Reflections on Henry Webb Johnstone, Jr.

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Abstract: Personal reflections on the philosophical career of Henry Johnstone, B.S. Haverford College, 1942, and Ph.D. Harvard, 1950, professor at Williams College 1948-1952 and Pennsylvania State University, 1952 - 2000. Founder and editor of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Johnstone wrote eight books, including two logic texts, three monographs, and over 150 articles or reviews. The focus is on his efforts to resolve problems stemming from the conflict between the logical empiricism Johnstone embraced in his dissertation, and the arguments of his absolute idealist colleagues at Williams, efforts he pursued in *Philosophy and Argument* (1959), and *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument* (1978).

Résumé: On présente des réflexions personnelles sur la carrière philosophique d'Henry Johnstone: B.S. au Collège Haverford, 1942, Ph.D, l'Université Harvard; professeur au Collège Williams de 1948-1952 et l'Université Pennsylvania State de 1952-2000. Il a été le fondateur et éditeur de la revue *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, il a rédigé huit livres, deux manuels de logique, trois monographies, et plus de 150 articles ou comptes rendus. On concentre sur ses efforts de résoudre les problèmes qui surgissent du conflit entre l'empiricisme logique adopté dans sa thèse doctorale et les arguments de ses collègues idéalistes au Collège Williams, et sur ses efforts poursuivis dans *Philosophy and Argument* (1959) et *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument* (1978).

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Henry Webb Johnstone, Jr. was born February 22, 1920 of affluent parents in Montclair, New Jersey. As an adolescent he went to Hill School where he got a good grounding in Latin and became interested in reading far eastern philosophy. He received a B.S. in Philosophy from Haverford College in 1942, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Harvard in 1950. After an instructorship at Williams College from 1948–1952, he joined the faculty of Pennsylvania State University in 1952. There he remained for 48 years, becoming Professor 1961–1984 and an active Professor Emeritus from 1984–2000. He was a visiting professor at the University of Brussels, Belgium (1957), at Trinity College, Dublin, (1960–1961), at Bonn, Germany (1969) and the American University in Beirut, Lebanon (1971–1972) and also lectured in Italy, France, Finland, England and Holland. He was a founder of the Journal, *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* which he edited from 1968 to 1976 and again from 1987 to 1998. He also became editor of the revived *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1987. His *vita* includes eight books, three monographs, and over 150 articles or reviews. He wrote two logic texts (1954, 1962), but his most

original works were *Philosophy and Argument* (1959), *The Problem of the Self* (1970), and *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument* (1978).

Back of this imposing array of accomplishments, was a moderately patrician man with a wry sense of humor, a rich interest in music and travel, and an inner struggle in pursuit of philosophical integrity. The inner struggle began at Williams after he left Harvard.

I knew Henry Johnstone as a graduate student at Harvard in 1946 to 1948. We were both members of that fortunate group discharged from the U.S. Army following World War II, whose graduate education was made possible by the GI Bill of Rights. We and our fellows were model students; we knew why we were there, what we wanted, and were seriously devoted to our subjects.

When I arrived at Cambridge I was told by the Philosophy Department Secretary, Ruth Allen, that philosophy Professor Raphael Demos had some extra rooms in his house that would be rented to graduate students. I quickly established myself on the third floor, and soon found that the adjacent room was occupied by 'Hank' Johnstone. For the next two years we went to classes, dining halls and many social occasions together, talking philosophy and enjoying the rich cultural environment of Cambridge and Boston.

The Demos home was a large, brown-shingled house on Francis Avenue. Hank's initial response was to be a bit overwhelmed by the tradition. Our backyard was back-to-back with William James's brown-shingled house, in which his son still lived. The desk in my room had been Josiah Royce's desk. The Demos's had been friends with the Alfred North Whiteheads, and his widow still gave teas for students, at least one of which we attended.

However, in the philosophical climate at Harvard at that time, Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy had little impact outside of his work with Russell on *Principia Mathematica* (1910). Russell was perhaps the most pervasive external influence. C. I. Lewis and W. V. O. Quine were the currently most influential philosophers in the department, though our mentors also included Donald Williams, a straightforward materialist, John Wild, a proponent of perennial Aristotelian philosophy, Henry Aiken (British philosophy), H.M. Sheffer (logic) and Demos (Plato).

Quine's "Elementary Logic" was the mandatory logic course, and his *Mathematical Logic* (1940), which sought to clarify and improve *Principia Mathematica,* was the primary advanced course in logic. We took C. I. Lewis's course in Theory of Knowledge, while reading his *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* in page proof; it came out later in 1946. This was a very thoughtful effort to establish the relationship between logic, empirical knowledge and valuation. Lewis's earlier attack on the "material implication" of *Principia Mathematica* and his proposed alternative of a logic based on "strict implication" had not won the day in logic. Quine defended *Principia* by separating "logical implication" from the "truth-functional conditional," thus removing confusions stemming from Lewis's (and Russell and Whitehead's) early characterization of '$\supset$' as "material implication" (see *Mathematical Logic,* §5).[1]

Behind the developments at Harvard in those years was the challenge of logical positivism. This movement had flourished with journals, books and congresses on the Unity of Science in the 1930s before World War II and was still alive immediately after the war. It was inspired by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), and spurred by Carnap's missionary zeal in books like *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (1935) and *Meaning and Necessity* (1947). It was characterized by the belief that in so far as philosophical problems are genuine they can be solved by logical analysis of language (using the logic of *Principia Mathematica)*, a blanket rejection of metaphysics as meaningless, and a reliance on scientific method in all matters of fact. They thought they had brought to an end the purported lack of progress in philosophy due to the fact that no metaphysical system of philosophy could establish itself against the arguments of opposing systems. Though the Vienna Circle had broken up, the movement was not dead. Ayer's second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic* came out in 1946 while we were at Harvard. I remember at a lecture Ayer gave at Harvard, Demos asked him rhetorically, "Does God exist?" and Ayer, in the best positivist stance answered coldly, "I don't know what you mean."

It would be very wrong to describe the Harvard Department of that period as being dominated by logical positivism. The shadows of Alfred North Whitehead, William James the pragmatist, Josiah Royce and William Hocking the idealists, as well as Santayana the materialist, hung over us. C.I. Lewis told me when I was preparing a paper about him for the Philosophy Club, that Royce was the one who influenced him most. Whitehead was the teacher that brought Quine under the spell of *Principia Mathematica*. And all were touched to some degree by James's pragmatism and radical empiricism. To pass comprehensives, graduate students had to master courses on ethics, metaphysics, Plato, Aristotle, British Empiricism and Continental Rationalism. The diversity of the faculty testified to the variety of approaches we encountered.

Nevertheless, the ideas motivating our dissertations came from the new mathematical logic, philosophical analysis of language, and empiricism. Johnstone's dissertation was entitled "The Grammar of the Sense Data Language"; mine was "Language, Designata and Truth: a Prolegomenon to a Pragmatic Rationalism." Johnstone was closer to realism, and not much influenced by James.

It was a period before contemporary existentialism began to take hold philosophically in this country. I remember just before leaving Harvard, reading Sartre's little book, *Existentialism*, and being unable to make any sense of it. It also preceded the spread of "ordinary language" philosophy spurred by Wittgenstein's about-face in *Philosophical Investigations* (1952), where he rejected his first method of linguistic analysis based on *Principia Mathematica* and started a general move away from the logical empiricism which characterized our days at Harvard. It even predated Quine's famous "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951). It was a period before computers, artificial intelligence, possible world semantics, and cognitive psychology. And of course it was long before the rise of deconstructionism

and post-modernism on the continent of Europe. And it was long before disillusion with formal logic led to the popularity of informal logic, celebrated by the founding of the journal *Informal Logic* in 1984.

Those years at Harvard were very stimulating, crucial years for both of us. They were also happy years. Henry had begun a collection of classical music records, and would buy a jug of red wine and invite his friends to join him on Friday evenings to listen to Vivaldi, Bach, and Beethoven among others. Among those who came were his close friends Bill Craig and Henry Hiz, who would later be colleagues at Penn State before they departed for Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania respectively. Among his other friends of that period were Hoa Wong (who stayed at Harvard, then went to Rockefeller University), Peter Glassen (University of Manitoba), Jim Oliver (Chair, University of South Carolina).

In his first year or so, Henry became romantically involved with one or two graduate students who attended his soirees. But in his second year his attention became focused on another philosophy graduate student, Margery Coffin, a φβκ philosophy major from Colorado College. She got her masters degree in 1948 and was offered a job at a nearby liberal arts college in Massachusetts, but married Henry instead on July 17th of that year. I was best man at their wedding, in Milwaukee.

In the fall of 1948 our ways parted. Henry secured an appointment as instructor at Williams College, so Henry and Margery moved to Williamstown, MA. In the fall of 1949 I went with my wife, who had been closely connected to the Demos household, to Florida State University. We visited the Johnstones at Williamstown, at Henry's family's summer place, Honest Point Farm, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and at Penn State. We exchanged Christmas cards and books from time to time. Hank turned up unexpectedly at my retirement party in 1989 at Wayne State University and in July 1998 he and Margery came to Kendal, where I lived, to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

But on leaving Harvard we went different ways philosophically and I did not follow Henry's work in great detail, nor did he mine. Perhaps I should leave discussions of his work to those who have followed it more closely, but having reviewed Henry's long career in preparing this article, I can not resist adding a few comments on his subsequent developments in the light of what I knew of him.

At Williams, Henry was shocked to find that Hegelian Idealism was alive and kicking in the person of Professor J. William Miller and his colleagues. In the Introduction of *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument*, Johnstone describes "the Angst, the desperation" of that encounter. As the result of his total immersion in the graduate program at Harvard, he was "not only deeply committed to empiricism, but also under the impression that any philosopher in his right mind would be committed to it." He found that his colleagues at Williams were not only not empiricists,

> They were adherents to a position I thought had long since been decisively refuted; to wit, Absolute Idealism. They read Hegel long after Hegel—as I

> had been led to believe—had been consigned to the museum of philosophical aberrations and curiosities. Even worse they seemed to have no appreciation of the advances which had been made by modern empiricism . . . In short, my new colleagues seemed to me to be anachronisms and quacks.
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> So I set out to refute them. . . . (1978, p.1)

In his dissertation Johnstone had espoused empiricism as the theory that "everything we know can be analysed into sensory or perceptual data" (p. 20). "Sense data must be assumed to justify any occurrences of empirical knowledge" (p. 72). "The relation between sense data and knowledge is in fact logical; it is precisely similar to the relation between postulate and theorem in mathematics" (p. 70, §41). Sense data are necessary conditions of empirical knowledge; axioms are necessary conditions of mathematical knowledge (p. 72). "No one who is rational," he wrote, "can fail to see the truth of a logical tautology, a mathematical theorem, or a proven empirical fact" (p. 5). "No fact can be better known to me than that I am now sitting at this desk . . . I can not conceive of any context of objects, unknown to me now, which would invalidate its claim to be objective. Theoretical doubt—e.g., that maybe it is an illusion that I am sitting at my desk, or even that maybe all of my conscious experience is an illusion—is meaningless because it has no practical consequences" (p. 36, §15). "Practical knowledge is knowledge which satisfies a system of purposes" (p. 41, §19). "Empirical and practical knowledge are indistinguishable" (§31). His theory is a "finite context theory" *vs.* the idealist's "infinite context theory" (p. 24).

His thesis was of course far more subtle and complex than these fragments, but they suggest the mind-set he brought to Williams. His new colleagues, notably Professor Miller, didn't buy it. Johnstone asked what sense impressions supported their ideas. Instead of retreating, they asked him questions about sense-impressions. Since he granted that sense-impressions were only qualities, he had to admit they couldn't imply anything. When he said that a sense quality was what he experienced here and now, they pointed out that "here" and "now" are abstractions. They rejected his view that empiricism and Russell's logic provided the final step in solving the problems of philosophy; rather it was just one phase in a long dialectical history of philosophical positions, each theory arising out of opposition to preceding theories and giving rise to new opposing theories.

> None of my attempts at refutation was successful. Much more important, however, was my realization, after a painful period during which it was nearly impossible to carry forward any intellectual project at all, that I had been caught up in the very idealism that had once seemed so easy to refute.
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> With this realization came the need to reflect on the etiology of the deep change in my philosophical position. Somehow, my colleagues had argued me into idealism. I wanted to understand the power of their arguments. My reflections took the form of my early writings on philosophical argumentation. . . . (1978, p. 2)

The book from which these passages were taken is dedicated to his two absolute idealist colleagues at Williams College, Professors Bill Miller and Larry Beals.

It contains sixteen of his most important and influential essays, and chronicles his development up to 1978. In it he remarks that few people other than his erstwhile colleagues realize his debt to the idealists in his theory of argumentation; e.g., "that when I said that I thought that philosophical argument were *sui generis*—not to be judged by the standards of argumentation in science and everyday discourse—I was expressing much the same idea that can be expressed by saying that the Hegelian dialectic is not to be judged by the standards of argumentation in science and everyday discourse."

The theory of philosophical argument which he developed was that philosophical argument was *sui generis* and always *ad hominem*. He used the term '*ad hominem*' in a special sense. Many elementary logic textbooks today treat "*Argumentum ad hominem*" as a fallacy—the fallacy of attacking the character or credibility of the person who advances the argument instead of the argument itself (e.g., Salmon 1989, p. 75). However Johnstone's use of "*ad hominem*" is based on a quite different definition, from Richard Whately's *Elements of Logic* (1838). There it is an argument which proves your position to an opponent by showing that ". . . *this* man is bound to admit it, in conformity to his principles of reasoning, or consistency with his own conduct, situation, &c." In order that his idealist opponents could convince Johnstone, they had to draw upon Johnstone's own philosophical presuppositions—for example his view that sense data were qualities, and that "The relation between sense data and knowledge is in fact logical; it is precisely similar to the relation between postulate and theorem in mathematics," which he held in his dissertation. If he was to convince idealists to adopt his philosophical position, he had to present an argument with their basic presuppositions and principles as premisses. Arguments from the other person's principles could be *valid* or *invalid*; if *valid* the other philosopher would be bound to accept them.

However, this was not the end of it. He later asked what constitutes "validity"? He assumed an argument is *valid* "only when it is *impossible* for all the premisses to be true while the conclusion is false" (Johnstone 1978, p. 47) , i.e., if the negation of the conclusion is inconsistent with the premisses. But what is "inconsistency"? There are different theories of logic with different criteria of inconsistency, and the different theories of logic are embedded in different philosophical systems. Thus, it is clear that "inconsistency" is not just a matter of fact. The realist in logic argues against the pragmatist or idealist in logic, each having different criteria of inconsistency and validity, yet each basing their argument somehow on appealing to the concept of validity held by the other. At first he had held that consistency and rationality were objective properties. But this conflicted with his theory that all philosophical arguments are *ad hominem* because then every philosophical argument would be solvable based on a universal objective principle. For a while in maintaining his *ad hominem* theory he held the view just mentioned, that validity and consistency were philosophical concepts that could differ in different philosophical systems. But how then could they both be appealing to the same

validity? Later he held that concern for validity was a regulative principle guiding both parties in philosophical argumentation, though opposing philosophers might not agree on just what validity is.

Johnstone's book, *Philosophy and Argument,* appeared in 1959. It drew upon nine of his earlier articles, beginning with "Philosophy and *Argumentum ad Hominem*" from the *Journal of Philosophy* (1952). His second book in this area, *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument*, was published in 1978. It covered the second phase of his philosophical journey—Johnstone's remarkable involvement with philosophy and rhetoric which grew out of his theory of *ad hominem* arguments. This was a gutsy move on his part, since this cross-disciplinary area was not recognized by the philosophical establishment. His entry into it was on novel grounds and influenced both disciplines.

In 1961, while Johnstone was acting chairman of the Philosophy Department at Penn State, Bob Oliver, Chairman of the Speech Department, suggested that they make a joint appointment in rhetoric and philosophy. This didn't work out though they approached some prospects (Perelman and Natanson) together. Besides, Johnstone's initial view of rhetoric was not favorable. He wrote a chapter on "Persuasion and Validity in Philosophy" in 1965 (1965, Ch. 9) in which, he later said, "I depict[ed] rhetoric in the worst possible light" (1965, p. 2). In that paper he held that (1) "the aim of the merely persuasive speaker is to secure acceptance to his point of view," (2) "rhetoric is perfect only when it perfectly conceals its own use," (3) "To be assured of effectiveness, a speaker must operate unilaterally upon his audience." He asserted that "No philosopher worthy of the name would wish to secure assent to his position through techniques concealed from his audience," and held that in philosophical argumentation arguments must be straightforward and bilateral (1965, p.2).

Oliver, however, noticing that Johnstone was *interested* in rhetoric, succeeded in getting him to speak on the subject and to collaborate in arranging a conference on philosophy and rhetoric in 1965 with five or six speakers from each discipline reading papers. Out of this mutual involvement came the journal, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. The first issue, with Johnstone as editor, appeared in April, 1968. His attitude towards Rhetoric changed, and in 1978 he wrote, "My present position on the nature of rhetoric and its role in philosophical argumentation is just about the opposite of my earlier one."

Perhaps his most influential article for people in Speech was, "The Relevance of Rhetoric to Philosophy and of Philosophy to Rhetoric" (1965, p. 2). There he wrote that rhetoric was relevant to philosophy in the same way in which science, politics and morals are relevant to philosophy. Just as philosophy must develop philosophy of science, political and social philosophy and philosophy of morals, it must develop a philosophy of rhetoric. For rhetoric deals with persuasion, and persuasion is a necessary mode of experience. Man is not only a scientific animal, a political animal and a moral animal; man is a "persuading and persuaded animal."

On the other hand, philosophy is relevant to rhetoric, just because philosophical examination "becomes imperative in times when the foundations of the subject poses a problem." He noted that awesome persuasive powers often occur in unscrupulous hands. How do we draw the line between responsible and irresponsible persuasion? This is not a problem which can be solved by rhetoric, but requires philosophy. He suggests an answer that goes back to his earlier objections: "The most responsible forms of persuasion" involve a "bilateral attempt to persuade, in which no rhetorical device is concealed" (1965, p. 43).

Johnstone's concept of *ad hominem* argumentation had special resonnance for rhetoric, since the attempt to persuade is most successful when one argues from premisses that the audience accepts. Johnstone enriched this ancient point. Responsible rhetoric will seek to be valid argumentation in a broad sense of valid. It will conceive of itself as bilateral, addressed to listeners who can respond with doubts and challenges. The audience should be viewed, not as objects to be manipulated, but as persons capable of accepting or rejecting premisses and conclusions

Johnstone's interest in informal logic was a natural consequence of his interest in the philosophy of rhetoric. Having written two books on formal logic, he was friendly to informal logic because he was concerned with validity and came to consider validity as being more than the formal validity of mathematical logic. Appealing to ordinary uses of 'valid' he added requirements of "forcefulness" and relevance, and would include as "valid" those arguments which showed another argument to be invalid, as in *ad hominem* argumentation.

Around 1975, at the age of 55, he became interested in the Classics, especially Homer and the pre-Socratics. He took courses in Greek and earned an M.A. in Classics at Penn State in 1979. He even became a candidate for a Ph.D. in Classics at Bryn Mawr but he did not finish that program. However Bryn Mawr published three of his translations of commentaries, one on *Heraclitus* (1984), one on *Empedocles* (1985), and one, with David Sider, on *Parmenides* (1986).

Johnstone's philosophical journey was a long search for honest responses to a deep philosophical question. His interest in points of view different from his own, and his efforts to meet the differences honestly, were apparent to all who knew him. Many prospective authors of articles, students and colleagues recall with great warmth both his encouragement and his active interchange of ideas, as editor and teacher, by correspondence or over a glass of wine. His unfailing courtesy, wry sense of humor, and the underlying quest for philosophical integrity enchanted all who knew him, as they did me more than fifty years ago.

Note

[1] However, Lewis's early work in *Survey of Symbolic Logic* (1918) and *Symbolic Logic* (1930) remains influential today, reconstrued as "modal logic" fortified by Kripke and "possible world semantics."

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