Book Reviews

ACCEPTABLE PREMISES: AN EPISTEMIC APPROACH TO AN INFORMAL LOGIC PROBLEM. By JAMES B. FREEMAN, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 1-401. ISBN: 0521833019, hb. US$85, ISBN: 0521540607, pb. US$35.

At a recent conference, one of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation conferences I believe, Jonathan Adler began his remarks by reminding us that we engage with sound arguments all of the time. People present standpoints with concise and appropriate support and have those standpoints accepted or appropriately challenged as a matter of course. These easily resolved argumentational encounters are often seen as the tissue of more complex issues, for it is through what we jointly accept that consensus in argument is reached. Argument converges through the modality of accepted beliefs, even if merely tentative or hypothetical. The existence of good arguments raises a deep question: how is effective argument possible? The topic of James Freeman's new book, *Acceptable Premises*, is at the core of an answer.

For those of us who have followed Freeman's work with interest, *Acceptable Premises* offers another example of the care and optimism that characterizes much of his output. Freeman likes to show how things work, and *Acceptable Premises* attempts to grapple with the deep epistemological underpinnings that set the basic condition for arguments, that is, premises that are agreed upon because they are acceptable. Although the book is focused around an essential problem, Freeman has thought-provoking contributions to make to a number of issues that relate to his central concern while being of considerable interest on their own. And in doing so, he responds to a host of scholars (the book references some 250 works) and alternative points of view. His analysis is structured by a discussion of statement kinds and includes a theory of 'intuitions' ranging from the *a priori* to the institutional, an interesting and somewhat technical account of subjunctives, explanation, and evaluation.

As the book's title suggests, the core is an epistemic account of how acceptable premises come to be. Before he enters into his detailed and insightful exploration of epistemic virtue, Freeman rehearses the discussions that lie behind proposals and concerns for a theory of premise acceptability. He offers thoughtful arguments against many of the prevailing accounts, including that of model interlocutors, and opts instead for a view that has deep echoes in traditional epistemology. The discussion identifies two features that serve him well in the constructions that follow. The first is the notion of presumption, with the correlative notions of challenge, burden of proof and expected cost; the second, something he extrapolates from classic eighteenth century belief-centered epistemology (citing Alvin Platinga as his inspiration) is the notion of belief-generating mechanisms. Boldly stated, a statement is acceptable as a premise if and only if there is a presumption in its favor (p. 20). And it has presumption in its favor when it is the result of a suitable belief-generating mechanism, with appropriate hedges about challenges, malfunctions and utility (p. 42ff.). "We shall be arguing that the principles of presumption connect

beliefs with the sources that generate those beliefs. "'Consider the source' could be our motto for determining presumption" (p. 44).

Belief-generating mechanisms are of a variety of sorts. These psycho/social constructs are presented in what might be seen as a philosophical anthropology, that is, a theory of persons seen in their most obvious light: "Taking things at face value" might be another motto, even if only with much qualification. Belief-generating mechanisms need to be adequate to the four-fold analysis of statements: analytic, descriptive, interpretative and evaluative (pp. 97ff.); and they need to engage with three sorts of beliefs: basic, inferred and received (p. 109). Descriptions, for example, rely on the belief-generating mechanisms of perception, which includes perception of qualities, natural and learned signs, introspection, and memory (pp. 124ff.). Perceptions are of three sorts, physical, personal and institutional. Institutional perceptions are presented on the model of "learned constitutive rules" (p. 136). This last is crucial for the modern condition: once mastered, systems of cognitive organization are manifested through mediated perception and enormously increase the range and relevance of sense perceptions, natural signs, and classifications. How far the notion of constitutive rule takes us into this broad and fascinating realm remains to be seen. Freeman relies heavily on examples that show clear presumption. These range across phenomenological descriptions, descriptions in ordinary language, causal claims and explanations, and evaluations. The key to these latter is an interesting account of subjunctive (modal) interpretations constructed upon physical, personal and institutional intuition (chapters 7 and 8). Freeman includes a discussion of testimony as a basis for acceptable premises (chapter 10).

Freeman's emphasis on presumption places his discussions within the context of dialogue, since all presumptions must resist challenge. The concern with dialogic interaction and especially with socially-constituted, institution-derived knowledge moves Freeman beyond traditional psychological accounts of belief in terms of mental states. Thus, his views are connected with significant discussions in both argumentation theory and cognitive psychology. Freeman, however, adheres closely to philosophical constructions, offering an account of epistemic casuistry (chapter 11).

The identification of those belief-generating mechanisms with presumptive force supports what Freeman calls "commonsense foundationalism" (pp. 367ff.). That raises the essential question of the foundation's reach: how much can it support? Belief-generating mechanisms reach only so far. Most sense perceptions are generally acceptable, but what is the reach of sense perception? We can see a tree. Can we also see an oak tree, a healthy tree, a tree that supports a soil bank, a tree that is indicative of the degradation of the environment, a tree as a metaphor for hydrostatic pressure? More is needed, so Freeman calls upon a series of belief-generating mechanisms each more powerful than the preceding. The world around us, and even our value structures, are addressed through available natural classifications, knowledge of trends, and even natural and learned interpretations (particularly those certified by 'institutions,' that is, groups and individuals appropriately certified as expert in a field). But the question can be raised at each level: for example, what is the reach of institution-based interpretations conceived as constitutive rules, as found in, say, a college chemistry textbook? In what contexts and for what purposes would following those rules furnish us with acceptable premises? A chemistry

classroom is one such context. What does that tell us about construing bodies of knowledge as constitutive rules in more substantive contexts of inquiry?

All of the kinds of belief generators have clear instances with presumptive status in contexts that permit easy resolution. There are contexts for each one of them that yield acceptable premises. Freeman's effort is an advance in theory. The articulation and care with which Freeman looks at each of the issues, and his mastery of the relevant arguments at the various levels he explores, give us a welcome contribution to understanding the foundations of argumentation. But whether he has furnished a theory of acceptable premises is another question entirely.

No matter how interesting the detail and no matter the breadth of the concerns that Freeman sets to rest by careful analysis and thoughtful arguments, Adler's insight gives us reason to question the potential yield of his enterprise. For if, as Adler maintains, we argue often and argue well on countless occasions, it should come as no surprise that the various mechanisms by which we come to our premises can be articulated in defensible ways. That is to say, it is interesting to show the existence of acceptable premises only if those premises are interesting. And, of course, a lot of perfectly adequate and ordinary argumentation is of enormous and vital interest to us. Freeman shows this by quite unexceptionable examples. But many of our vital arguments remained unresolved. Competing images of acceptable premises, incongruity between levels of accepted premises (e.g., perceptions contradicting theory) a healthy skepticism about the adequacy of natural signs and classifications (cultural and other sorts of deep bias) and the ever-changing nature of the institutions that determine our sophisticated beliefs (the disciplines and fields of knowledge) all conspire to call the easy solutions of commonsense into question.

Freeman has a strong affinity for Thomas Reid with over 30 citations in the index, followed closely by Reid's champion, Plantinga. All three share a deep commitment to the availability of acceptable epistemic states as the bases for beliefs ranging from the sensory to the ethical, with a presumptive intuition of the *a priori* to knit it together. It is a powerful and persuasive stance. Freeman advocates "commonsense foundationalism" as a tonic against the skeptics (pp. 367ff.), and his foundationalism has an immediate effect on the theory of argument. Skepticism aside, Freeman sees a commonsense foundation for arguments in a broad class of available and acceptable premises of various epistemic sorts for an enormous range of argumentation concerns. In addition to arguments there is argumentation, and Freeman calls for "epistemic casuistry" as a complement. This includes such presumptive mechanisms as memory, personal testimony, chains of testimony, summary report and non-projective generalization, established authority, physical intuition, personal intuition, institutional intuition, interpretations, and evaluations. Freeman offers policies on meeting challenges addressed to these particulars, and reaching, as before, as far as explanation and evaluation (pp. 319-366). This is a considerable yield. If the skeptic is committed to the universal negative, Freeman has certainly given us particular affirmatives, as well as an account of them.

This raises an essential question. Can epistemic casuistry meet the needs of complex arguments for which networks of commitments need to be sorted out, weighed and evaluated? Can epistemic casuistry accommodate the "web of belief"? Freeman acknowledges Quinean web-of-belief theories, and views them as possible

competitors to his basically linear construction. It is linear in that it does not have the open dialectical character that field-based views of belief require, even if it is only *basically* linear, since it has 'loops' where competing potentially acceptable premises are challenged in order to determine where the presumption lies. On a web of belief account, however, beliefs are the result of forces across the field as a whole or across significant sub-portions of the field, rather than the result of belief-generation at a particular level. But the web of belief is a metaphor and after accepting the possibility of an alternative account Freeman can only point to the sorry fact that the intuition behind the web of belief remains unarticulated (p. 374).

Freeman has mounted an effective case for the availability of acceptable reasoning across a wide range of contexts, and in doing so offers an image of acceptability rooted in common sense and basic cognitive procedures. Persuasive examples of particular kinds of belief-generators are available, showing that we come to belief in ordinary ways about ordinary affairs including the internalization of available systems of institutional knowledge. This reflects the concern of informal logic with ordinary argumentation, and the traditional eighteenth century empiricist epistemology with its characteristic grounding of knowledge in sensory experience. It sees the edifice of knowledge as built upon experience through accessible cognitive procedures. This raises an issue that has exercised me throughout my speculations about informal logic: can an adequate theory of argument, and *a fortiori* a theory of acceptable premises, be based on the common and effective use of argument in relatively non-controversial contexts? Or does it require the exploration of contexts that cannot furnish easily seen resolutions? What of difficult arguments that draw on various competing points of view and require the careful evaluation of complex underlying theories, arguments that rest heavily on what Ralph Johnson has taught me to call "knowledge structures"? In my view, the theory of argument needs to focus on the hard cases, for they tell us more about the essential functioning of the underlying structure of belief that supports and reflects the hard won results of disciplined inquiry. For these show what commonsense obscures: how meta-theoretic concerns—like the breadth of explanatory scope, the depth of theoretic support, and the degree of articulation—connect a claim with a sub-structure of commitments. These are tacit in daily life, but their exhumation can account for the strength of our commitments where appropriate and offer a critical probe where our commonsense is more the result of historical contingency than of an inerrant grasp of the truth.

Freeman is aware of the need for complex judgments and sees the limits of acceptable premises just where inference is required. A web-based theory of knowledge, to the contrary, sees all premises as subject to revision in light of considerations from elsewhere. Thus, all premises are defeasible in a manner that makes acceptable premises an inherently dialogical category. Freeman approaches these issues when discussing the challenges to putative acceptable premises, and the idea of epistemic casuistry is focused directly on that problem, particularly in the discussion of expert opinion as a species of testimony (pp. 303ff.). He offers a budget of considerations relevant to establishing expert authority and conflict among experts (pp. 344ff.). But although complex, the discussion is derived from general considerations of adequate testimony discussed earlier (pp. 299ff.) and he pays little attention to the interactions between claims and complex knowledge bases, each with different epistemic yield and more or less entrenched commitments. And this is just what a web-of-belief-account should furnish.

Such a substantive notion of the web of belief begins in Toulmin with the distinction between warrant and backing and the essential role of rebuttal. But those deep structural affinities remain disconnected from their natural arena of employment (disciplined inquiry) because of the enormous difficulty of articulating the relationships within the web and especially how the weighting of nodes changes as a function of disturbances across the network. My intuition is that such a model can be available working from clear instances, and requires a return to metamathematical formulations in places of informal descriptions. On such a view, the "constitutive rules" of disciplinary practice are rules for settling cases more than they are indications of cases settled. They don't give us acceptable premises as much as acceptable modes for exploring hypotheses. Falliblism in the disciplines is no mere epistemological posture; it constructs the very tissue of dialectical growth and it is the engine of epistemic adequacy over time. But that is a story for another place.

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COOPERATIVE ARGUMENTATION: A MODEL FOR DELIBERATIVE COMMUNITY. By JOSINA M. MAKAU AND DEBIAN L. MARTY. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001. Pp. xiii, 1-295. ISBN:1-57766-139-7. US$19.95

All information, we are told in the first chapter of *Cooperative Argumentation*, is partial and derives from a specific perspective, indeed, often from an intentional desire to promote that very perspective. Objectivity is not something we can depend on, especially when we are trying to assess information or understand a position. "*Every perspective is necessarily partial,*" appears in italics on page 11, followed by the dictum that understanding viewpoints alternative to our own expands our sense of knowing the full story. Thus these two ideas, being critically aware of unintended and intended bias, and seeking to expand our understanding of issues in an open and critical way form the pillars that underlie this interesting book. The emphasis is that being critical involves operating within a community, and that doing so requires both cooperative values and specific skills.

This book is not a traditional book on Informal Logic. The description of fallacies takes roughly 15 pages, and the entire chapter, "Evaluating Arguments," is the final one in the book and uses about 40 pages. The book is largely concerned with articulating the following premiss (italics and bold in original): Dialogue is "*a process of communicating* ***with*** *(rather than at, to or for) others and the sharing of a mutual commitment to hear and be heard*" (46). There is a fair bit in this statement to give pause to a philosopher: how do we distinguish the four types of talking? how can we know when someone is "heard"? One must persist in the authors' explication to understand the approach. Emotions, for example, play a significant role. So-called "critical emotions," *viz.*, empathy and compassion, allow us to better understand a position, though not necessarily accept it. Even anger plays a role in signaling intensity of feeling and potential problems within a relationship.