GRANT PROPOSAL

D.M. Godden, Ph.D

Location, Mentorship and Collaboration

I have been invited to conduct this research at the University of Windsor which is a leading centre for the study of Argument and Argumentation. In addition to being the home of the journal *Informal Logic* and host to numerous international conferences in the field, its faculty includes the highest concentration of established researchers in Argumentation in North America today. Blair (2003, 2001, 1999, 1998), Hansen (2002, 2000, 1997, 1995), Johnson (2002, 2000, 1996), and Pinto (2003, 2002, 2001a, 2001b) are all leading scholars actively contributing to both the theoretical and pedagogical (Johnson & Blair 1993; Pinto, Blair & Parr 1993) aspects of the field. My post-doctoral research will be jointly supervised by Pinto (Professor Emeritus) and Blair (University Professor). Pinto's specialization in the epistemological dimensions of the theory of argument (2001) makes him an ideal mentor for this project, and Blair's expertise in the field will guide me in my background research. Finally, I have been invited to join the Windsor Group for Research on Informal Logic and Argumentation, allowing me to participate in an ongoing discussion of current topics in the discipline, receive feedback on my research as it develops, and to collaborate in the ongoing research of other group members.

POST-DOCTORAL GRANT PROPOSAL

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