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Dialectical Obligations of Serial Arguers

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ABSTRACT: I examine the concept of the relationship negotiation dialogue (Weger Jr. 2003) in the context of serial arguing (Trapp and Hoff 1985). Between argument episodes, marital partners experiencing difficulty may think about entering counseling, or terminating their relationship. Removed from the dialogical context, such judgments involve the notions of argument as inquiry (Blair 2004; 1992; Johnson 2000) and argument₀ (Hampe 1992). I explore the dialectical obligations of a person who decides to end his relationship.

KEYWORDS: argument₀, dialectical obligations, inquiry, relationship negotiation dialogue, serial argument

INTRODUCTION

One perspective on serial argument is to concentrate on the amount of insight the parties achieve about the source of their disagreement. One kind of serial argument where there is little or no insight involves a confusion of the levels of communication, where parties argue over content issues while not recognizing that their disagreement is really over a relationship issue (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 81; Trapp 1990, p. 54; Sillers and Wilmont 1994, p. 177). Another kind concerns parties who are aware that their arguments are really on the relationship level, and thus the content of the argument episodes is a relationship issue (Trapp Ibid.; Friemann 2005). Both kinds share the same structure articulated by Trapp and Hoff (1985): there are multiple conversational events (CE1, CE2, ...CE_n) which are particular argument episodes over X, and all of these arguments taken together constitute the larger concept of a serial argument about X.

One issue that the marital interaction literature has highlighted concerning serial argument is what to do about the emotional intensity of the argument episodes. For example, Johnson and Roloff (2000, pp. 678-679), recognizing the negative effects of serial argument, recommend certain behaviours *between* argument episodes to counteract such effects. The reason for proposing positive behaviours between argument episodes rather than during them, is that the intensity of argument episodes can be too high for the parties to find the motivation to act in positive ways at that moment. Thus suggestions about how to argue are rendered ineffective. Caughlin and Huston (2002, p. 114), in a paper about the demand/ withdraw interaction pattern, recognize that in *intractable* serial arguments, it may not be realistic to think that the demand/ withdraw pattern can be eliminated. Thus parties will have to engage in positive behaviours between one heated argument episode and another. Gottman has written much about this topic and his popular book (1994) has much advice for the layperson. In particular, he stresses the physiological consequences of marital argument. While he does mention demand/

withdraw (Ibid., p. 151), he is more concerned with similar kinds of destructive patterns, or cascades, that he calls the four horsemen. Crucial to Gottman's analysis is the recognition by the parties that they are feeling emotionally flooded during an argument episode. Feeling flooded interferes with cognitive processing; we cannot think clearly when our bodies are so aroused. When this occurs the parties must stop the argument and take a break long enough for their heart rates to return to normal.

However, all the advice about what to do during and after heated argument episodes will not make any difference if the parties do not give an honest effort. Gottman, for one, is explicit about this several times, and perhaps the following quote sums it up best. "This really comes down to viewing the bottle as half full rather than half empty – the classic choice between optimism and pessimism" (Ibid., p. 183). Of course, supposing that one does choose optimism, success is not assured; separation and divorce are still possible.

This paper concentrates on that possibility. Specifically, it focuses on the situation where a couple is in a serial argument of the second kind; the relationship issue is felt to be intractable; and emotional flooding is a frequent experience. Here, one or both of the parties are likely to entertain serious thoughts about ending the relationship. At the end of his book, Gottman (Ibid., p. 223) asks an interesting question: "If your marriage has been rocky, you may wonder, So just what are sufficient grounds for remaining married?" His answer is this.

While each couple must discover their own answer to this question, my research suggests some answers. At the very least, our studies show how extensive the grounds need to be.

Remember that marital stability rests on a 5 to 1 ratio of good to bad times. Happy solid couples nourish their marriages with plenty of positive moments together.

Learning to resolve conflict effectively is important to maintaining this ratio.

But couples also need a proportionate measure of pleasure and joy in their marriages.

The first point in the quote refers to a ratio. There needs to be a least five times as many good moments as bad ones. So we need to be able to distinguish a good moment from a bad one, and we also need some way of determining the number of these moments, presumably by a tally of some kind. The second point Gottman makes about learning to resolve conflict effectively needs explaining. Gottman's position on conflict resolution is that while an actual resolution to a conflict may be a good thing, it is not necessary for a good relationship (Ibid., p. 175; Cf. the concept of "perpetual problems" in Gottman 1999). So with respect to maintaining the ratio, the tally concerned with "resolving" conflict will not only include the number of conflicts resolved. Crucially, what will be tallied is how parties deal with the emotions their marital problems stir (Gottman 1994, p. 175). What he means by this is captured in his four strategies for breaking negative cycles. In sum, they are the following: calm yourself; speak and listen nondefensively; validate each other; and overlearn these principles (Ibid.).

So when can a partner make a mark in the "good moments" side of the ledger? During an argument, does the partner need to calm him or herself, speak and listen nondefensively, and validate the other? Or is there a lower threshold for achieving a "good moment"? Perhaps one only need to calm oneself and speak (but not listen?) nondefensively? Gottman does not go into such details, but thinking about these issues

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are important not only for the practical suggestions that may arise, but for the examination of the concept of dialectical obligations.

RELATIONSHIP NEGOTIATION DIALOGUE

Drawing from Walton, Harry Weger Jr. (2003) introduces the relationship negotiation dialogue (RND). The goal of the RND is “to create a mutually acceptable definition of the relationship” (Ibid., p. 452). A couple does this by “arguing for interpretations and definitions of the relationship that satisfy their personal and interpersonal needs” (Ibid.). Below is Weger Jr.’s first example of a RND (Ibid., p. 453).

David: You shouldn’t blame yourself every time Bobby misbehaves.
Laura: Don’t tell me how to feel. Stop trying to dominate me!
David: Shut up! I’m not trying to dominate you.
Laura: You see, there you go again! You’re exactly like your dad. Don’t tell me to shut up!

Without going into the details of his analysis, the following points about the example are important for our purposes: Weger Jr. - in the role of the critic - reconstructs David’s opening message as problematic; the critic suggests an alternative opening that would not cause Laura to feel that David’s view of the situation was superior to hers; the theoretical impetus of the alternative opening originates in a therapeutic perspective.

What happens if we suppose that in the example, the critic and David is the same person? Presumably it is an important goal of Weger Jr.’s analysis to make practical suggestions to real people to help them communicate better about their relationship. Certainly this is true for Gottman, from whom Weger Jr. takes the example. So let us imagine a relationship where those scholars concerned with promoting more effective communication among partners have achieved at least this much: one partner in this imaginary relationship, call him Mark, has read, and to a significant degree has understood, some of the literature on marital communication that takes a Gottmanian perspective. Furthermore, Mark understands that when he is arguing with his partner Julie over a relationship issue, that they are having a RND. Thus Mark is keen to employ the suggestions of Weger Jr. in order to facilitate the dialogue. Unfortunately, strife must be introduced into Mark and Julie’s imaginary relationship, for the conceit of this paper is that they are headed for separation and divorce.

INQUIRY AND ARGUMENT₀

Recall that I want to concentrate on intractable serial arguments with many instances of emotional flooding. In order for Mark and Julie’s relationship to fit this situation, many of their past RNDs must not have gone very well. Indeed, things are so bad that Mark is seriously thinking about ending the relationship. At this point he asks himself Gottman’s question as applied to his own case: “Do I have sufficient grounds for remaining in this relationship?” Since this is a serious question for Mark, he decides to treat it with the respect it deserves and hence resolves to get to the truth of the matter. Mark does not feel up to sharing this with Julie, for lately their RNDs have ended particularly badly. Thus he will be engaging in an inquiry (Cf. Blair 2004; 1992; Meiland 1989). A crucial part of

Mark's investigation concerns aspects of the RNDs he has had with Julie. Hample's (1992; 1981; 1985; 1988) concept of argument₀ was meant to bring a cognitive perspective to argument₁ and argument₂, thus completing the understanding of these terms. More generally though, argument₀ refers to the cognitive processes involved in "thinking out" an argument," and I want to focus on "the memorial processes of storage, retrieval, and reconstruction of pertinent cognitive elements" (Hample 1992, p. 92).

Supposing that Mark is looking back on his RNDs in order to come to a decision about the grounds he has for continuing or ending his relationship, Mark will attempt to tally up the good moments of his RNDs. A basic question here is how he is going to do that.

One way for Mark to tally is to try to remember if he felt good at the end of his RNDs (Cf. the notion of our emotional economy in Goleman 2006, p. 14). Two obvious problems arise if he attempts to reflect on his past RNDs in one sitting. First, it will be hard to remember accurately the past RNDs that have occurred long ago, and they are just as relevant as more recent RNDs. The second problem is that depending on how far Mark and Julie are into the marital cascade, Mark's negative thoughts about the relationship may infect his interpretation of past RNDs. Thus he may judge his past RNDs more harshly because he now feels more pessimistic about the relationship (C.f. Gottman 1994, p. 105). These two problems militate against the idea that one could accomplish, in one sitting, an accurate tally of all the good moments of one's RNDs.

Now much work has been done in cognitive science and social psychology about the topics of memory and biases stemming from unconscious influences. While this work is relevant (e.g., LeDoux 1998; Wegner and Bargh 1998) in that it points out the constraints on our thinking, I will not pursue the connections here for it is difficult to integrate this material in a paper concerning practical matters. Perhaps this is why Gottman largely ignores the issues that arise over this material. Gottman's book has numerous self tests where the reader is invited to diagnose his or her problem by answering yes or no to a statement. Many of the individual questions on the self tests require the reader to make a summary judgment about his or her feelings, beliefs, or memories. For example, in part B of the self test called, Telling Your Story, we find these questions: "4) Our lives are very separate; 9) I have only vague memories of our first meeting, the marriage proposal, and our wedding; 10) It seems like problems have beset this marriage throughout; 16) When you come down to it, my marital struggles have been pretty meaningless" (Ibid., p. 134). To my eyes the presentation of the self tests encourage completing each of them in one sitting. The highest and lowest numbers of questions in the tests were 30 and 12 respectively; the mean was 20. With the relatively high number of questions and by having the reader check 'yes' or 'no,' the tests encourage a certain attitude in the reader: to wit, do not spend too much time thinking about the questions. This may be innocuous when the question asks about the reader's present state of belief or feeling, but on summary questions this attitude could be dangerous. By not taking the time to think about past interactions a reader may not accurately report his or her thoughts on the matter.

However, Gottman does raise the issue of potential self-deception over the interpretation of the results of the self test on defensiveness. "If you said that you are not defensive but your spouse is, you may not have been completely honest with yourself" (Ibid., p. 167). Being honest when answering the questions on the self test is important;

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so is giving yourself enough time to remember past interactions on the summary questions. If you are not honest on the summary questions, or you do not allot yourself enough time, you may end up judging that how you feel *all told* on a question like, “It seems like problems have beset this marriage throughout,” is how you feel *now*.

Why does this matter? Why not base one’s decision to end a relationship on one’s current feeling? The answer is that one’s current feeling may lead one to make a mistake that with hindsight, is more or less obvious. To see the point, first think of the case where someone is really upset and breaks up with his girlfriend. The man’s current anger is the justification for his decision to end the relationship. If the man got angry over something trivial – like his girlfriend smoking the last two cigarettes in the house (true story) – others will expect him to eventually come to his senses and regret his decision. Of course, this is not to say that one should never decide to end a relationship on the basis of current feeling. Yet the cautionary point is the same for a person in Mark’s situation. If he decided to end his relationship on the basis of his current negative feelings which, ex hypothesis, are caused by a cascade, he was not in a position to accurately judge his past interactions. Thus at the time of his decision he did not know if his relationship was salvageable. While others would not necessarily expect him to regret his decision *if* he did end his relationship with Julie – for they were having problems – in hindsight Mark may come to regard it as a mistake.

Now can anything be done to improve the epistemic situation in which people like Mark find themselves? Taking a point from Gilbert (2004), that in dealing with emotional material we often face the same issues as when dealing with logical material, I think a fairly obvious suggestion here is that Mark should keep a physical record of his thoughts and feeling at the end of RNDs. Depending on one’s proclivities, this can be full of detail or an overall judgment of good or bad. Many therapies, not to mention some argument scholars (e.g. Hample et al. 1999; Benoit and Benoit 1990) make use of some sort of diary work, but the idea of keeping a record of certain ‘instances,’ whatever these happen to be, is a general strategy when one needs to keep a numerical track. Of course, just as Mark would have to be honest with himself if he were trying to remember the good RNDs, he would have to honestly record his judgment at the end of every RND. This presupposes that he knows what he feels as the end of a RND, or at least feels confident enough to make a summary judgment that he feels good or bad. Perhaps it is unlikely that Mark often would be confused about what he feels after a RND; however, if he does, he would need to take the time to work out how he feels and record it honestly. Finally, if the record is to be of any use to Mark in his deliberating, he must, when consulting it, respect the results. That is, to the extent that this is possible, his attitude toward the results should not be infected by his current negative feelings. It may not be realistic to expect Mark to tally up the good RNDs in the record and, upon seeing that there are five times as many good instances as bad, decide right there that his relationship is on solid ground. Nevertheless, if Mark does not oppose his current negative feeling enough to seriously give the results a fair hearing, then the advantage of a physical record is negated.

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We have been supposing that Mark is engaging in an argument₀, and the characterization of it has been in terms of an inquiry into his grounds for remaining in his relationship

with Julie. Johnson (2000, p. 14) holds that certain character traits seems to be necessary in order to engage in the practice of argumentation, and presumably he would agree that Mark must try to be honest with himself in those situations that were discussed above. Should this honesty be considered a dialectical obligation in an argument₀? If so, are there other dialectical obligations of arguments₀ that would be worth thinking about in terms of their similarity or difference to critical thinking dispositions? As interesting as these questions are, I will pass them over to discuss Mark's dialectical obligations in a dialogic context, once he has ended his inquiry.

If the all things considered outcome of Mark's inquiry is that he should not remain in his relationship, then what are his dialectical obligations in a future RND where he makes his decision known to Julie? But what exactly is his *argument* to Julie in that future RND? Should we say that Mark will attempt to rationally persuade her that he lacks the sufficient grounds for remaining in the relationship? Now putting the question like this might sound wrong. For one might think that the likely reaction of those in Mark's situation would be to eschew persuasion – rational or otherwise – in favour of a *fait accompli*. Such action would no longer allow us to characterize the discussion as a RND, for recall its goal is to “create a mutually acceptable definition of the relationship” (Weger Jr. *Ibid.*). The condition of mutuality may seem to impose an unrealistic burden on those in Mark's situation; for why try to convince the other that the relationship should end, when you have already made up your mind to leave? However, there is a way for Mark to respect the nature of the RND while acknowledging the feelings that accompany the decision he has made. Since we have been supposing that Mark is serious and honest, for him to just declare that he is leaving without some sort of discussion would be just too incompatible with those traits. But how much mileage can we get out of seriousness and honesty? The mutuality condition seems to require Mark to at least try to rationally persuade Julie, if he is steadfast in his decision. I think the right attitude for Mark to take is captured in a *justification*. Blair (2004, p. 140) claims that in a justification, we try to get the other to see that what we are arguing for is the truth, or to appreciate the truth that we have discovered. I think that this can strike the right balance between self-interest and the concern for the other to which the mutuality condition speaks. Mark can be interested in Julie's contribution to the new definition of the relationship – which is that the relationship is over - if we keep Blair's point in mind that there are cases of persuasion where an arguer wants the other to be persuaded *irrespective* of whether or not he or she understands the significance of the thesis (*Ibid.*). However, since Julie is unlikely to miss the significance of the thesis, we would have to say that Mark is respecting the mutuality condition when he tries to convey the significance of his premises. So here then is Mark's argument:

P1 At the end of my past RNDs I have felt bad far more than I have felt good.

P2 There has been many more bad moments than good moments in our relationship.

C I lack sufficient grounds for remaining in this relationship.

Mark's argument reflects the fact that he was proceeding on the basis of certain relationship concepts from Gottman. At this point it becomes obvious how dependent everything is on how Mark is thinking in general about the issue; his argument, and his dialectical obligations emanate from the character of his thinking. He may have a theory

that guides it, as in this case, or he may not. What happens when we consider Julie's thinking about the issue? The easiest situation to imagine would be to assume that she possesses the kind of beliefs about relationships as does Mark. But what if she doesn't? What if either she is ignorant of the theory, or believes it is ridiculous? What are Mark's dialectical obligations here? To get some purchase on such questions, let us look at what Johnson has to say.

Johnson tries to strike a balance between the importance of responding to objections in order to satisfy the requirements of manifest rationality, and not creating excessive obligations for arguers (Cf. Johnson 2000, pp. 327-333). Johnson's proposal is for the arguer to take account of what he calls the standard objections.

In summary, it seems that the following can be said about the arguer's dialectical obligations. The arguer must deal with The Standard Objections. The question is how to specify these. In addition, the arguer is obliged to deal with any objections that the arguer knows the audience will expect that he or she deal with (if they are not included in the TSO) and also those objections the arguer believes his or her position can handle (even if not included in the TSO) (ibid., p. 332).

To begin, let us suppose that Julie's and Mark's beliefs about relationships are roughly congruent, and that Mark knows this. Insofar as both hold the theory in esteem, Mark can expect that Julie will not object to the basic principles of the theory from the perspective of a rival theory. So we are in the familiar situation where she can object to Mark's premises, his conclusion (or both), or the inference from the former to the latter. However, Julie is unlikely to object to the inference since she also adheres to the theory. Thus she likely believes that the inference is a good one, *if* the premises are true. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Julie will object to Mark's conclusion on the basis of an argument of her own, the conclusion of which is the negation of his conclusion. This is unlikely for the same reason: she accepts the theory. Thus to bring an argument of her own against Mark's conclusion is to disagree with the principles the theory has laid out for the sufficiency of remaining together.¹ Thus we are left with the idea that Mark can assume that Julie will challenge his conclusion on the basis of objecting to the truth or acceptability of his premises.

Considering the first premise² of Mark's argument, can we say that a standard objection applies to it? Given what was said in the previous paragraph, Mark should expect Julie to question it. Yet this does not seem to be enough to allow us to claim that a standard objection surrounds it. As an example of a standard objection Johnson notes that for someone who takes a pro-choice position in the abortion debate, he or she will have to face the objection that such a view "...unjustly deprives the unborn of their right to life, and so forth" (ibid., p. 207). Obviously standard objections are context specific; and in

¹ One might think that if Julie shares this much with Mark about what it takes to build a solid relationship, then she would likely see just as well as him that their relationship is headed for disaster. Thus it is possible that Julie will greet Mark's decision with relief and acceptance instead of opposition. If this happens then there is no argument for there is no disagreement; although they are still engaging in a RND. Nevertheless, before this can happen, Mark still has dialectical obligations because he *believes* that Julie will disagree with him. This belief of his creates a dialectical obligation before his argument with Julie and hence, the obligation exists prior to a situation where Mark is prepared to discharge it, even though doing so seems unnecessary.

² The treatment of the second premise is along the lines of the first, *mutatis mutandis*.

our context there isn't the opposition over positions that we have in the abortion debate. The mere expectation that the premise will be challenged does not mean that there is anything *standard* to the anticipated objection. The connotation of "standardness" is one of generality: the objection is attached to the position irrespective of the particular person adopting the position. But for us, Mark supposes that his premise will be challenged on account of his belief that Julie does not want the relationship to end, rather than on any debatable content issue contained in the premise. Thus the dialectical obligation that Mark has cannot be characterized as dealing with a standard objection.

But what exactly is the nature of Julie's objection? She could doubt that Mark has had such negative feelings after past RNDs. Presumably such doubt would be based on her interpretation of his behaviour after past RNDs. However, she could also doubt that he has conscientiously made the effort to record and weigh his feelings. Fortunately, in either case the suggestion to improve Mark's epistemological situation in his inquiry - keeping a diary of his feelings after RNDs - can serve him in his argument with Julie. Mark can present Julie with the diary. If that were to occur, and assuming there were no egregious psychological issues of the kind pertaining to the previous discussion of cognitive science, then general issues surrounding the nature of historical evidence arise. Do the entries appear to be written over some period of time, or do they all seem to be entered within a short time? Are there dates on the entries? Do the dates correspond to what Julie remembers about their routine? For example, is there an entry for a RND when she was out of town for the weekend? Do the entries appear to be the product of a sober hand? Assuming that there is no problem with such issues, it appears that a prudent strategy for epistemological inquiry has become a dialectical obligation for argument in this case.

Of course the particular character of the diary evidence will depend on the theory one adopts, and the arguers. For example, some couples might accept a much lower threshold of evidence for sufficiency: say, a record of the last two weeks. However, some account must be made of past feelings, and this constitutes the dialectical obligation of serial arguers.

CONCLUSION

Although the title of this paper concerns the dialectical obligations of serial arguers, it is clear that we have only been considering the dialectical obligations of one serial arguer, Mark. From the perspective of theory integration, one may fear that unless the particular beliefs of that arguer are widely shared, figuring out his dialectical obligations could result in theoretical culs-de-sac. So I will try to say something more general that may link all serial arguers who find themselves in a situation analogous to Mark's.

We saw that Mark's dialectical obligation was something other than discharging a standard objection. However, what if we think about the *situation* Mark is in, rather than any debatable issue contained in the content of his premise? I think some important general aspects of his situation are the following: on the basis of an inquiry, 1) X has decided to end relationship; 2) X engages in a RND with partner to justify decision; 3) part of X's justification involves some account of past feelings. Now while the second aspect presupposes some character traits and beliefs on the part of the arguer that not all who decide to end a relationship will share, I assume there are a great many people who

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believe that this is more or less what they should do. The same may be said about the third aspect, yet my proposal is that we should say much more. Would it be wrong for argument theorists to hold that those serial arguers in situations analogous to Mark's, should do more or less what Mark did? That is, keep a record of his feelings? The objection to this of course, is that such a suggestion would take a particular theory's understanding of emotion (roughly Gottman's) and illegitimately hold it up as the standard for everyone. The illegitimacy, in this case, stems from the fact that there are competing theories of emotion and marital therapy. But would we really be holding up the theory as a standard? How closely tied to a particular therapy theory are the following two ideas? 1) past RNDs that have occurred long ago are usually harder to remember accurately than more recent RNDs, and 2) depending on how far a couple are into the marital cascade, a partner's negative thoughts about the relationship may infect his or her interpretation of past RNDs. The first idea concerns fading memory, which applies to anything of which one cares to keep track. The second, stripped of special terms, comes down to saying that the longer a couple is having problems the more they interpret their past in a negative way. Granted, this has theoretical baggage. If one cannot live with this baggage, then the suggestion of keeping a record will only apply to the first point about memory. However, if one thinks that the second point is closer to common sense than some pop psychological fad, then the suggestion can do double duty. I think these ideas should be seen as things one should expect to deal with when in this situation, and the consequent failure to do so is some kind of (dialectical?, epistemological?, moral?) mistake.

Gottman and others have pointed out the negative physiological effects on thinking while engaged in an emotional argument episode. While in between argument episodes our bodies may not be the cause of faulty thinking, there is no guarantee that our thinking about emotion will be error free. The two ideas above are sufficiently general such that any serial arguer should be concerned with them. The promotion of a record is a suggestion that can help reduce the cognitive mistakes made by serial arguers inquiring into the end of a relationship.

[link to commentary](#)

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