response

On Adler On Charity

Trudy Govier
Trent University

In "Why Be Charitable?", (ILN, iv.2, May, 1982) Jonathan Adler locates the Principle of Charity in the broad context of the epistemic goal of seeking truth. He says:

> If the study of informal logic is construed as within the theory of inquiry, then it should seek anlyses and evaluations that bring us closer to the truth. Presumably this implies that we want to maximize truth-relevant or epistemically relevant considerations over pragmatic or ethical ones in defending certain approaches, rules, or principles. (p. 16)

> The Principle of Charity should be justified, at least as a first try, as significant for finding out whether the conclusion is correct, given the premises, rather than merely winning the argument. (p. 16)

Adler's connection between charity and Popper's philosophy of science is fascinating, and his emphasis on the oddity of making ethical and pragmatic values predominate over cognitive ones raises fundamental issues. However, there are some real problems with his brief account.

I am not sure what Adler means to include under the broad description "theory of inquiry", but I shall assume—taking a hint from his reference to Popper—that this would be the philosophy of science and epistemology. Let us take it that a primary and central task of informal logic is to develop a theory of argument. The theory of inquiry would be a normative theory including rules for seeking and evaluating evidence, for corroborating hypotheses, and for selecting between competing theories. Adler supposes that informal logic should sit squarely within the theory of inquiry, and that such an approach may be able to provide a block to relativism and subjectivism. There are several problems with this over-riding assumption about informal logic and the theory of inquiry. First of all, in current philosophy of science there is by no means a consensus as to whether the road to relativism and/or subjectivism can be blocked. A substantial school, inspired by Kuhn and further radicalized under the influence of Feyerabend, contends that it is impossible to justify generally-applicable normative rules for the correct conduct of scientific inquiry. Also, it is not at all clear that the

theory of argument should be within the theory of inquiry. Topics in informal logic or—I would prefer to say—the theory of argument include:

1. The nature of argument and its differentiation from explanation, narration, illustration...The nature of the "rational support" for a claim which argument is supposed to give and the 'how it came to be' of an explanation, the purely persuasive techniques of some advertising, and so on.
2. The problem of missing premises.
3. The question as to how many distinct types of argument there are.
4. The question as to how many distinct standards of appraisal there are, so far as appraising the connection between premises and conclusions of arguments.
5. The issue as to whether all such standards are formal, or can be made formal and, if not, as to how formal and non-formal standards are related.
6. General questions regarding acceptability of premises; to what extent this is an audience-relative matter; why question-begging is a mark of argument inadequacy; whether, and in what sense, the premises of a good argument must be more certain than its conclusion.

In my view, the most notable feature of informal logic is its strong naturalism, which should put those experienced in teaching informal logic in a position of some privilege with respect to questions (3) and (4) here. I am suspicious of charity which is strong enough to undermine what I see as a healthy naturalistic bias in informal logic. Now if "theory of inquiry" includes epistemology and philosophy of science, and "informal logic" includes the topics listed above (and some others), it is just not clear that the latter **is** part of the former. I urge that it is not part of the former; it is more interpretive, more specific, higher order....It is another subject. If he wishes to preserve his claim that informal logic is part of the theory of inquiry, Adler owes us an account of the whole and its part.

Having seen that Adler's overall framework is not as unproblematic as it might be, let us move more specifically to the Principle of Charity itself. Following Johnson and Scriven, Adler again reports that the principle directs the critic of an argument to "provide the best interpretation of the material under consideration" and says that ideally, this principle would be justified as "significant for finding out whether the conclusion is correct given the premises". This may all sound terribly obvious and completely right—but if it does, it is only because some crucial ambiguities are hiding beneath the surface.

In an earlier note ("Uncharitable Thoughts about Charity", ILN, iv.1, November, 1981), I urged that the apparently bland advice to seek the best interpretation of an argumentative passage may be taken in three different ways, as:

PC1: Interpret the passage well. Do a good job of your interpretation by paying attention to context, ambiguities, notes of irony, nuances of meaning and so on. (Call this Truistic Charity.)

PC2: Interpret the passage so as to get out of it the best argument you can. (Call this Strong Charity.)

PC3: If several distinct interpretations of a passage are **equally licensed** by the material which is actually stated, work on that interpretation which represents the passage as giving the best of the several distinct arguments which it might be said to express. (Call this Modest Charity.) I personally would defend Modest Charity, but Adler works with Strong Charity:

We want to formulate arguments at their best or greatest strength because that makes the evaluation a more "severe" test. A more severe test—a stronger statement of **the argument**—is more likely to reveal falsity (failure of the line of reasoning) than a less severe one (weaker statement of the argument). (p. 16, emphasis mine.)

In this defence of strong charity there is a crucial ambiguity of reference in "the argument". Adler takes it that you have an argument, and you then have the problem of whether to assess the weaker or the stronger statement of that argument. But actually, you have a piece of discourse, and you have the problem as to whether to interpret it as expressing A*—which you could assess, or A**, or A***, and so on.

Teaching informal logic brought this lesson home to me, and the learning experience wasn't pleasant. First I thought my students were awfully slow at developing the skill of picking out premises and conclusions. Later I came to realize just how often even a brief and apparently prosaic piece of discourse can be taken as expressing several quite distinct arguments—depending on what we add and delete, what meanings we attribute to key terms, whether loose analogies are taken as really part of the argument, and so on. There isn't any one and the same argument which has weaker and stronger versions; there is one piece of discourse which may be taken in various ways. Adler's defence of Charity completely hides this interpretive problem. But it shouldn't be hidden, especially not as the Principle of Charity is itself a principle of interpretation. The problem undermines Adler's defence of charity, for we can no longer insist that applying strong charity will give us the best estimate of whether "the conclusion is correct given these premises" (p. 16). The principle applies to the discourse itself, and yields the interpretation with "this" conclusion and "these" premises. There will not only be one estimate of the adequacy of these premises to support this conclusion; there will frequently be several distinct premise–conclusion sets which may be extracted from a natural piece of argumentative discourse. Adler's defence of strong charity is inadequate because it has charity working at the wrong stage in argument appraisal.

There are many different purposes which we may have in evaluating argumentative discourse. Sometimes our purpose is to reply as cogently and briefly as we can to an opponent. Sometimes it is to check the strength of reasons offered in support of something we already believe. Sometimes it is to check the legitimacy of our beliefs by examing grounds offered for competing beliefs. Sometimes it is to find the underlying assumptions and world view of a famous thinker. Sometimes it is to evaluate the truth of a single crucial statement, identified as the conclusion. In this last case, if our interest is solely in whether this conclusion is true, the matter of how well the **stated** reasons happen to support it is secondary, and the rest of the "argument" could drop out as unimportant. We might drop out statements offered in support of the "conclusion" to replace them by more cogent and convincing premises. Here strong charity is appropriate. But this is **one kind** of case.

Toward the end of his article, Adler notes that "in normal day-to-day life, as in the classroom, truth is not such an overriding desideratum as in science...one (non-ideal) constraint we might place is to try to understand and evaluate arguments within the context and terms in which they are presented" (p. 16). In terms of Adler's over-riding desire to making epistemic goals predominate over moral and pragmatic ones, this is certainly a very significant qualification. For we see him allowing that for practical reasons (i.e., pragmatic reasons), the scope of what are (in his view) the appropriate cognitive values will be somewhat restricted. More fundamentally, however, I would wish to question Adler's view that understanding discourse in its own terms and context is a compromise, an appraisal strategy which one could resort to for practical reasons, but which is less than ideal.

Discourse is another person's discourse. It provides access to the theories and reasonings of another mind—sometimes to those of another world view, another culture, or another time. Against proponents of strong charity, I would urge that it is in the interests of self-development and human understanding that we seek to understand other people's ideas as they put these ideas forward. To the extent that we are interested in how other people actually think and what they have to say, strong charity will not serve us well in interpretation. For it directs us to mold the discourse of others in the light of our own preconceptions as to what a good argument is, what is well-ordered, and so on. This is a license for projecting one's own mind into the discourse of other minds. Like some other forms of charity, strong interpretive charity will frequently be manipulative and condescending.

Several issues back, David Hitchcock wrote in the **Newsletter** that the primary purpose of evaluating arguments was to determine whether or not the conclusion of the argument was true. [1] Adler's view on this matter is similar to Hitchcock's although he makes the qualification of "true" as "conclusion is correct (**sic**) given the premises" (p. 16). In what sense **is** TRUTH the primary goal in argument appraisal? Obviously truth is our over-riding goal in analyzing Smith's argument on nuclear arms if the truth we are looking for is a truth about Smith's argument on nuclear arms (whether it has two conclusions or one, whether it is **ad hominem** and fallacious, whether any stated premises are irrelevent to the conclusion, etc.). But this is not what is at issue. What Hitchcock and Adler seem to be working with is a model on which the point of appraising Smith's argument on nuclear arms is to find out the truth about nuclear arms. But unless Smith is somebody pretty special, examining his argument is going to be an indirect and inefficient route to discovering the truth about nuclear arms! Determining the truth of the conclusion is not typically the over-riding goal of argument analysis, and there seems no good reason to found our interpretive principles on the belief that this kind of truth-seeking comes first and the understanding of what other people actually have to say comes second.

Note

[1] **Editors' Note:** Cf. **ILN**, iii.2 (March 1981), p. 7 in "Deduction, Induction and Conduction", pp. 7-15. We believe the passage that Govier refers to is the following one:

Usually our purpose in appraising an argument is to come to a decision about whether to accept its conclusion.

We take it that Govier's point here does not hinge upon emphasizing truth over some other value, but that she holds that the primary goal of argument analysis is typically not to determine the truth or the acceptability of the argument's conclusion. ●