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In Response to: Michael Gilbert's *Ideal Argumentation*

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In his essay 'Ideal argumentation,' Michael Gilbert criticizes the pragma-dialectical distinction between the *resolution* and the *settlement* of a difference of opinion or dispute. As Gilbert understands it, there cannot be a resolution in the pragma-dialectical sense if a standpoint has changed during a discussion; the result of the discussion must then be regarded as a settlement, because within the framework of a critical discussion two parties in a dispute cannot both change their stance and agree to some third standpoint. If their disagreement is in this sense settled rather than resolved, their discussion is *ipso facto* not a critical discussion.

Gilbert thinks that the problems with the pragma-dialectical approach with regard to the distinction between a resolution and a settlement arise, in the end, from "an insistence that a categorization be applied too seriously." He recommends a move away from the abstract (or perfect) to the actual: what is needed is "a continuation of the acknowledgement explicit in van Eemeren and Houtlosser that the ideal does not really exist and the rhetorical imbues all argumentation."

With this optimistic conclusion of Gilbert's essay in mind I shall start my commentary on his paper. As a stepping-stone I would like to take Gilbert's observation that most logical approaches to argumentative discourse tend to neglect the non-logical communicative properties of argumentative discourse. As a pragma-dialectician, I cannot but agree with this observation. This observation was in fact one of the fundamental starting points of the founders of the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation. In addition to the recognition that a dialectical approach to argumentation is to be preferred over a (mono)logical approach, the basic insight was that a full-blown theory of argumentation has to be 'pragmatic' in the linguistic sense. This insight is brought to bear at the analytic level by developing a set of instruments for analyzing argumentative discourse based on Searlean insight in the successful performance of speech acts and Gricean insight in the rational conduct of communication. At the theoretical level it is implemented by modeling a dialectical exchange as an interaction between speech acts in a critical discussion. The model of a critical discussion thus developed serves, in turn, as a heuristic device for the analysis of argumentative discourse with a view to a critical evaluation.

Gilbert might object that applying the model of critical discussion in the analysis of argumentative discourse precisely shows that pragma-dialectics is not concerned with everyday argumentation in everyday communication but with ideal argumentation in ideal communication. He should see no reason to do so. As has been explained before, most emphatically by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse*, pragma-dialectics is designed to cover any sort of argumentative discourse, including argumentation in everyday conversation. The only feature that "lifts" pragma-dialectics, so to speak, one level higher than the discourse itself is its normative interest in providing sustained insights on how to enhance the quality of argumentative discourse where this is necessary. Gilbert's own remarks suggest that he does not eschew such aspirations. In his opinion, the pragma-dialectic apparatus should surely have an application to discussions less critical than the proclaimed ideal, because "there can still be analysis, recommendation, transformation, and so on." But how can there be "recommendation" without some norm or ideal? Let me emphasize

that the pragma-dialectical term “ideal” is not identical with the colloquial word “perfect,” and that a “critical discussion” is not an empirical text type or genre. Both notions are theoretical constructs that do not “mirror nature.” This is not to say, however, that they are not to some extent reflected in everyday discourse or that they cannot be fruitfully applied in the interpretation, reconstruction, analysis, and evaluation of argumentative discourse. Empirical research carried out by van Eemeren, Meuffels and Verburg (published in the 2000 volume of *Language and Social Psychology*) has in fact shown that everyday arguers generally consider the pragma-dialectical rules for the confrontation and opening stages of a critical discussion acceptable and instrumental. In a series of meta-analytic reviews recently published in *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Daniel O’Keefe has for a number of normative guidelines as those developed in pragma-dialectics shown that the interviewees regarded following these guidelines the most persuasive option. And Harry Weger concluded in a research review of small group, interpersonal and relational communication (published in the 1998 *ISSA Conference Proceedings*), among other things, that even quarelling couples prefer reasoned discourse along the lines of critical discussion over simple assertion and counter-assertion.

Let me come to Gilbert’s criticism of the pragma-dialectical distinction between the resolution and the settlement of a dispute. According to Gilbert, this distinction is problematic and the problems “arise from an insistence that a categorization be applied *too* seriously” [italics PH]. But, in fact, Gilbert’s arguments in support of his criticism of the pragma-dialectic distinction are not really connected with his proclaimed annoyance with categorization. He rather attempts to show that the distinction is not tenable. First, he claims, this distinction can only be made if psychological considerations are included in the analysis: the difference between a resolution and a settlement may only reside in someone’s *attitude*. As Gilbert rightly observes, pragma-dialecticians are known for their “avowed distaste for anything psychologistic” (just as they are, *pace* Gilbert, known for their disapproval of any theoretical resort to the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘belief’). So, supposedly they cannot always account for the difference. Leaving aside that in the pragma-dialectical theory attitudes are dealt with in so-called “higher-order conditions” that need to be satisfied for arguing in accordance with the rules of critical discussion, I take it that Gilbert means either that the distinction cannot be made because it is not always externalized; or that it cannot be accounted for when it is not externalized. As regards the former I would respond that this is a matter of definition: a resolution is a final agreement between the parties in a discussion, no matter whether actual parties ever finally agree with each other or not; a settlement is a non-argumentative ending of a discussion, no matter whether any discussion is ever decided in a non-argumentative way. As for the claim that the distinction cannot be accounted for when it is not externalized, one can say that parties do not always explicitly say whether they agree, but that there is often textual and contextual evidence that can be appealed to in order to make out whether they agree or not. If no such evidence is available, it may indeed be impossible to determine whether the parties have reached a resolution. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to determining whether the dispute is settled. This problem, however, is a general analytic problem: sometimes there is simply not enough evidence to determine whether a certain label applies. In a particular case it may, for instance, be unclear whether we are dealing with an argument or not. It may also be unclear whether a certain person is Michael Gilbert or not. But the fact that the available analytic or perceptual instruments sometimes fall short, does not mean – I hope – that there are no arguments or that Michael Gilbert does not exist.

Gilbert's second objection is substantiated by treating two exemplary dialogues in which apparently some kind of resolution has been reached, but pragma-dialectics could not label it as such, so that according to Gilbert it would – erroneously – have to be called a 'settlement.' Gilbert's view of the first dialogue, in which two parties abandon their initial standpoints and come to agree on a third standpoint, is that within the framework of a critical discussion the two parties cannot be said to have resolved their original dispute. In his comment on the dialogue, however, he says that "the interaction might have been [...] a critical discussion, or, at least, a series of them. In other words, there was a critical discussion about A, then a second about B, and, finally, a third about C. [...] So, it is possible that an argument such as this one could be a critical discussion if it is allowed that the larger critical discussion be broken down, via transformation, into smaller critical discussion units each of which resolves itself appropriately." What then, I wonder, is the problem? For Gilbert it is, once more, psychological: while the one party (Susan) may be convinced, the other party (John) is, given the motives attributed to him by Gilbert, merely accommodating – "he *says* he has been convinced, but he *really* has only been persuaded [...] How, in this case, are we to determine that, *really*, a settlement rather than a resolution has taken place?" Here is a pragma-dialectic answer: "We are not to determine this, because, for philosophical and methodological reasons, we are not interested in what people *really* mean but only in what they are committed to on the basis of what they have *said*, explicitly or implicitly."

Gilbert's second example is designed to illustrate that interesting arguments are by definition arguments that result in a settlement. No dispute over initial standpoints is ever just resolved: conditionals are added on the way, Toulminian 'rebuttals' are included, and initial standpoints are made more precise. All these operations prompt the analyst, says Gilbert, to speak of a settlement rather than a resolution. "Part of the difficulty [for pragma-dialectics] arises," says Gilbert, "from an oversimplification of the ideal of 'position'." But, again, Gilbert's conclusion is unjustified. In fact, the opposite is true: Gilbert's difficulties stem from a non-technical use of pragma-dialectical terms such as "position" and "standpoint." In the pragma-dialectical model parties are at all stages of the discussion allowed to ask for a so-called language declarative – an elucidation, an explanation, a definition, a specification, et cetera. If, as a result of this, a standpoint is made more precise, or restricted in scope, or constrained to a particular context, analytically speaking, the original standpoint is retracted and the modified standpoint is discussed. If, in the end, the parties come to agree on the acceptability of the modified standpoint, they have established a resolution to their dispute if ever there was one.

To conclude, I return to the issue Gilbert ends his paper with. Should arguers in everyday argumentative discourse be assumed to be aiming *merely* at a resolution of their disputes? No. In the project Frans van Eemeren and I are working on, it is explicitly acknowledged and duly taken into account that arguers will and may aim for a resolution *in their own favor*. This is the "happy change" Gilbert alludes to in his paper. He sees it as an acknowledgement that "the ideal does not really exist, and that the rhetorical imbues all argumentation." It will be clear by now that the view that the "ideal" does exist has never been upheld in pragma-dialectics. As for the claim that the rhetorical imbues all argumentation, a few additional considerations may clarify our position. We do agree that "the rhetorical imbues all argumentation," but in our view this does not mean that 'the rhetorical' should be the primary point of view in the critical analysis and evaluation of argumentation. Nor do we think that it should be the point of departure when accounting for the strategic rationale of the moves that are made in everyday argumentative discourse. In our view,

the rhetorical functions of argumentative moves are to be explained and accounted for on the basis of the dialectical functions of such moves in a critical discussion. Only then is it possible to explicate, and to account for, the critical constraints that most rhetorical theorists require of rhetoric but have so far not been able to provide. More importantly, our approach makes it possible to explain *why* rhetoric is not just *mere rhetoric*. Our emphasis on the primacy of the dialectical framework enables us to make it clear that rhetoric consists primarily in keeping up a commitment to reasonableness, i.e., a commitment to being engaged in a process of bringing about *rational conviction* rather than *mere persuasion*. We think that the possibility of making this commitment explicit would be lost if we took rhetoric, instead of dialectic, as our point of departure.