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# Argumentative Activity Types and the Account of the Empirical Aims of Argumentative Discourse

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**ABSTRACT:** Institutional contexts influence the argumentative exchanges that occur in them. This paper examines the concept of argumentative activity type as an integration of institutional insights into the pragma-dialectical theory, aimed at depicting such influence. The integration is significant to the pursuit of an empirically adequate account of argumentative discourse. Activity types account for the institutional aims of the arguers and provide tools to trace the influence of these aims on the arguers' attempt to balance between their dialectical and rhetorical aims, I argue.

**KEYWORDS:** activity type, analysis, conventions, dialectical aim, institutional aim, institutional context, the Prime Minister's Question Time, rhetorical aim, rules, strategic manoeuvring.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines, in more detail, the concept of activity type within pragma-dialectics. It situates the introduction of the concept of activity type in the context of a current pragma-dialectical pursuit of accounting more adequately for empirical elements of argumentative discourse, in its analysis and evaluation. After the theory of strategic manoeuvring has provided an account of the arguers' aim to persuade, the theory of activity types comes as a step further, as it accounts for the empirical institution-related aims of the arguers.

In the first part of the paper, the concepts of strategic manoeuvring and activity type are examined in light of their contribution to providing a fair account of the aims of arguers in argumentative discourse. The need to account for such empirical aims is discussed in light of the aspiration, advocated by pragma-dialectics, to combine both descriptive and normative elements in examining argumentative discourse. In the second part of the paper, the contribution of these two concepts is illustrated through analysing an argumentative exchange that took place in the Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. Preliminary to this analysis, Question Time will be examined as an activity type in which Members of Parliament discuss with the Prime Minister the performance of the government.

## 2. STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING AND ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPES: A MORE ELABORATE PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL ACCOUNT OF THE EMPIRICAL AIMS OF ARGUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE

In order to improve the quality of the analysis of argumentative discourse, two main concepts have been introduced into the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, in the last decade. In their pursuit of a better account of argumentative discourse as it

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takes place in reality, van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999; 2000; 2002) have introduced, first, the concept of strategic manoeuvring, which is a term that they coined to refer to arguers' attempt to reconcile their concerns of being both reasonable and persuasive. The second concept that they introduced is the concept of argumentative activity type (2005), which is a term that was inspired by Levinson's concept of activity type (1979; 1992), and used within the framework of pragma-dialectics to refer to 'cultural artefacts [within argumentative discourse] that can be identified on the basis of careful empirical observation of argumentative practice' (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005). Aimed at improving the quality of the pragma-dialectical analysis, the concept of strategic manoeuvring was introduced to account for the arguers' concern to be persuasive – in addition to their concern to be reasonable. The concept of activity type came as another step forward; it improves the analysis through putting strategic manoeuvring in the specific institutional context in which it occurs. The concept of activity type provides extra tools to account for the institution-related aims of arguers in the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse, as it characterises the specific type of argumentative discourse in which strategic manoeuvring takes place, and traces the effect of the specifics of such a type on the argumentative exchanges that occur in it.

In this section, I shall discuss the contribution of these two concepts to a pragma-dialectical account of the empirical aims of arguers in argumentative discourse, which is necessary for a justified analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse. The first subsection discusses the concept of strategic manoeuvring in terms of its depiction of the empirical aim of the arguers to be persuasive. In the second section, the aim-driven nature of argumentative activity types is highlighted. The concept of activity type is examined in terms of its depiction of the empirical aims that the arguers have as they engage in argumentative exchanges in a specific institutional context.

### *2.1. Strategic manoeuvring: an account of arguers' aim to persuade*

The evaluation of argumentative discourse has always been the ultimate goal of pragma-dialectics, as a normative theory of argumentation. Necessary for a meaningful normative examination of argumentative discourse, is a fair descriptive account of argumentative reality. It is in this endeavour that van Eemeren and Houtlosser introduced the concept of strategic manoeuvring, promoting a systematic integration of rhetorical considerations in a dialectical theoretical framework. Since, as they put it, in real argumentative discourse, arguers are not necessarily only concerned with critically testing their points of view, but can also seek to get their points of view accepted, the promoted integration of dialectics, being the discipline concerned with the scrutinising of points of view, and rhetoric, being the discipline concerned with persuasion, is necessary.

The integration of dialectical and rhetorical insights into a pragma-dialectical framework brings about a more realistic examination of argumentative discourse. Empirical aims of the arguers, among which the aim of being persuasive, play an important role in the way argumentative exchanges are conducted in reality. The concept of strategic manoeuvring, attributing to the arguers' the attempt – at every argumentative move – to maintain a balance between being reasonable and being persuasive, provides the means to highlight this role. While a purely dialectical framework enables the analyst to capture those elements of argumentative exchanges that are motivated by the arguers' concern to be reasonable, incorporating rhetorical

insights enables him to capture those elements that are motivated by the aim to be persuasive, too. A framework that incorporates rhetorical insights does not only broaden the scope of analysis, as it makes it capable of accounting for the empirical aim of being persuasive in interpreting actual argumentative practice. It also provides the tools to trace the effect of pursuing persuasiveness as it characterises strategic manoeuvring in terms of the arguers' choice of topics, their adaptation to their audience and the stylistic devices they use to present their argumentation.

The promoted conjoining of dialectical and rhetorical lines of analysis is aimed at reconciling descriptive and normative insights derived from the two complementary perspectives of rhetoric and dialectics respectively. Descriptive insights from rhetorical theories are integrated, by making the empirical assumption that arguers seek to be persuasive. This assumption enables the analyst to give a more descriptively adequate examination of argumentative discourse. Nevertheless, pragma-dialectics maintains its dialectically normative perspective, as it seeks to evaluate argumentative discourse in terms of adherence to the dialectical norm of critical reasonableness, as the sole norm of argumentative discourse. Therefore, the conjoining contributes to the pursuit of an analysis that is at the same time empirically adequate, and critically insightful.

With the concept of strategic manoeuvring, pragma-dialectics attributes to the arguers two types of aims: dialectical and rhetorical aims. The dialectical aims are specifications of the ideal aim of critical testing, each of which pertains to a stage of critical resolution of a difference of opinions. They embody the obligations that the parties of a difference of opinion need to meet in order for the aim of critical testing to be achieved. The general dialectical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion by critically testing the points of view at stake. Similarly, the rhetorical aims are specifications of the empirical aim to get one's own point of view accepted. In pragma-dialectical terms, the general rhetorical aim attributed to the arguers is the aim to resolve the difference of opinion to one's own favour.<sup>1</sup> Pragma-dialectics characterises the rhetorical aims as counterparts of the dialectical aims. For every dialectical aim that is derived from the ideal norm of critical reasonableness, there is a rhetorical complement that is derived from the empirical concern of persuasiveness. Despite the different origins, the yielded set of dialectical and rhetorical aims are theoretically attributed to arguers in argumentative practice.

Even though the concept of strategic manoeuvring makes a pragma-dialectical examination of argumentative discourse more realistic, a more empirically adequate examination is still needed. The pragma-dialectical rhetorical aim is not entirely empirical. It is rather a normative conceptualisation of the empirical aim of persuasiveness, performed in light of the dialectical ideal aim of critical testing. Furthermore, whereas the aim to be persuasive can be attributed to arguers regardless of the context in which an argumentative exchange takes place, every argumentative exchange takes place in a specific context, which has its proper empirical aims. In order to get closer to argumentative practice, there is a need for a new concept that accounts for the context-related empirical aims. In the next subsection, the introduction of the activity types is presented as a contribution to this particular concern.

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<sup>1</sup> An account of the specification of the dialectical and rhetorical aims according to the stages of critical resolution of differences of opinion can be found in van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2002.

## 2.2. *Argumentative activity types: an account of arguers' institutional aims*

The theory of activity types comes as a step further in the pragma-dialectical endeavour to get closer to argumentative practice. Activity types characterise types of argumentative discourse by situating argumentative exchanges in their specific contexts. Such a characterisation becomes essential, given that argumentative exchanges occur in contexts whose features provide opportunities and impose constraints on the production of argumentative discourse. Given that all contexts are to a certain extent institutionalised, the context-dependent empirical aims of arguers are to a great extent institutional, too. The characterisation of the context of a type of argumentative discourse, by applying the concept of activity type, highlights the institutional aims, and the importance of their role in shaping argumentative exchanges. That constitutes a significant contribution to a more empirically adequate examination of argumentative discourse.

The theory of argumentative activity types provides an empirical description of argumentative practices as they manifest themselves in more or less formal institutional contexts. The theory describes the institutional aims, and the available means to realise these aims, given the rules and conventions of the practice concerned. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) characterise the various argumentative activity types in terms of four parameters that correspond to the four stages of a critical discussion. These parameters are: the initial situation (paralleling the confrontation stage of a critical discussion), the starting points (paralleling the opening stage), the argumentative means (paralleling the argumentation stage) and the way in which the outcome is determined (paralleling the concluding stage). This characterisation highlights the institutional features of argumentative practices and thereby provides the analyst with an insight into the influence that these features may have on the argumentative exchanges that occur in it.

Like Levinson's activity types, the pragma-dialectical argumentative activity types are aim-driven. They, therefore, highlight the empirical institutional aims of the arguers, as they characterise the institutional contexts of argumentative exchanges. As Levinson puts it, the

structural elements [of activity types are] [...] rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question, that is the functions that members of the society see the activity as having. (1992: p.71)

As a specific category of Levinson's activity types, argumentative activity types are, similarly, structured through rules and conventions that are adapted to advance the realisation of the aims that the arguers have as they engage in argumentative exchanges in a more or less formal institutional context. For example, the rules and conventions of a negotiation encounter are adapted to the aim of satisfying the maximum of the parties' interest. As arguers get engaged in a negotiation encounter, they are supposed to be geared towards the satisfaction of this aim. By applying the concept of activity type, the different aims that argumentative discourse can have, are acknowledged and accounted for. The differences in the rules and conventions of the various types of argumentative discourse are explained in terms of the context-dependent empirical aims of arguers. While all types of argumentative discourse exhibit argumentative exchanges that are aimed at defending and refuting points of view, every type has its own institutional aim. The argumentative exchanges that take place in these types, being ideally aimed at resolving the difference of opinion, are

instrumental to the fulfilment of the institutional aim.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the specific institutional aims that the arguers in every type of argumentative discourse have, influence the argumentative exchanges in a manner that is specific to the characteristics of the type concerned.

In light of the concept of activity type, argumentative exchanges are perceived as the result of the interaction of three types of aims: the context-independent dialectical and rhetorical aims<sup>3</sup> and the context-dependent institutional aims. The dialectical aim is an expression of a pragma-dialectical normative assumption of pursuing reasonableness attributed as an aim to arguers in actual discourse. The rhetorical aim, in contrast, stems from an empirical assumption of pursuing persuasiveness as another aim that is attributed to the arguers. Dialectical and rhetorical aims are attributed to arguers, and given shape in the concept of strategic manoeuvring: they are conceptualised in terms of their contribution to a resolution of differences of opinion, as the ideal aim of argumentative discourse. Institutional aims, conversely, are derived from the empirical practice of conventionalised types of argumentative discourse, and expressed in terms of their contribution to social and political processes. Therefore, it is, in fact, the inclusion of institutional aims, that enables a pragma-dialectical analysis to account more faithfully for the empirical reality of argumentative practice. The integration of rhetorical considerations, in order to account for the arguers' aim to persuade, is complemented by the integration of institutional considerations that account for the context-related aspect of argumentative discourse. Nevertheless, institutional aims and rhetorical aims are kept separate. In contrast to other approaches, where the institutional aims are integrated into the rhetorical aims of the arguers<sup>4</sup>, pragma-dialectics maintains a distinction between the two. Such a distinction allows for tracing the influence of extrinsic characteristics of argumentative discourse, basically those derived from its context-dependent institutional aims, on the intrinsic aims of it, being to argue both reasonably and persuasively.

Applying the concept of activity type contributes to the pragma-dialectical pursuit of systematically accounting for the elements of the context of an argumentative exchange that are significant to the resolution of a difference of opinion, in the pragma-dialectical examination of argumentative discourse. The identification of the institutional aims of the different types of discourse and the characterisation of the corresponding activity types, as well as an understanding of the strategic manoeuvring taking place in the context of an activity type, constitutes an essential contribution to this pursuit. They highlight the aspects of the institutional setting of argumentative discourse that have the potential to influence the dialectical and rhetorical aims of the arguers. Such highlight is a preliminary step to the detailed identification of the specific ways in which each of the identified aspects of the institutional setting affects the arguers' pursuit of reasonableness and persuasiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Since the aim of a specific type of argumentative discourse is to be realised through argumentative exchanges, the quality of such exchanges is influential for the realisation of the aim of the discourse. The claim here is that a reasonable argumentative exchange contributes to the realisation of the aim of discourse in which it happens. See Mohammed (2007a, Forthcoming) for an example of how the quality of the critical testing of standpoints in a negotiation encounter is indicative of the quality of the resolution of the conflict of interests that underlies it.

<sup>3</sup> Even though the aim to persuade is in principle context-dependent, pragma-dialectics characterises its rhetorical aims as context-independent. The pragma-dialectical rhetorical aims are defined as aims that enable the arguers to realise, in a rhetorical manner, the tasks that are to be performed in a critical discussion. They apply in all contexts.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacobs (2002).

Hence, activity types further the incorporation of the context in the pragma-dialectical analysis through tracing the effect that this context has on the possibilities of strategic manoeuvring.

The contribution of applying the concept of activity type to the examination of argumentative discourse will be demonstrated with the help of an example. In the next section, the Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons will be characterised as an argumentative activity type, followed by an analysis of a fragment from Question Time. Together, the characterisation and the analysis are intended to demonstrate the way in which the theory of activity types serves the purpose of enabling the analyst to provide a systematic account of the context in which an argumentative exchange takes place.

### 3. THE ACTIVITY TYPE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME

In the British House of Commons, the Prime Minister's Question Time is the parliamentary weekly session in which the Prime Minister provides oral answers to the questions of the Members of Parliament. The session is "part of the way in which the government can be held to account" (Rogers & Walter, 2006). Even if the procedure of the Prime Minister's Question Time makes it look like an information-seeking session, it is in fact an argumentative political exchange that constitutes a mini-debate over the performance of the government (Beard, 2000; House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Rogers & Walter, 2006; Wilson, 1990). In this debate, Members of Parliament express and defend their opinions concerning the policies adopted by the government, implicitly, in the question-answer exchange.

#### *3.1. The characteristics of the activity type of the Prime Minister's Question Time*

As a mini parliamentary debate, Question Time can be perceived as an argumentative activity type aimed at enabling the Members of Parliament to take a decision concerning the performance of the government. As explained in the previous section, based on an examination of the argumentative practice of Question Time, the activity type will be characterised in parallel to the model of a critical discussion.

In parallel to the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, the initial situation of Question Time can be characterised as a disputed proposition concerning the performance of the government. The debated proposition is something like: the government's performance is up to the standards. The direct audience up to which the decision is is the whole House of Commons. The evaluation of the performance of the government is carried out mainly by the Members of Parliament who need to approve the government's policies.

In parallel to the opening stage of a critical discussion, Question Time has clear procedural rules and assignment of roles. The rules of Question Time make it clear what kinds of contributions are allowable: the Members of Parliament pose questions and the Prime Minister provides answer. Furthermore, questions must conform to the Parliamentary conventions regarding Parliamentary language and respect for the Crown, the judiciary and Members of both Houses. Question must also relate to a matter for which the Prime Minister is responsible; they may not, for example, touch on activities in his capacity as a party leader or member. It is also the convention that the prime minister and the Members of Parliament from his party are in favour of the position advancing a positive evaluation of the performance of the government, and the Opposition is against this proposition, and in favour of its

opposite.

In parallel to the argumentation stage of a critical discussion, the argumentative means allowed for the parties are clearly determined by the rules and conventions of Question Time. In Question Time, the Member of Parliament need to advance their argumentation in the form of a question, and the Prime Minister should formulate his argumentation in support of the same proposition in the form of an answer. Every question posed by a Member of Parliament usually advances an implicit argument<sup>5</sup> either in support or against the proposition 'the government is doing well'.<sup>6</sup>

In parallel to the concluding stage of a critical discussion, the decision about the proposition is usually taken later, in a vote in the Parliament about approving the government's policies, for example. Thus the debate over the performance of the government is usually not concluded during Question Time. It is possible however, for the sub-disputes about the sub-standpoints advanced by the Members of Parliament to come to an end.<sup>7</sup>

## *3.2. The contribution of the theory of activity types: an example from the Prime Minister's Question Time*

The institutional rules and conventions of Question Time influence the arguers' strategic manoeuvring by posing restrictions on the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical and rhetorical aims. For example, in parallel to the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, the arguers in Question Time are assumed to manoeuvre strategically in an attempt to achieve a definition of the disagreement that favours the issues each of them wants to discuss. This attempt is restricted by the conventions of Question Time, which stipulate that the difference of opinion at stake needs to concern the performance of the government. Similarly, as the arguers manoeuvre strategically in parallel to the opening stage, their attempt to establish the most opportune allocation of the burden of proof is restricted by the conventions that require the Prime Minister (and the Members of Parliament from his party) to be the protagonist of a positive evaluation of the performance of the government. In parallel to the opening stage too, the arguers' attempt to establish the most workable procedural starting points is restricted by the rules of Question Time, as these rules stipulate that the contribution of the parties have to relate only to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister. In the same way, in parallel to the argumentation stage, the argumentative means employed by the arguers to attempt to make the strongest case is in Question Time restricted to the use of questions and answers as the only allowable argumentative means.

The above-identified argumentative practices are typical of Question Time, since they are derived from its rules and conventions. They occur in the fragment below. The fragment is part of the Question Time session of March 14th, 2007, in the Parliament of the United Kingdom (Parliamentary Archives, 2007). In it, the Prime

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<sup>5</sup> The questions of Members of Parliament in Question Time are usually preceded by a set of assertions (both presuppositions and propositions) that constitute argumentation in defence of a point of view that is usually left implicit. The question itself is, most of the time formulated in a way that makes any direct answer commit the Prime Minister to the preceding assertions (Wilson, 1990, pp. 131-178).

<sup>6</sup> Usually too, the argumentation presented in the question is challenged, either by other Members of Parliament or by the Prime Minister. Members of Parliament usually anticipate such a challenge, which turns their argument into a sub-standpoint that needs to be defended, so they often provide implicit argumentation in support of the main argument they advance in the question.

<sup>7</sup> For an elaborate discussion of the Prime Minister's Question Time as an argumentative activity type, see Mohammed (2007b, Forthcoming).



Minister, Tony Blair, receives a question from the Member of Parliament from the Scottish National Party, Angus MacNeil, concerning the British soldiers in Iraq.

*Mr. Angus MacNeil:*

[C]ash for peerages is probably not the biggest disaster of the right hon. Gentleman's tenure; Iraq is. We have heard concerns already about poor medical treatment for soldiers, lack of body armour and delays in coroners inquests. Indeed, some of my constituents from Stornoway have to pay council tax when they are in Iraq. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that families are having to send food parcels to some soldiers in Iraq because of the lack of 24-hour canteen facilities? Why is this Prime Minister, who was so cavalier in taking this country into Iraq, failing in his duty of care to these soldiers?

*The Prime Minister:*

I simply dispute that we are failing in our duty of care towards our soldiers. Our soldiers are doing a magnificent job in Iraq. They are doing a necessary job for our security and the security of the wider world. I have to say, even though the hon. Gentleman and I may disagree strongly over the issue of Iraq, it is completely wrong for people to undermine the morale of our armed forces by suggesting that we are deliberately not giving them the equipment they need or the care they need when injured. It simply is not true and it is not right to say it.

Mr. MacNeil's question, in this exchange, implies a point of view in favour of a negative evaluation of the Prime Minister's government. Based on the alleged story that the families of British soldiers in Iraq had to send them food parcels, after the government has failed to ensure that they have 24 hour canteens in their bases in Iraq, the Member of Parliament argues that *the Prime Minister's government is failing its duty of care to the soldiers in Iraq*, as presupposed in the question he asks. The Prime Minister rejects this argument by saying "I simply dispute that we are failing in our duty of care towards our soldiers". He further denies the alleged story upon which the argument is based, as he says "It simply is not true". Another argument that Mr. MacNeil's presents in support of a negative evaluation of the performance of the government is that it was wrong as such to send British soldiers to Iraq. This is implied in his ironic description of the Prime Minister as *cavalier*, as Mr. MacNeil asks "Why is this Prime Minister, who was so cavalier in taking this country into Iraq, failing in his duty of care to these soldiers?" The Prime Minister's response addresses this issue too, as he says that *it is completely wrong to undermine the morale of the British armed forces*, and justifies the involvement of British soldiers in the war in Iraq by saying that *they are doing a necessary job for British security and the security of the wider world*. In his response, Mr. Blair attempts to refute Mr. MacNeil's arguments for a negative evaluation of the performance of the government, and also provides his own arguments in support of a positive evaluation of the performance of the government.

In accordance with the conventions of Question Time, the disagreement in this exchange is defined as a disagreement over the evaluation of the performance of the government. The Prime Minister assumes the role of protagonist of the standpoint *the government's performance is up to the standards*, and Mr. MacNeil assumes the role of protagonist of the opposite standpoint. Also in accordance with the rules, Mr. MacNeil presents his point of view and the argumentation in support of it implicitly in the form of a question. Similarly, the Prime Minister presents his implicit standpoint and argumentation in the form of an answer.

As explained earlier, the way in which the features of the activity type influence the arguers' strategic manoeuvring is manifested through the opportunities and constraints that these features place on the arguers' choice of topics, their adaptation to their audience and the style they adopt for their argumentation. For example, as Mr. MacNeil attempts to provide support to his standpoint that *the*

*government's performance is not up to the standards*, his choice of the topic of his arguments is restricted to the matters that fall under the responsibility of the Prime Minister, and his choice of the stylistic devices to formulate his arguments is restricted to asking questions. In light of these restrictions, Mr. MacNeil chooses the topic of the British involvement in the war on Iraq, and the form of a question in which he imbeds his implicit arguments. This choice adheres to the rules and conventions of Question Time, and at the same time allows him to defend his point of view in an effective way, since he believes that the British involvement in the war is a *disaster*. In a similar way, meeting his obligations in an opportune way within the constraints of Question Time, the Prime Minister defends the British involvement in the war, in the form of an answer in which he steers the discussion towards a favourable outcome, by portraying the involvement in the war to be carried out by the government as part of its duty to provide security for the country.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have emphasised the importance of applying of the concept of activity type in the examination of argumentative discourse. I have argued that as the concept of activity type systematically incorporates institutional insights into the pragma-dialectical method, it accounts better for the institution-related empirical aims of the arguers, and consequently brings the examination of argumentative discourse closer to argumentative practice.

The application of the concept of activity type, I have argued, enables the analyst to interpret argumentative discourse as the result of a simultaneous pursuit of dialectical, rhetorical and institutional aims. The concept of strategic manoeuvring attributes to the arguers in all types of argumentative discourse dialectical and rhetorical aims. Taking the specific contexts of these types into account, arguers are also attributed institutional aims. Institutional aims shape the contexts of argumentative exchanges, determine the rules and conventions associated with them, and consequently provide opportunities and impose constraints on the arguers' simultaneous pursuit of the dialectical and rhetorical aims. It is therefore in this endeavour that the examination of the influence of the institutional context on the arguers' strategic manoeuvring becomes significant. I believe that an important step forward in this endeavour is the development of tools for a systematic integration of institutional insights into the pragma-dialectical method. As a result, the specific ways in which the institutional context of argumentation shapes the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring can be identified. That would, in turn, contribute to a systematic identification of criteria for evaluating argumentation in a way that takes the institutional context of argumentative discourse into account.

[link to commentary](#)

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