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Commentary on Erik C. W. Krabbe's "Winning and Losing for Arguers"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In "Winning and Losing for Arguers" Erik Krabbe points out that in both practice and theory the terms 'winning' and 'losing' are often applied to argumentative discussions. On the other hand, he also notes that there are theoretical discussions in which the application of these terms is dismissed. The question Krabbe then seeks to answer is: "Can the concepts of winning and losing be given a precise content in a way such that justice is done to these antagonistic views about their role in argumentation?" (p. 1) Krabbe's answer to this question is 'yes.' His primary strategy for reaching this answer is to distinguish the victory sense of winning from the benefit sense of winning. According to Krabbe: "Using this distinction it turned out to be possible to defuse the apparent incompatibility between a win-win situation and a win-loss situation." (p. 10). More significantly however, he concludes:

That only one of the parties can win in the victory sense of 'winning' does, also where theory is concerned, not exclude that both parties may win in the benefit sense. The term can, therefore, equally be applied to those types of discussions that are cooperation-oriented. (p. 11)

2. FURTHER CLARIFICATIONS OF 'WINNING'

I begin my commentary by challenging Krabbe's just quoted inference from "both parties may win in the benefit sense" to "the term can, therefore, equally be applied to those types of discussion that are cooperation-oriented," on the grounds that while the former claim is true, the latter claim is false. Consider the following three pairs of sentences:

- (1) Arthur won his chess match.
- (2) Betty won the lottery.

- (3) Charles won the medal of honor.
- (4) David won a million dollars.

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- (5) Edgar won the queen after 30 moves.
- (6) George won our admiration for his generosity.

Each pair corresponds to one of the three definitions given in Krabbe's paper. The first pair involves being victorious in some competitive activity. The second pair involves obtaining some benefit or prize as the result of some competition, struggle, bet, etc. The final pair involves obtaining some benefit as a result of some sort of effort. But now consider the following pair:

- (7) Hillary won the debate.
- (8) Indira won that argument.

Unless arguments or debates are themselves benefits that can be obtained, the only plausible interpretation of these sentences is via the victory sense of 'argument.' But Krabbe's claim that 'winning' can be applied to cooperation-oriented argumentative discussions requires applying the benefit sense of 'win' to argumentative discussions. Such an application is just a category mistake—arguments are not benefits that can be obtained as the result of competitions or hard work. David does not win an argument in the same way that he wins a million dollars or wins our praise. So whatever use of winning/losing is available to advocates of cooperative argumentation will not sanction claims such as "person x won argument y."

What uses of winning/losing will be sanctioned? Krabbe's discussion of Gilbert's claims on winning is illustrative. But first what Krabbe calls the benefit sense of winning requires further refinement. Note that, given Krabbe's three quoted definitions, there are two benefit senses of winning. The first benefit sense is tied to the prize obtained in some sort of competition, etc., and so is closely tied with the victory sense of winning. In other words for any sort of competition or activity in which one can be victorious and there is a sanctioned prize, P, for being victorious, then the first benefit sense of winning allows us to say of the winner of the competition that they won P. Call this the prize or spoils sense of win. Since our talk of win-win situations does not include the cases where two or more individuals are both winners because of a tie, we cannot account for win-win situations in terms of the prize sense of 'win'. Given the close tie of the prize sense of win to being victorious in some sort of competitive activity, advocates of cooperative argumentation—such as Gilbert or Makau and Marty—will eschew the prize sense of win as well.

The second benefit sense of 'win' however is not so closely tied to winning a struggle or competition. For example, Edgar can win the queen after 30 moves, but still lose the chess match to Arthur. Indeed, the second benefit sense of 'win' need not be attached at all to the sorts of struggles or competitions that have winners and losers. George can win our admiration for his generosity outside the context of a bet or game or competition or struggle, etc. Call this second benefit sense of win the obtainment sense of win.

So my understanding, which effectively mirrors Krabbe's, of Gilbert's comments about there being no clear winner in a creative argument, but both parties still coming out ahead is as follows: no party to the argument is necessarily the winner in the victory sense, but all parties can obtain some sort of benefit from going through the process of

arguing creatively with each other. Perhaps each wins a better understanding of the positions and beliefs of the other parties to the discussion and perhaps also one's own position, etc. Hence, all parties can win in the obtainment sense of win.

3. HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE DISTINCTION?

But how much are we to make of the fact that there is a place within the cooperative based view of argumentation for the concept of winning, at least in the sense of gaining a benefit from engaging in the process of arguing? Not much I think, for several reasons. Firstly, so far all that appeal to the victory/prize/obtainment distinction does justice to is Gilbert's downplaying of winning on the one hand and allowing it in one sense on the other. In other words the distinction allows us to interpret all of Gilbert's statements about winning as true. But appeal to the distinction does not in the same way do justice to cooperative argumentation theorists' disavowals of winning on the one hand and adversarial argumentation theorists' avowals of winning on the other. Indeed, given the distinction we should reasonably interpret the disavowals of the concept of winning as disavowals of the victory sense of winning in direct opposition to the adversarial argumentation theorists' avowals of the theoretical significance of the victory sense of winning.

Secondly, while Krabbe argues for the claim that the victory sense of win necessarily has the benefit sense of win attached—a claim I would dispute—what is significant about the obtainment sense of winning is that it can occur separately from competitive endeavours that have victors and losers. Indeed, given that the obtainment sense of win need not apply to competitive endeavours, it is no surprise that it can be applied to argumentative discussions conceived non-competitively. Note, however, that saying that the obtainment sense of winning can be applied in the context of argumentative discussions is still not to sanction such phrases as “x won argument y” or “x was the winner of argument y,” but at best phrases such as “x won z in virtue of participating in argument y” or “x was a winner in argument y.” Put another way, while there may only be, at most, one winner *of* the argument, everyone can win *in* the argument or win in virtue of arguing.

Thirdly, the obtainment sense of ‘winning’ is easily replaced by language such as ‘gaining’, ‘acquiring’, ‘achieving a benefit’ with no mention of winning at all. Why eschew the term ‘winning’? Because it is so easily interpreted in its victory or prize sense, both of which engender the competitive or adversarial way of thinking or approaching argumentation that the cooperative theorists are trying to avoid. Hence, the mere fact that sense can be made of applying the notion of winning even to non-adversarial theories does not imply that it should be so applied.

Indeed, it is whether ‘winning’ *ought* to have a significant theoretical role that points to the fundamental issue between adversarial models of argumentation and cooperative models of argumentation—whether the best way of achieving the desired outcomes in contexts in which we offer and evaluate reasons is via an adversarial model of arguing or a cooperative model. If the best way to resolve disputes, achieve the truth, etc. is via the adversarial model, then winning ought to be part of our theory of argument. But if the best way is not via the adversarial model, but rather through some sort of cooperative model, then winning may have little or no role to play.

Is there any way to resolve the issue concerning which sort of model is best? I suspect the answer is no because I suspect that there is no model that will cover all cases of argumentation. If the demands of justice are best served by an adversarial model, then some argumentation will involve victors and losers, whereas if scientific inquiry is best served by an inquisitional model, then some argumentation will not involve victors and losers. Note also that even within the jurisprudential sphere, debate rages over the merits and demerits of adversarial models and non-adversarial models, such that it may turn out that adversarial and inquisitorial models are equal, but different, methods for achieving the desired outcome of justice.

4. CONCLUSION

Clearly resolving the issue of which, if any, model of argumentation is best is beyond the scope of these comments. But given that cooperative models can eschew the use of the term ‘winning’ in any of its senses, without such a resolution we cannot yet determine whether ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ ought to play a significant role in our best theory of argumentation.

[Link to reply](#)

[Link to paper](#)

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