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Commentary on van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans

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Commentary on Frans H. Van Eemeren, Peter Houtlosser and A. Francisca Snoeck Henkemans:
"Dialectical Profiles and Indicators of Argumentative Moves"

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1. INTRODUCTION

The pragma-dialecticans have expanded the repertoire of analytical instruments available for relating their ideal model for a critical discussion to the complex and rich world of "real life" argumentation. Now, in addition to principles and procedures for normative reconstruction, directions for dialectical reconstruction, a well developed approach to analyzing the pragmatic organization of conversational argument, and the design flexibility of strategic manoeuvring, they have developed a conceptual apparatus aptly titled "the dialectic profile." I must admit that it sometimes seems that the elegance of their model for an ideal critical discussion is about to be overwhelmed by the complexity of scaffolding necessary to bring argumentation as actually practiced within the scope of the model. But my response here is not to complain about the addition. On the contrary, I think the careful attention pragma-dialectians have paid to the connections between "real world" discourse and their abstract framework for the evaluation of argumentation is a strength of their research program, and their proposed conception of *dialectical profiles* may even prove useful to the broader array of scholars who take normative pragmatic approaches to the study of argumentation. In the first part of the paper I will try to indicate why I think that may be so; in the second part I will offer a question and a suggestion regarding dialectical profiles.

2. THE POTENTIAL USEFULNESS OF DIALECTICAL PROFILES IN THE ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTATION

Our authors adapt their conception of dialectical profiles from the work of Walton and Krabbe, and assign it a special role in the pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentation. Let us first recall the concept's assigned role and then look at its broader applicability.

        The idea of a "dialectical profile" is fundamentally an abstract design concept: a mode of representing options available and appropriate to the several components of a larger architecture. In this case the larger architecture is the pragma-dialectical model for an ideal critical discussion, and dialectical profiles are abstract representations of the

legitimate moves available to arguers for fulfilling the functions required by at each stage of the ideal model.

> Our *dialectical* profile is from the outset a purely normative concept and can be defined as a sequential pattern of the moves that the participants in a critical discussion are entitled – and in some sense obliged – to make to realize a particular dialectical aim in a particular stage or sub-stage of the discussion. . . [T]hey can be used as a design for capturing the moves that are instrumental at a particular stage or sub-stage of a critical discussion. (Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007)

By systematically and comprehensively identifying the dialectical profiles available at each stage in an ideal critical discussion, pragma-dialecticians expect to develop an inventory of the linguistic, grammatical, and functional indicators used to identify moves in argumentative discourses.

This potential contribution to pragma-dialectic's "indicator project" is of considerable general interest. As anyone who has worked with the text or other recording of an argument knows many of the functions utterances play in the argumentation are often not clearly articulated by the participants, and many basic shared understandings remain unexpressed. Tools which enrich our capacity to recognize and fill in the moves made in the course of argumentation are certainly welcome.

Productive as the analysis of dialectical profiles may prove to be within pragma-dialectics, it has, I suspect, a larger potential utility within the broader range normative pragmatic approaches to the study of argument. Some scholars regard argumentation as communicative interaction which develops within a space created by the commitments arguers undertake and/or incur (Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993; Goodwin, 2001). Whether or no one is committed to a model of argumentation as an ideal critical discussion, it is the case that many of the tasks and objectives which serve as components of that model are important elements in day-to-day argumentation. Arguers ordinarily commit themselves to or are compelled to undertake "burdens of proof." They negotiate and accept common areas of agreement; they act to induce each other to participate in this or that line of argumentation. Critically important questions regarding the design of argumentation within the disagreement space created by arguers concern the ways in which one party's commitments may ramify leading to other commitments and inviting or prompting corresponding responses from other parties to the disagreement (Jackson, 2005, p. 411). The design properties of dialectical profiles seem well suited to representing the how commitments may ramify in disagreement space.

For purposes of illustrating the potential utility of the representation properties inherent in dialectical profiles, I offer an analogous profile of potential exchanges in a type of conversational disagreement space, *viz.*, the sort of space in which one party (A) comments on the concerns of another party (B). My illustration will relax some of the protocols which our pragma-dialecticians impose on the use of dialectical profiles; more specifically, I make no effort to restrict potential contributions to those which conform to the rules governing an ideal critical discussion or would be judged to contribute positively to the resolution of a dispute. Nor will I attempt to duplicate the elegant right-branching notation developed by our authors. Given these reservations, I think the following profile (analogous in mode of representation to a dialectical profile) of potential moves in a type of disagreement space may elicit some interesting observations.

A: [1]You should put your father in a nursing home.

B: [2]Yes. (No further argument is likely.) or
[3]Yes, but . . . (B commits himself to providing some reason for not placing his father in a nursing home.) or
[4]That's none of your business. or
[5]Why do you say that? or
[6]No.

A: [7] {responding to [3]}: I see. (no further argument) or
[8] {responding to [3]}: But that's not a sufficient reason. (A commits herself to providing some overriding reason.) or
[9] {responding to [3]}: Stop kidding yourself! (This will most likely end the argument.)
[10] {responding to [4]}: Your right. Sorry I did not mean to intrude.
[11] {responding to [4]}: Your right, but I'm looking at this from the standpoint of your concerns, and I have some considerations I would like to share with you. (Here A openly undertakes a global probative obligation.)
[12] {responding to [4]}: No, as your father's doctor I have an obligation to inform you about what needs to be done.
[13] {responding to [5]}: Stop kidding yourself. You know your father's condition as well I do. (This would likely end the conversation.)
[14] {responding to [5] Well, that's just my impression; I'm not really qualified to advise you on this matter. But I do think you should give the matter some serious thought.
[15] {responding to [5]} Well, I given this matter a lot of thought. What with my experience with my aging parent and my understanding of your situation, I would say . . . . (Here B openly accepts burden of proof).
[16] {responding to [6]} Okay, I didn't mean to intrude. or
[17] {responding to [7]} No so fast! As your husband I have something to say about this, and I insist that you put your father in a nursing home. (Now the conversation will fork in a different direction and the argument will involve the respective rights and obligations of A and B.)

This branching structure enables us to see any number of interesting things about *conversations regarding the concerns of others.* In [3], [8], [11], and [15], the speakers openly undertake some probative obligations. In [3] and [8] those commitments are rather specifically directed to one issue; in [11] and [15] the commitments undertaken are rather more global relating to a full range of issues that might arise in advising A regarding his father. In [11] those commitments are undertaken in an effort to induce B to consider A's advice; in [15] those commitments are undertaken in response to a request from B. In [12], [13], and [14] A stands behind her initial assertion, but she declines to accept a probative obligation to back it up with reason and evidence. In [17] we see the beginning of an effort to correct the way in B [7] engages in the argumentation. We can also see that expressions related to A's *concerns* and criticism related to *meddling* are important structural indicators in this sort of conversation. We can also see in [4] that

statements made without regard for the commitments and presumptions governing a conversation can be very counterproductive. I do not offer this sketch as anything more than illustration of how the representational resources inherent in the concept of a dialectical profile can enrich our capacity to understand the strategic routes in and through a disagreement space.

3. A QUESTION AND A SUGGESTION

Very briefly I should like to indicate some thoughts I have regarding the uses of dialectical profiles proposed by our Frans, Peter, and Fransica. These comments are offer more in the spirit of "helpful considerations" than that of critical comment.

My question concerns the dialectical profile used to illustrate potential responses in the opening stage of an ideal critical discussion. Here in response to P's refusal to accept the challenge to defend P's standpoint, A has the option of asking 'Why do you refuse?' In explanation we are told that "As reason for not wanting to defend his standpoint here and now, P can for instance say that A is such a well skilled arguer that it might be a good idea if he played the devil's advocate and made an attempt to defend P's standpoint" (Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007). A little reflection suggests that the potential responses P might give for refusing to defend his standpoint and which might be regarded as legitimate moves in the discussion could be fairly extensive. So, for example, P might respond that while P is certain about his standpoint, A has at his disposal all the evidence bearing on its truth, while P currently has no access to that evidence. Or P might allege that on previous occasions A has acknowledged the truth of P's standpoint, suggesting that A's challenge is an attempt to derail the discussion. To these options we should perhaps add the possibility of P accepting A's challenge provisionally, e. g., 'I accept your challenge provided that we give due weight to the urgency of the moment' or, alternatively, 'provided that you duly recognize the priority of my concerns' or, alternatively (in the case where P had denied responsibility for wrong-doing) 'provided that you first make known to me the argument and evidence against me so that I can fairly defend myself'. Moving a bit further into the illustration to the node at which P's option to giving reasons for refusing to accept the challenge to his standpoint is to retract it. Here the absence of further branching suggests that the opening stage would end at that point. But it might not. Suppose that P's standpoint alleged some wrong on A's part, the allegation of which is disturbing to A and damaging to A's reputation. Here A might not accept a simple retraction and might (legitimately) demand that P present the grounds on which he made the allegation so that A has an opportunity to dispel the disturbing belief P expressed. The question raised by these potential expansions of the dialectical profile of the opening stage of the discussion concerns the principles for allocating probative burdens in the confrontation stage. Does the extensive possibility for negotiating the distribution of probative obligations in the opening stage, as revealed by dialectical profiles, tend to undermine the principle that a party who puts forward a standpoint in the confrontation stage can be challenged to defend it?

My suggestion has to do with the range of linguistic and conversational features which are considered as potential indicators of argumentative moves. I did not find in the paper under discussion much attention to the way in purported cognitive and emotional states as well as rights and prudential concerns may figure in the distribution of probative

obligations generated by relevant speech acts. So, for example, A's certainty that B did something which A believes wrongfully harms A may be quite disturbing to A. The fact that A is disturbed (and is thus suffering harm) may be one of the conditions which warrant A's demand that B accept an obligation to answer for B's conduct. Or, as in the conversation profiled above, the fact that the conversation involves A's concerns, which are not necessarily B's concerns, may strikingly influence that argumentative moves available to A and B. It may be that a richer picture of how such considerations figure in speech act might provide indicators of the argumentative moves related to those communicative acts.

link to paper

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