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Commentary on Mohammed

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Commentary on Dima Mohammed's *"Ad hominem* as a Derailment of Confrontational Strategic Manoeuvring"

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One of the nice things about the OSSA conferences is that every two years I get a chance to comment on a paper about pragma-dialectics; this helps me to keep up with recent developments of the theory. I have learned a lot from studying Mohammed's paper. I find her essay intriguing and stimulating and given her starting points, I think she develops a very interesting analysis of what she calls *inconsistency retorts*, a kind of *tu quoque* challenge to a standpoint. Let me see whether I can briefly review her argument. Then I will suggest some questions to begin our discussion of her paper.

The *tu quoque* fallacy (you too) consists in "pointing out an inconsistency between the other party's ideas and deeds in the past and/or present" (*ACF*, p. 212). In this paper Mohammed uses the expression "accusation of inconsistency retort" as neutral and *tu quoque* to denote a fallacious use of an inconsistency retort.

The pragma-dialectical method for resolving differences of opinions has two aspects to it: (1) the resolution of differences of opinion by *critical testing* of standpoints, and (2) *strategic manoeuvring*. Although the concept of 'critical testing' is not explained in the presentation to-day, I believe what is meant is that a standpoint is critically tested only if it follows a specified dialectical procedure such as that recommended by the Critical Discussion model. In contrast, *strategic manoeuvring* allows that it is not unreasonable to attempt 'to win' an argumentative discussion by selecting certain moves over others in a critical discussion, provided one doesn't run afoul of the requirements of the *dialectical procedure*.

In part, the dialectical procedure consists in viewing a critical discussion as having four stages. At the *confrontation stage* the nature of the disagreement that constitutes the difference of opinion is identified (it includes neither the giving of arguments nor the critical reactions to arguments). In the *opening stage* the ground rules for the discussion, as well as the starting points, are agreed upon. There must be common starting points, shared standards of good arguments, and a decision procedure for determining the outcome of the argumentation. It is at the *argumentation stage* where the arguments for a standpoint and doubt against it are made. The defender of the standpoint makes arguments, attempting to overcome his antagonist's doubts; the antagonist holds on to her doubt unless the arguments she hears make it reasonable for her to give them

up. The *concluding stage* has to do with deciding what was achieved by the discussion: was the standpoint successfully defended, or does doubt about it still prevail? Only if the arguers can agree on these questions, has the difference of opinion been resolved.

In an ideal critical discussion the arguers pursue their disagreement sequentially through the four stages—or, at least, they ideally pursue the disagreement as far as they need to in order to eliminate the disagreement.

What is remarkable (worthy of remark) about the PD analysis is that it takes inconsistency retorts to be moves made at the confrontation stage of argumentative discussions: even before the rules for the argumentation stage have been agreed upon, and hence some distance in advance of the argumentation stage. (Perhaps that is why we never hear about *tu quoque arguments* in this essay.)

The kinds of disagreements that PD recognizes: Limiting ourselves to *simple disputes*—those involving just one standpoint— we have *non-mixed disputes*, formally expressed as <+/p, ?(+/p)> and *mixed disputes*, <+/p, −/p>. Mixed disputes are to be broken down into two non-mixed disputes—<+/p, ?(+/p)> and <−/p, ?(−/p)>—and, ideally, dealt with one at a time.

The present paper also introduces a third kind of dispute, what Dima Mohammed calls a *no dispute*. I am not able to find a definition of this kind of dispute in my books.[1] "For a dispute to arise at all" according to the 1992 book, "it is necessary that there be doubt concerning a standpoint" (p. 16). However, according to Mohammed, a disagreement eliminated is a *no dispute*, a confrontation that turns out to involve no difference of opinion, and no doubt. This is one of the three kinds of disputes. Such a *no-dispute dispute* may be represented like this:

$$[<+/p, +/p> \lor <−/p, −/p> \lor <?(+/p), ?(+/p)> \lor <?(−/p), ?(−/p)>]$$

Here are some examples of non-mixed disputes; doubt is expressed by the second speaker in each case through the use of an accusation of inconsistency (an inconsistency retort):

Father to daughter:	Don't smoke! [*standpoint*]
Daughter to father:	(not-A) You used to smoke dad & (A) you say one shouldn't smoke [*inconsistency retort*]
Critic to sportsman:	You shouldn't kill animals for sport (pleasure) [*standpoint*]
Sportsman to critic:	(not-A) You take pleasure from eating meat & (A) you say one shouldn't kill animals for pleasure [*inconsistency retort*]
Cameron to Brown:	"Borrowing should not have been allowed" entailed by

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[1] Mohammed refers us to *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, pp. 16 - 22, but I did not find 'no dispute' as a type of dispute discussed there.

	"Government policies contribute to the recession" [*standpoint*]
Brown to Cameron:	You are committed to the proposition that borrowing had to be allowed (not-A) & you say that borrowing should not have been allowed (A) [*inconsistency retort*]

In each of these cases, according to Mohammed, the inconsistency retorts may be understood as attempts by the second speaker to have the first speaker withdraw his standpoint. Imagine the following sequence of moves.

1. Cameron   +/p
2. Brown   ?(+/p) [Lines 1 and 2 constitute a *non-mixed dispute*]
3. Cameron   ?(+/p) [Lines 2 and 3 constitute a *no-dispute dispute*]

Let us next review the concept of strategic manoeuvring. In general, strategic manoeuvring is the managing of a process to make it turn out as desired. For rhetoric it might be this:

(SM)$_R$ = *Strategic manoeuvring* is when a speaker designs his communication in view of his knowledge of the audience in such a way that it is most likely to bring about the response in the audience he intends.

The pragma-dialectical adaptation of strategic manoeuvring is as follows:

(SM)$_{PD}$ = *Strategic manoeuvring* is the attempts by a discussant to steer a discussion towards the outcome that is most favourable to her.[2]

There can be a tension between, on the one hand, an arguer's desire 'to win' and her subsequent engagement in strategic manoeuvring and, on the other hand, her obligation to be dialectical.

In a word, the kind of argumentative phenomenon Mohammed is dealing with is that in which one speaker has a standpoint, and the second speaker expresses doubt about that standpoint via an inconsistency retort. That will be a non-mixed dispute in which the first speaker would have the obligation of defending his standpoint. If the first speaker wants to avoid this obligation (and the possibility of having to withdraw his standpoint), then he may strategically manoeuvre to change the definition of the dispute form a non-mixed one to a *no-dispute dispute.*

Strategic manoeuvring, PD-style, can be reasonable, thinks Mohammed if the attempt contributes to the establishment of the type of difference of opinion as a *no-dispute dispute* without preventing any other defining of the difference of opinion (p. 6);

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[2] Sometimes Mohammed writes that 'strategic manoeuvring' refers to "attempts to *reasonably* steer" (p. 4), and sometimes she writes "a *reasonable* case of strategic manoeuvring" (p. 5). The issue here is whether 'reasonable' should be considered as part of the df of SM, or whether we would say that there a reasonable cases of SM, and non-reasonable cases of SM as well.

that is, without preventing the defining of the difference in some other way.

Accordingly, Mohammed introduces the the Freedom Requirement: *A dialectically reasonable accusation of inconsistency (A and not-A) at turn n must not preclude the possibility that the expressed opinion (A) is maintained at turn n+1.* Perhaps the justification of the freedom requirement is the first PD rule, the freedom rule: *Discussants must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints.*

The discussant with standpoint *A,* who engages in strategic manoeuvring at the confrontation stage by use of an inconsistency retort, in order to define the disagreement as a *non-dispute dispute,* attempts to get her interlocutor to withdraw that part of the inconsistency that is inconsistent with A. In our case study, like this:

Cameron: "Borrowing should not have been allowed" (A) entailed by "Government policies contribute to the recession" [*standpoint*]

Brown: You, Cameron, say both that borrowing had to be allowed (not-A) & that borrowing should not have been allowed (A) [*inconsistency retort*]

Brown: A commitment to *not allowing borrowing* is presented as a commitment that would *deprive families and business of real help* [*strategic manoeuvring*]

Cameron: OK, withdraw commitment to *not allowing borrowing*

Cameron: OK, then withdraw standpoint that Government policies contribute to the recession.

Result: *No-dispute dispute.*

Mohammed analysis is that Brown transgresses the Freedom Requirement when he associates Cameron's standpoint that borrowing should not have been allowed with an insensitivity to people's problems. That association somehow makes Cameron's choice of how to define the difference of opinion unfree. "An alleged inconsistency retort derails into the *tu quoque* fallacy," writes Mohammed, because "an alleged inconsistency in one's position is misused to violate one's freedom to adopt a certain point of view"[3] (p. 9). Thus the effect of the Freedom Requirement is to restrict the kind of strategic manoeuvring that is reasonable.

Questions

1) How could Brown have manoeuvred to a *no-dispute dispute* without violating the Freedom Requirement? Some different examples of this would be helpful.

2) What is the 'representing' relation in *representing commitment C as commitment D?*

3) What if we reconstruct Brown's manoeuvring as follows?

(1) If borrowing is not allowed then that will deprive families and business of real

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[3] Does it make any difference if we take out the word "alleged"?

help
(2) It would be impolitic of Mr Cameron to be seen as being in favour of depriving families and businesses of real help
(3) Surely, Mr Cameron does not want to deprive families and businesses of real help
(4) Hence, Mr Cameron should withdraw his implicit claim that borrowing should not have been allowed
(5) Hence, Cameron must withdraw his standpoint that government policies contribute to the recession.
(6) So, our disagreement is eliminated.

4) This would mean that there is some argument going on at the confrontation stage. Is that possible?

5) Mohammed analyzes the passage as a simple non-mixed dispute: Cameron has a standpoint and Brown expresses doubt about it through the use of an inconsistency retort. But alternatively, and I think more realistically, it is Brown (the Government) who has a standpoint and Cameron who has expressed doubt about it. If we view it this way, we can make quite a bit of sense out of the excerpted passage.

Brown: Borrowing must be allowed   [*standpoint*]
Cameron: ?? (Borrowing should be allowed)   [*expression of doubt*]
Brown: [A number of arguments to remove Cameron's doubt, including the inconsistency retort.]

If we analyse the given textual example like this we have a more complete analysis of the remarks made by Brown, but the inconsistency retort assumes a somewhat lesser role.

6) We may view the text yet another way. In the context of a debate in the British House of Commons, the difference of opinion that is important to Brown is the one between his Government and those who have doubts about his policy of allowing unfunded tax cuts. Seen this way, Brown is not so much trying to make a response to Cameron as he is trying to defend his government's position in the British House of Commons. In response to Cameron, he defends the Government's position in what appears to be three ways. Most importantly, he gives a supporting argument for his standpoint, namely that it will help people and businesses through a difficult time caused by the international financial crisis. This appears to be Brown's main argument. Second, in saying that everyone agrees that the economic downturn started in America, he implies that the change in policy is necessitated by factors beyond his Government's control and hence that the change in policy is forced upon him. Third in importance, he minimizes Cameron's objection to his standpoint by pointing out that Cameron is inconsistent on the same question. On this view the *tu quoque* charge is ancillary [secondary] to the main argument. It can be taken in a number of ways all of which may be in play. It may have the rhetorical role of reminding the members of the House (the audience) that at one time Cameron advocated the very policy that the Government is now pursuing and that therefore Cameron's present objection to the policy needs some explanation on his part. Or, the charge of

inconsistency may be intended to have the dialogical role of quieting Cameron's opposition and allowing Brown to concentrate on the positive arguments (see Whately's *Elements of Logic*). Or, finally, although Brown's remark that Cameron has changed his mind does leave the implication that he is inconsistent, the remark seems contextually to be more closely associated with the one that follows it, namely, that Cameron would deprive people of real help for business and families. So, rather than dwelling on Cameron's inconsistency, Brown uses it to to show his audience that Cameron's present position leads to undesirable results. Seen this way, the strategic manoeuvring in which Brown engages is with the House and the public, Cameron's views are but a pawn in the game.

This last observation may be developed a little further. If we take two propositions, A and not-A, we can either conjoin them and have an inconsistency, or we can disjoin them and possibly forge a dilemma. A dilemma can also be used either to express doubt about a standpoint or to give someone pause about their doubt. Looking at the text we are given, we notice that Brown never actually makes an inconsistency retort; what he says is that Cameron has changed his mind—given up an earlier view for a later view—something that rationality often requires (consider what must happen at the closing stage of a critical discussion). Mohammed interprets Brown's remarks as an inconsistency retort, but that may not be what was foremost in Brown's mind since he explicitly offers his hearers a choice though a disjunctive question: "Do we want to help people through difficult times or do we want to take the advice […] [of the] […] Conservative Government and do absolute ly nothing to help people in time of need?" This question can be seen as the outcome of a constructive dilemma, which begins with a disjunctive proposition of the form A and not-A.

> EITHER borrowing should be allowed OR borrowing should not be allowed
> IF borrowing is allowed, as Brown and his government are recommending, THEN we will be able to help people through difficult times.
> IF borrowing is not allowed, as it wasn't during the earlier Conservative Government, THEN hardships will fall on the people
> Hence, EITHER we want to help people through difficult times OR we reject the advice . . . [of the] . . . Conservative Government to do absolutely nothing to help people in time of need

On this interpretation of what Brown says, he does not make an inconsistency retort at all. What he does is he shows his audience that either Cameron must agree with him or follow a route that would be very unpopular.

7) Suggestions for a subsequent version. More detailed, technical statements of what 'inconsistency retorts,' *tu quoque*, 'no dispute' and 'critical testing' are would be very useful. (No-dispute disputes are like decafinated coffee, alcohol-free beer, marriages without love—something is missing! It's not really coffee, it's not really beer, it's not really a marriage—it's not really a dispute).

Link to paper