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Commentary on: Cathal Woods' "The language and diagramming of rejection and objection"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper, Cathal Woods deals both with the linguistic devices that critics may use to express their rejection of and objections to what an arguer has put forward, and with the way in which we can visualize such rejections and objections in a diagram. I am very much sympathetic to both of Woods' projects, because, in my view, argumentation is a co-production of a proponent (arguer, protagonist) and an opponent (critic, antagonist), in the sense that the proponent's argumentation can best be understood as the result of a dialogue in which the proponent responds to the critical reactions of the opponent who examines the proponent's position. Consequently, to make progress in the study of argumentation, we need to have a clear grasp of the various ways of criticism, as well as of the ways to analyze and evaluate them. In addition to a number of critical remarks regarding some of Woods' specific proposals, I shall attempt to contribute to the debate by adding some related ideas.

2. COMMENTS ON THE LANGUAGE OF REJECTION AND OBJECTION

What Woods labels "rejection" and "disagreement," I would label a "critical reaction." As I understand Woods, he distinguishes between the various types of critical reaction by taking three parameters into account: first, the illocutionary *force* of a critical reaction; second, the propositional *focus* of a critical reaction; third, the *norm* that a critical reaction appeals to.

First, he distinguishes between on the one hand *doubt*, examples of which would be "Really?" or "Why do you think that?", and on the other hand *dismissals*, and *denials*, where the critic adopts a counter-standpoint of her own, such as "No!" The difference, I suppose, has to do with the differences in illocutionary *force*, for the reason that doubts seems to be associated with – what Searle labeled – *directives*, such as posing a question or making a request for an argument, whereas dismissals and denials seem to be associated with – what Searle called – *assertives*, such as denying something the proponent said, and thereby advancing a counter-standpoint of her own.

Second, Woods distinguishes between various critical reactions by taking their propositional *focus* into account. Some question or deny a premise, whereas others focus on the argumentative connection.

Third, Woods characterizes an objection as a critical reaction “which indicates the nature of B’s criticism of what A has said.” In this way the opponent, in my terminology, specifies and makes explicit the norm that she appeals to. In Woods’ examples, the objection either appeals to a norm to the effect that an argument is valid or at least sufficient strong, or to a norm to the effect that the premises used are true or acceptable. In my view, each critical reaction appeals to one norm or other, so even a simple challenge can be seen as appealing to the burden of proof rule, in that the message is that if the proponent will not answer adequately, his burden of proof will not be seen as having been discharged. Further, there is a wide range of dialogical norms that can be appealed to in criticism. The opponent might appeal to any rule for critical discussion, such as the language use rule, by pointing out that some phrase used by the proponent is insufficiently clear. Or she might appeal to an institutional rule, such as when a lawyer points out that the evidence, though extremely convincing in its own right, has not been obtained in an admissible way. Or she might appeal to an optimality rule, to the effect that – though complying with all the rules for critical discussion- the argumentation is not up to standard, for example by not being very persuasive, or by not being efficiently phrased, and so forth.

In addition to these three parameters for characterizing a particular type of critical reaction, a fourth could be added. Fourthly, one could indicate whether a critical reaction contributes to, on the one hand the ground level of dialogue, where the proponent and the opponent exchange arguments and requests for arguments, thereby co-producing the proponent’s argumentation, or to a meta-level of dialogue, a dialogue about a dialogue, in which the participants deal with the strategic quality of a previous move, or with the dialectical or institutional legitimacy of a previous move. A fallacy charge, for example, initiates such a meta-dialogue, just like a strategic remark such as “Wouldn’t it be better to support your position by way of a utilitarian argument, rather than that deontic one you just gave me?” In my view these four parameters –norm, level, force and focus- need, in the end, to be fully exploited in any systematic classification of types of criticism (see, Krabbe & Van Laar, 2011).

What makes Woods’ project especially worthwhile is his interest in the ambiguity of criticism. His examples make it clear that some phrases for expressing a critical reaction allow, within their context of utterance, of more than one reading, because it has not been made sufficiently precise what the intended propositional *focus* of the criticism is. But then, each of the parameters may give rise to ambiguity. As to *force*, the critical reaction may be ambiguous for leaving it unclear whether the opponent is making a counter-assertion, or whether she is just firmly requesting for argument: “S? No!” As to *norm*, the critical reaction may be unclear for leaving it unclear whether the opponent appeals to the burden of proof rule, on the ground that this, apparently, cannot be proven, or some optimality rule, on the ground that this is unconvincing: “You can’t say this.” As to *level*, the criticism may be unclear for leaving it unclear whether it contributes to the ground level dialogue, by inviting the

proponent to offer a further argument, or to a meta-level dialogue, for example by inviting the proponent to revise his strategy or to withdraw an illegitimate move: “That’s utter nonsense!” The normative question that these ambiguous criticisms raise is: What if the proponent interprets the critical reaction different from was intended by the opponent, or in a way that happens to be unwelcome to her, and he develops an argument, on that basis, that happens to be flawed, in the opponent’s or in the analyst’s eyes? Then, I surmise, the flaws in that argument are at least in part to be attributed to the opponent.

In my final remark about the language of rejection and objection, I want to point out the importance of – what can be called – “counter-considerations” (Van Laar & Krabbe, 2012), which are those propositions with which the opponent motivates her critical stance, and thereby explains to the proponent why she is critical towards some assertion on his side, as well as informs him about what kind of strategy he should use in order to take away her critical doubts. These counter-considerations can be seen as reasons, and thereby they are close to dismissals and objections. But different from expressing a counter-standpoint, that brings a burden of proof when challenged by the proponent, a counter-consideration does not constitute genuine argumentation. For, it is not an attempt to convince the proponent on the basis of what he is willing to concede. Rather, they are motivations that the proponent can take into account in order to device an argument that he can use in order to take away the specific doubts by the opponent regarding his position. In other words, the opponent does not have a burden of proof regarding counter-consideration, but it remains up to the proponent to refute them. Thus, a critic might put forward highly informative criticism, without committing herself to the truth of the information, and yet steering the proponent’s argumentation in a particular direction: “Why should we take a dog? As far as you’ve shown, a dog would add expense” (cf. Rescher on *cautious assertion*, discussed in Van Laar & Krabbe, 2013).

3. COMMENTS ON DIAGRAMMING REJECTION AND OBJECTION

Woods’ second project about diagramming rejection and objection is important, for it concerns the relation between the dialogical process in which the participants, as it were, co-produce the proponent’s argumentation, and the final result or product of that process. Traditional diagrams are to be seen as the result of such argumentative exchange, and I agree with him that it would be very interesting to visualize the specific ways in which that result is partly generated by critical reactions of the interlocutor.

A first comment on Woods’ specific proposal to diagram objections is to indicate the existence of a similar technique, not mentioned in his paper, that is used in computational dialectic, where defeat-relations between arguments and propositions are diagrammed (see for example, Pollock, 2010).

A second comment deals with the dialogical information already contained within the conventional diagramming techniques within argumentation theory, and within the pragma-dialectical method of reconstructing the argumentation structure in particular. As I read these argument diagrams, they do not merely diagram propositional relations in the abstract, but rather, propositional relations such that

if the opponent accepts the starting points she must withdraw her doubts regarding the conclusion. And therefore, these diagrams can be understood as already containing quite some information about the opponent’s critical reactions, albeit only as understood or as taken into account by the proponent. I shall deal with the various components of these diagrams, as used in the pragma-dialectical method, in turn: the arrow, the ampersand, the plus-sign, the circled plus-sign. What do they express, given the dialogical understanding of argumentation as a series of responses to a series of critical reactions?

An arrow pointing from premise A to (intermediate) conclusion B symbolizes a single attempt by the proponent to convince the opponent, and can thus be seen as expressing that the proponent either responds to a request for an argument, focused on proposition B, or that he anticipates such criticism. In other words, the arrow expresses that A is a response to a criticism of the form “Why B?”. We could include the criticism taken into account by adding a label to the arrow, containing the specific form that the criticism had. And if the opponent chose to accompany her challenge, “Why would I accept that John is Mary’s father?”, with a counter-consideration, “As far as you’ve shown, nobody vouches for it!” (“Counter C”), this could be added to the label. As a result, the propositions that the opponent puts forward are not treated as reasons to convince the proponent, but their status as mere counter-considerations to be taken into account by the proponent is visualized by writing them on these labels.

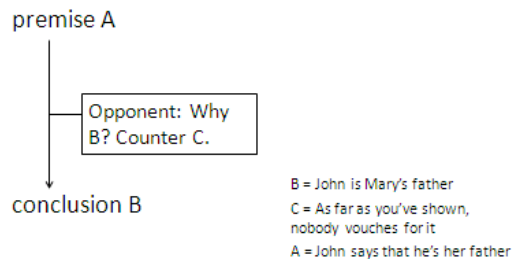


Figure 1

Suppose opponent Olga would make a somewhat more radical choice, and chose to act herself as a second proponent, defending a counter-standpoint. Then, she must, of course, be seen as developing an argumentation of her own, responding to or anticipating criticism by her interlocutor Pierre – the former proponent now in the role of a second opponent. Therefore, a mixed discussion merits two separate diagrams. Of course, in so-far as the counter-argumentation by Olga expresses criticism towards Pierre’s argument, it must be taken into account in Pierre’s argument diagram by substantiating the labels with counter-considerations. Dual functions, such as discussed by Woods, then are only visualized by the fact that the

same proposition figures both in the argumentation diagram by Pierre (as a counter-consideration) as well as the one by Olga (as a premise in her argumentation), or vice versa.

The ampersand, &, symbolizes that two (or more) reasons, A and B, constitute the support of a single argumentation in favor of a conclusion C, and if the proponent's expresses A first, and B second, then B can be seen as understood as a response to a critical reaction to the effect that it remains unclear how premise A can be used to convince the opponent of C. This kind of critical reaction could thus be attached to the ampersand with a label. If the critical reaction is accompanied with a counter-consideration, that could be included as well. Thus, if the proponent's standpoint is that John is Mary's father, and his first reason reads "Well, John is male," then the opponent might challenge the connection between premise and conclusion saying "Why would I accept that John is Mary's father on account of him being male?", possibly accompanied by a counter-consideration "He might just be a friend!" One possible reaction for the proponent, then, is to add the link between premise and conclusion, saying "Well, John is one of Mary's parents," thus completing his single argumentation. (Of course, he could add novel evidence as well, in which case a different argumentation structure would arise.)

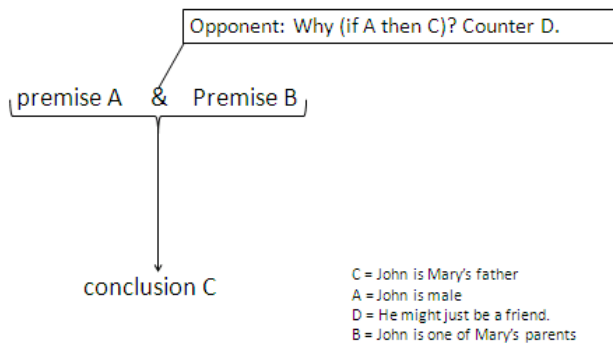


Figure 2

The plus-sign symbolizes that the premise to the right of it supplements the premise(s) to its left, so that the same attempt at persuasion becomes a stronger one. Thus, it anticipates, or responds to a critical reaction in which the opponent requests for a strengthening of the earlier argumentation: "What more do you have to go on?" or "These reasons do not suffice, so you might want to supplement them." Again, this critical reaction can be fixed to the plus-sign.

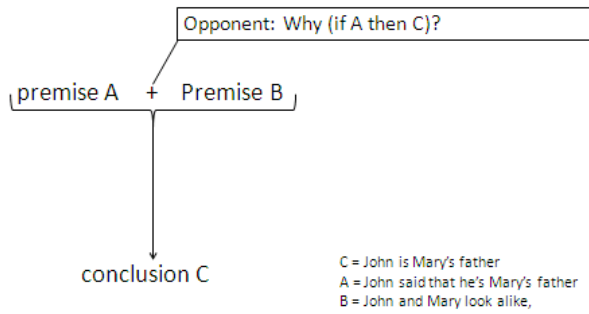


Figure 3

Finally, a similar story can be told about the circled plus-sign, which is made to represent situations where the proponent responds to, or anticipates specific counter-considerations (“objections,” as they are referred to in the pragma-dialectical theory). So, according to this theory, this symbol always requires the mentioning of a counter-consideration. For example, if the proponent defends his standpoint that John is Mary’s father by saying that John said himself that he is her father, and the opponent counters that as far as she knows they do look alike, the proponent is, as it were, invited to refute this counter-consideration by saying, for example, that they do look alike (which of course, may need further support).

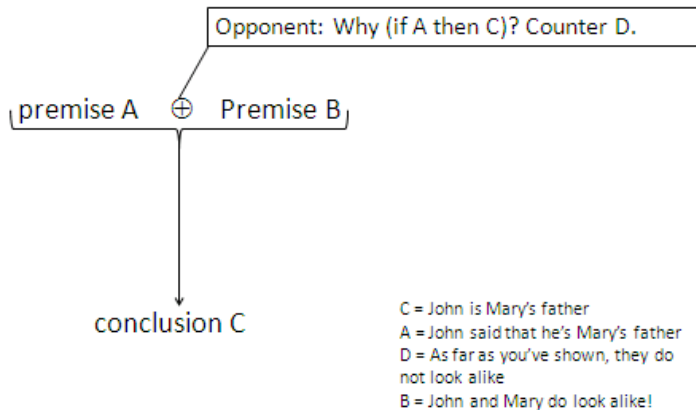


Figure 4

To conclude my second comment, a diagram of just the argumentation of the proponent already conveys much information about the criticism that drove the proponent to developing this very argumentation, and diagramming techniques

might take this into account, and visualize the driving force of the opponent's critical moves. Note, that if argumentation is the result of reasoning with more than one opponent, the specific agents can be specified in the criticism-labels.

There is one shortcoming of my counter-proposal: It only visualizes the specific manner in which the proponent takes criticism into account. Some of Woods' techniques are still needed in order to show criticisms that have not, or not yet, been taken into account, and they might be useful to represent critical reactions regardless of the specific way the proponent chooses them to deal with.

Note, however, that I am not convinced that dashed arrows that do not start from a specific proposition ("formal objections") have been visualized well by Woods' system. For, as Woods says, a dashed arrow represents that "x is a reason for not accepting y," and that does not lead to a result that is comprehensible if x is not replaced by a specific proposition. If he would mean something like "There exists some proposition x such that x is a reason against y," then, I surmise, this amounts to a kind of meta-dialogical way of arguing that merits a separate treatment.

4. CONCLUSION

Woods' article contributes in many interesting ways to the theory of criticism, and in my commentary I have only dealt with some of the basic points of his approach, trying especially to connect it with the kind of work in formal dialectic that I have been involved in myself. My main point for the further development of such a theory of criticism, is that it ought to do justice to the kind of dialogue in which an opponent puts forward highly informative criticism, yet without adopting herself any counter-standpoint. This would further clarify the basic notion of a critical discussion (or a persuasion dialogue, for that matter), by fully exploiting the dialectical asymmetry of a defending proponent and a critically examining opponent.

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