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Acceptable Premises

An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem

When, if ever, is one justified in accepting the basic premises of an argument? What is the proper criterion of premise acceptability? Can the criterion be theoretically or philosophically justified?

This is the first book to provide a comprehensive theory of premise acceptability and it answers these questions from an epistemological approach that the author calls commonsense foundationalism. It will be eagerly sought out not just by specialists in informal logic, critical thinking, and argumentation theory but also by a broader range of philosophers and those teaching rhetoric.

James B. Freeman is Professor of Philosophy at Hunter College of the City University of New York.

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*For the Hoffmans,
all of those who are with us,
and in memory of Don*

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*An Epistemic Approach to an Informal
Logic Problem*

JAMES B. FREEMAN

Hunter College of the City University of New York



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2005

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Freeman, James B.
 Acceptable premises : an epistemic approach to an informal logic problem /
 James B. Freeman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-521-83301-9 – ISBN 0-521-54060-7 (pb.)

1. Logic. I. Title.

BC7.LF734 2005

160-dc22 2004045887

ISBN 0 521 83301 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 54060 7 paperback

Cambridge University Press

0521833019 - Acceptable Premises: An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem

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Preface

The project of this book is easily stated. Suppose a proponent puts forward some claim that is in some way doubtful or controversial. The proponent thus incurs a burden of proof. He may attempt to discharge this burden by presenting an argument for his claim. For simplicity's sake, let us assume that he puts forward a one-premise argument. But if that premise in turn is controversial, if by putting it forward the proponent incurs a further burden of proof, he will not have discharged his initial burden unless he discharges this further burden. By attempting to do that, the proponent may incur a further burden of proof because of the premise he puts forward to defend his controversial premise, and so on. Now the opposite of burden of proof is presumption. So if the proponent is proceeding in good faith, he is seeking a premise for which there is a presumption. Given a presumption, his premise should be acceptable. Now any noncircular argument will have basic premises, those not argued for in the course of that argument. So the proponent is seeking ultimately to ground his argument on basic premises for which there is a presumption. When is there a presumption for a premise and how do we recognize it? That is the project of this book, developed over Chapters 1 through 11.

Our conception of the problem of premise adequacy limits our investigation from being even more complex or drawn out. First, notice that our proponent is pictured as asserting each of the premises he puts forward. He has not supposed or asked his interlocutor to suppose some statement true for the sake of the argument. On our view, the question of premise adequacy or acceptability does not arise for supposed premises, such as those assumed in the course of a *reductio ad absurdum* or conditional argument. Such premises are not *accepted*, at least in the

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contexts in which they are supposed, and thus the question of their *acceptability* does not arise in connection with their occurrences in those contexts.

There is another less trivial way in which the project of this essay is circumscribed. From our perspective, we turn to an argument to discover whether there is good reason to accept some claim. If we recognized that we were justified in believing the premises of an argument and that the argument transferred this justification to its conclusion, we would have a positive answer. Traditionally, logic has concerned itself with the connection of premises with conclusions, and thus with the issue of transferring justification. Informal logic's raising the question of premise acceptability, to our mind, raises the question of whether one is justified in believing or accepting the basic premises of an argument. But we may turn to arguments for other purposes. As Walton has pointed out on numerous occasions, arguments may occur in many types of dialogue. As Blair (1995) points out, this gives rise to different contexts of arguments raising different questions of premise adequacy. Whether or not one should argue for a premise may depend on whether the argument is occurring in the context of a quarrel, an attempt at rational persuasion, or an exchange involving hostile advocacy. But from our perspective here, growing out of the logico-epistemic evaluation of arguments especially as conceived by informal logic, we may set such issues aside. From our perspective, the issues of argument evaluation concern whether the conclusion is justified in light of the premises and whether those premises are justified. We address ourselves exclusively to premise adequacy in this sense in this essay.

To give just a hint of our answer, let us say here that premise acceptability is to be explicated in terms of presumption, which depends upon the source vouching for a statement. By a source, we do not mean simply some person or organization that might put forward that statement. If one believes some premise because one perceives that the state of affairs the premise alleges to hold actually does hold, one's own perception is the source (at least *a* source) vouching for that premise. What sources then may vouch for a premise? May we presume a particular source reliable in general or under certain circumstances? Because presumptions can be undercut or defeated, what factors defeat a presumption for a source's reliability? If we know how to answer these questions, we might very well be able to determine whether there is a presumption for a premise. But why should one worry about this question in the first place? Does the

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standard textbook account not tell us that an argument is good from the logical point of view just in case it has true premises which either deductively entail or give inductively strong support to the conclusion? Why is truth not the proper criterion for premise adequacy? That indeed would seem to be the first question. We turn to it in Chapter 1.

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Acknowledgments

Some material prepared for this book has appeared in various previously published papers. Material from Chapter 1 appeared in “Why Classical Foundationalism Cannot Provide a Proper Account of Premise Acceptability,” *Inquiry* (1996). Material from Chapter 2 was included in “A Dialectical Approach to Premise Acceptability,” *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Argumentation* (1991). Material from Chapter 3 appeared in “Consider the Source: One Step in Assessing Premise Acceptability,” *Argumentation* 10 (1996), 453–60 (© 1996 Kluwer Academic Publishers). “Consider the Source” appeared earlier in *Analysis and Evaluation: Proceedings of the Third ISSA Conference on Argumentation 2* (1995). Further material from Chapter 3 appeared in “The Pragmatic Dimension of Premise Acceptability,” in *Anyone with a View: Theoretical Contributions to the Study of Argumentation*, 2003 (© 2003 Kluwer Academic Publishers). This paper also was included in the *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Argumentation* (2003). Material from Chapter 4 was included in “Epistemic Justification and Premise Acceptability,” *Argumentation* 10 (1996), 59–68 (© 1996 Kluwer Academic Publishers). Material from both Chapters 3 and 4 also appeared in “Premise Acceptability, Deontology, Internalism, Justification,” *Informal Logic* (1995). Sections 1 and 2 of Chapter 5 are largely drawn from “What Types of Statements Are There?” *Argumentation* 14 (2000), 135–57 (© 2000 Kluwer Academic Publishers). An earlier version of this paper appears in *Argumentation & Rhetoric* (1998). Material from Chapter 8 is included in “Can Interpretations Ever Be Acceptable Basic Premises?” in *Argumentation and Its Applications: Proceedings of the Fourth OSA Conference*, 2002. I hereby express my thanks to these publications and their editors for allowing me to

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Acknowledgments

use this material. In particular I note that material from the three articles in *Argumentation* and the article in *Anyone with a View* appears with kind permission of Kluwer Academic Publishers.

We wish to thank the editor of *The Monist* for permission to reprint selections from “Concepts of Epistemic Justification” by William P. Alston, Copyright © 1985, *THE MONIST: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*, Peru, Illinois USA, 61354. Reprinted by permission. We wish to thank Dr. James Q. Wilson and The Free Press for permission to include quotations from *The Moral Sense* by James Q. Wilson. Copyright © 1993 by James Q. Wilson. Reprinted with permission of the author and The Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster. All rights reserved. Work on this book has occupied two sabbatical years, in 1994 and 2001, when I held Fellowship Leaves from Hunter College of The City University of New York. I hereby gratefully acknowledge Hunter College’s granting me these leaves.