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Fabrizio Macagno

*Universidade Nova de Lisboa, ArgLab, Institute of Philosophy of Language (IFL)*

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# Commentary on: Jan Albert van Laar's "Criticism in need of clarification"

FABRIZIO MACAGNO

*ArgLab – Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem (IFL)*  
*Universidade Nova de Lisboa*  
*Avenida de Berna 26*  
*1069-061 Lisbon*  
*Portugal*  
[fabrizio.macagno@fcsh.unl.pt](mailto:fabrizio.macagno@fcsh.unl.pt)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the author analyzes and develops the dialectical problem of criticism. Is the act of criticizing (being critical or skeptical, or challenging or attacking) the proponent's viewpoint free of any dialectical bounds or conditions? The role of criticism lies in between two dialectical risks: shifting the burden of initiative and ambiguity. On the one hand, criticizing a specific position presupposes an implicit reason not to accept to be committed to it, which can be made explicit and defended. For this reason, the proponent can ask or require the opponent to provide clarifications and reasons in support of the critical stance, and thus risking shifting the burden of initiative. On the other hand, such a request is often reasonable, especially when the criticism or the request made by the opponent for further reasons is potentially ambiguous or extremely vague, or when it is directed against a proposition that is commonly shared. How to find a balance between these two dialectical risks? The answer that is suggested lies in the concept of burden of criticism, and the conditions governing it.

## 2. CRITICISMS AND THEIR DIALECTICAL NATURE

The first step needed for specifying the burden of criticism is to analyze the speech act of criticising a viewpoint. The author singles out a fourfold description based on the focus, the norm, the level and the force of a criticism. The first dimension consists in the subject matter, namely in what is criticized (the standpoint, the reason, the specific major premise of the scheme used). The second dimension is the norm that is appealed to in order to advance the criticism (the rule for critical discussion, the rules governing the quality of an argument, the institutional rules). The third dimension is the level, namely whether the criticism is dialogical (against the standpoint or its reasons) or meta-dialogical (an attack against the admissibility of the proponent's dialogical moves). Last, the force of a criticism corresponds to the type of speech act used to elicit the proponent's reply. The critical reaction can be a directive or an assertive. This account raises two crucial issues: the strategic dimension of the force of a criticism and the classification of, or rather interrelations between, these dimensions.

The first distinction that can be made is between two types of acts of criticism: 1) advancing an assertive act, consisting in a negative judgment on the other's position (argument); and 2) performing a directive act of requesting grounds. In both cases, we can notice, we have the same effects on the conversational (or rather dialogical) context, but at a different level. In (1) the illocutionary act commits the opponent to a value judgment, and at a perlocutionary level invites (leads) the proponent to defend his position. In (2) the opponent is committed to a request, and suggests a negative consequence of a failure to reply satisfactorily. Depending on whether the negative judgment is explicit or implicit (or rather, indirect) the opponent exposes himself directly or indirectly to fulfilling a burden of criticism. While in the first case the negative judgment can open to the proponent the possibility of exploiting the burden of criticism at his advantage, in the second case the only possible move is requesting for clarifications or attacking the move itself if it challenges presumptions.

The second issue is to classify these characteristics, and see how they can be interrelated. The first crucial distinction is between the types of acts of criticism: while directive moves request further ground for supporting a standpoint, assertives provide backing for both challenging a viewpoint and grounding a meta-dialogical attack, consisting in ruling out the proponent's move. Among the dialectical moves, the opponent may opt for playing within a dialogue rule imposing a burden of criticism on a critic to a standpoint, or appeal to the criteria for assessing arguments. In this latter case, he can consider the argument in itself or as a move. In the first case, he can criticize a premise or request further grounds, while in the second case he points out the unacceptability of a move based on its fallacious nature. Finally, the opponent can strike a meta-dialogical attack by appealing to the institutional rules of the dialogue, excluding a specific move of the proponent as not complying with the conditions of the dialogue. We can represent a tentative classification of the moves of criticism in the following figure (Fig. 1):

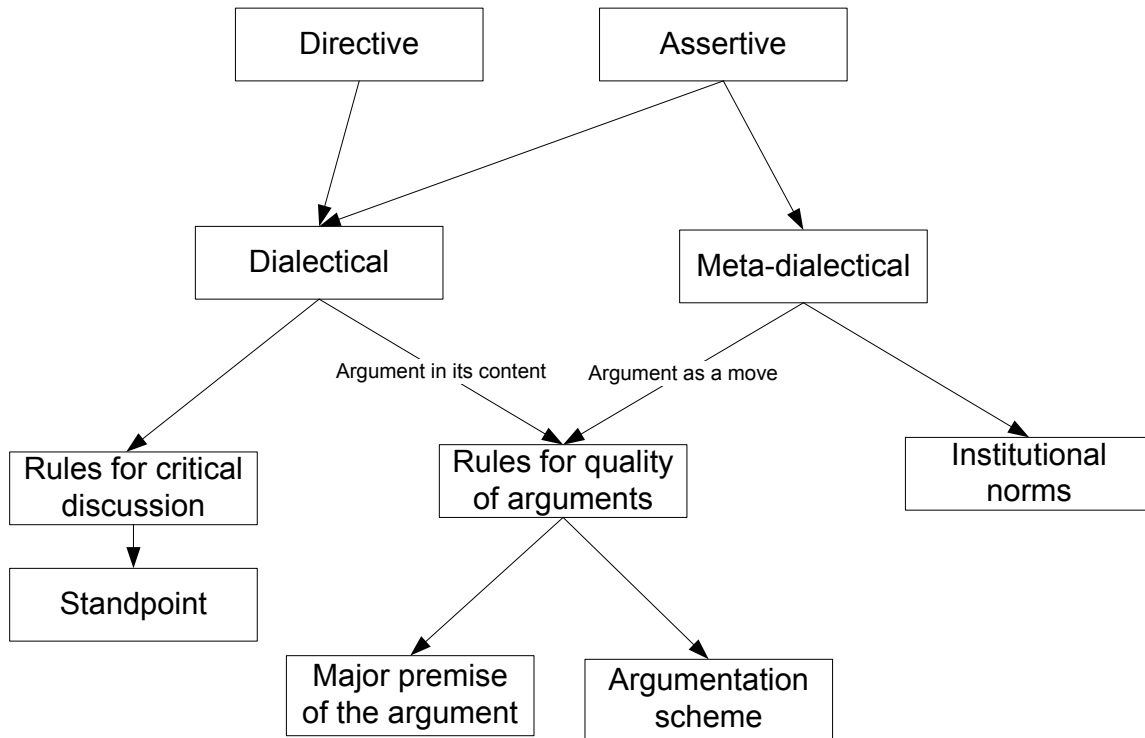


Fig. 1: Classification of criticisms

### 3. THE BURDEN OF CRITICISM AND THE EPISTEMIC LEVEL

As mentioned above, criticism involves the risk of ambiguity and offers the possibility of reversing the burden of initiative. The proponent, instead of defending or providing reasons in support of his viewpoint, may request the opponent to prove the grounds of his critical stance. How to draw the line between a reasonable request of grounds or specification and a potentially mischievous one? The paper points out an important distinction based on the epistemic nature of the commitments that have been criticized. The author distinguishes between two types of criticisms: against potentially controversial propositions and against presumptive commitments. In the first case, the opponent may offer counter-considerations, namely reasons advanced to meet a certain burden of criticism. In the second case, he shall provide such counter-consideration, as his criticism is challenging a proposition that is presumed to be accepted by everybody in a given community, or at least everyone in the conversational context. We can analyze the dialectical effects of presumptive commitments from two points of view: their reasoning structure and their pragmatic nature.

Presumptions are characterized by three features: a reason, the dialectical burden-shifting effect, and their nature of reasoning in lack of evidence (Ullmann-Margalit, 1983, p. 147). First, presumptions are propositions that are generally or contextually accepted for a general or specific reason. For instance, they can represent propositions commonly considered to be acceptable (if an expert

expresses an opinion on an issue in his domain of knowledge, the opinion shall be considered to be acceptable / reliable). Or they can derive from a specific dialogical reason. For instance, if the opponent asks the proponent to ground his viewpoint on an expert's opinion, he is presumed to accept the relation between expertise and reliability as acceptable and reliable. The second characteristic is that presumptive reasoning does not provide proofs, but only a reason to shift the burden of proof onto the other party. Since they are commonly accepted proposition, the interlocutor needs to provide evidence to prove that the conclusion drawn from it is not the case. The last feature is their use in conditions of lack of evidence. Presumptions operate when proof is not available (Louisell, 1977, p. 290); they are not a form of evidence (Rescher, 1977, p. 1). In a dialectical system, the participants cannot state and demand commitment to all the possible propositions. Some of them are presumed to be part of the other party's commitment store even if there is no evidence that they actually are. This latter characteristic leads us to the analysis of the second dimension of presumptive commitments, their pragmatic nature.

Presumptive commitments can be compared to what Walton and Krabbe (1995; see also Corblin, 2003) called dark-side commitments, or also implicit commitments. Implicit commitments are not inserted in the participants' commitment stores based on explicit acts and a dialectical process of evaluation and acceptance. Rather, they are taken for granted to be part of what the interlocutors have accepted. In this sense, they are presupposed to be actual commitments in two different senses (Ducrot, 1966; 1968). They can passively presupposed in the sense that they are presumed to be part of the interlocutor's commitment store based on reasons (because they are known to be accepted by the community; because the interlocutor expressed this commitment in the past...). They can be actively presupposed in the sense that the speaker treats such propositions as commitments when there are no reasons, or when it is unreasonable to do so (Macagno, 2012). For instance, the speaker can presuppose a redefinition of a concept that he knows to be unacceptable or unknown to the hearer. In both cases, the opponent (the hearer) needs to provide reasons to retract the commitment, both when it is a genuine one and when it has been unduly presupposed. Otherwise, he can attack the move by terminating or suspending the dialogue and opening a meta-dialogue. However, also in this case he needs to provide reasons supporting his criticism.

On this perspective, presumptive commitments can be considered to be presumptive by the opponent not because of their epistemic nature (which is a justification of their dialectical status) but rather because of their pragmatic dimension (they are taken for granted and therefore presumed to be part of the other party's commitment store). In this sense, presumptive commitments place the burden of criticism onto the opponent because they are pragmatic instruments for shifting the burden of proof.

The dialectical force of presumptive commitments is strictly connected with the notion of *kairos*, i.e. opportunity (Bitzer, 1968). *Kairos* is basically related to the specific opportunity at a given time (Kinneavy, 2002, p. 67): the speaker chooses a premise that is to be accepted by the interlocutor in case contrary arguments are not advanced. The speaker chooses premises that are generally accepted, or simply presumably acceptable, belonging to the domain of likeliness or *eikòs*. This latter

term refers to what “is accustomed generally to take place, or which depends upon the opinion of men, or which contains some resemblance to these properties, whether it be false or true.” (Ciceronis *De Inventione* I, 46). Enthymemes are grounded on what is presumed to usually occur, on what is likely to be true for a specific audience, and not on statistical probability (Viano, 1955, pp. 280-86). The choice of a premise that is only likely becomes a choice of a dialectical strategy aimed at shifting a specific type of dialogical burden of initiative.

#### 4. DIALECTICAL STRATEGIES OF AMBIGUITY

In the last part of the paper the author analyzes different dialectical profiles, namely sequences of moves that describe a specific dialogical interaction. On this perspective, a dialogical move opens up certain possibilities and rules others out. This idea is applied to the requests for argumentation and requests of explanation. The opponent can advance different types of critical reactions, i.e., he can choose between different ways of asking the proponent to provide further grounds to support his viewpoint. His critical reaction can be extremely general (why A?) or more specific, indicating the class of schemes to be used to support the position or the specific argumentation scheme (or premises of it) that the proponent needs to focus on in his reply (scheme bound challenge).

The crucial point that this analysis suggests is a possibility of designing distinct strategies bound to the specificity of the critical reaction. For instance, a generic request for argumentation is highly vague, in the sense that it can be interpreted and met in different ways. For this reason, the opponent is unlikely to incur a burden of criticism, but at the same time he leaves to the proponent the widest possibility of reply (request explanations or clarifications; advance an argument based on different grounds). On the contrary, a specific request restricts the possible options of the proponent, but it crucially depends on the reasonableness and possibility of backing it up. A challenge bound to an argument from expert opinion (is there any expert vouching for it?) can be advanced when no argument from expertise has been used by the proponent, otherwise the opponent needs to meet the burden of showing that the authority was not a good one, or a real authority. We can represent this chess game of criticisms and possible replies in figure 2 below:



Fig. 2: Moves and possible reactions – challenging a viewpoint

This figure represents only the first move, i.e. the possible moves opened by the opponent’s criticism. The same representation can be applied to the further move consisting in challenging the argument from expert opinion. In this case the opponent has two possibilities: attacking the dialogical premises of the move (is Expert E a good one?), or challenging its dialogical presuppositions (why “if an expert says A, then A?”). In the first case, the proponent needs to fulfil the burden of backing up the controversial grounds of his argument. In the second case, however, the opponent attacks a presumption, or rather a dialogical presupposition, of the dialogue, which is a premise that is taken for granted and considered as accepted by everybody. In other words, the opponent rejects a commitment that has been already inserted in his own commitment store by the very fact of having engaged in the dialogue. He is no longer aiming at continuing the dialogue, but rather modifying some of its conditions (the presumptive commitment structure). For this reason, the burden of initiative is on him, as he needs to provide reasons supporting the reason why a certain dialogue presupposition cannot be considered as such. We can represent the structure of this move in figure 3 below:

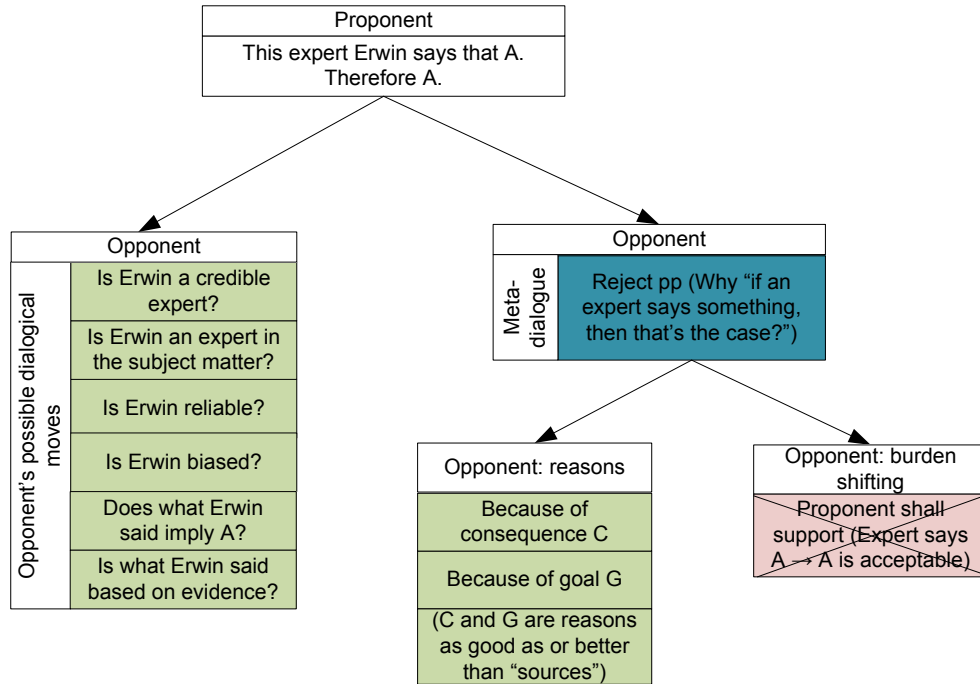


Fig. 3: Moves and possible reactions – challenging an argument

On this perspective, the presumptive nature of some commitments makes their retraction, or rather challenge, a move at a different dialogical level. The burden, in this case stemming from a critique, is on the party who makes such a move. He needs to rebut one of the presumptions on which the dialogue is grounded, just like definitions of common word or institutional or dialectical rules.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Van Laar’s paper raised several extremely interesting issues. This commentary is intended to show how some of these advances can be translated into a structuralistic perspective, combining the insights of formal dialectics with the categories of argumentative structuralism. In particular, this commentary aimed at underscoring the importance of the idea of pointing out the relationship between a criticism and the consequent moves and burdens that it (in a structuralistic perspective) “implies”, or rather means, considering its dialectical effect. On this view, the meaning of a move corresponds to the possible continuation of the dialogue. For this reason, the purpose of a specific criticism consists in the paradigm of possible replies that are offered to the interlocutor. This approach needs to take into account a linguistic, dialogical and epistemic difference between what is said and what is taken for granted. While the first category represents the commitments that the parties take on, or may take on, as a result of a move, the second dimension refers to what the parties consider to be the grounds on which they advance their moves. The implicit, or more precisely, presumptive commitments are the foundations of the dialogue, the boundaries and the conditions of the possible



moves that can be made. Obviously such presumptive commitments can be different in kind and force. Some of them are the very roots of an interaction (obligation to reply, compliance with institutional roles...). Others are the grounds of the reasoning that the interlocutors express in their acts of discourse. In both cases, challenging such premises is an act different in kind from criticizing a viewpoint. The burden of initiative shifts, and the dialogue structure is interrupted by a metadialogue with different rules and burdens.

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