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Strategic manoeuvring in simultaneous discussions

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ABSTRACT: In public political discussions, an accusation of inconsistency can play a role in a number of discussions that run simultaneously. In this paper, I discuss the implications of considering the different simultaneous discussions to which the accusation contributes when examining it. While the different political considerations derived from these discussions can shed significant light on the strategic function of the accusation, such considerations may also lead to an inconsistent critical evaluation of it.

KEYWORDS: Accusation of inconsistency, Prime Minister's Question Time, reasonableness, simultaneous discussions, strategic manoeuvring, straw man.

1. INTRODUCTION

In public political discussions, accusations of inconsistency are common responses to criticism. It is not uncommon that a politician who is confronted with criticism accuses his critic of being inconsistent in relation to the subject of criticism. The politician challenges the commitment of the critic to his criticism by pointing out that this criticism is inconsistent with another position of the critic and urges him to retract this criticism in order to eliminate the inconsistency. This way of responding to criticism is strategic. By means of the accusation of inconsistency, the politician can rule out the criticism as untenable and avoid the discussion about it, which is an outcome that is favourable to the politician, and this can be achieved in what is in principle a reasonable way, i.e. by urging the critic to eliminate an inconsistency in his position. Needless to say that while it is in principle reasonable to point out that one's opponent is inconsistent and to urge him to eliminate the alleged inconsistency, responding to criticism by accusations of inconsistency is not always reasonable. Cases of the *tu quoque* fallacy are maybe the best known example of such responses that are not.

Responding to criticism with an accusation of inconsistency is even more strategic once it occurs in public. Since the public sphere is open to many discussions that may run simultaneously, the accusation can play a role in a number of them at the same time. In the parliamentary session of Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons, for example, when the Prime Minister points out that the criticism advanced by a Member of Parliament (MP) from the Opposition is inconsistent with some other position of the Opposition, the accusation can play a role in at least two discussions: a discussion about the performance of the Government in view of the criticism advanced and a discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country. In the first discussion, it can rule out as untenable the criticism advanced against

the Government, and in the second it can undermine the leadership competence of the allegedly inconsistent Opposition and promote the ruling party as a better alternative.

In earlier work, I have used the concept of strategic manoeuvring as developed within the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren 2010; van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002) to analyse and evaluate responses of the Prime Minister such as the above. On the basis of the characterisation of the accusation of inconsistency as a speech act, proposed by Andone (2009), I characterised the responses as a particular way of strategic manoeuvring, namely strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency (Mohammed 2009: Ch.2). In this way of manoeuvring, a politician who is confronted with a critical point of view replies that the criticism advanced is inconsistent with another position of the critic: while the current criticism commits the critic to A, another position with which he can be associated commits him to \neg A. The accusation of inconsistency is usually intended to lead the critic to retract his current criticism, as a way of eliminating the alleged inconsistency.¹ The retraction would spare the politician the difficulty of refuting the criticism. The analysis of accusations of inconsistency in response to criticism as cases of a particular way of strategic manoeuvring sheds significant light on the strategic function of the accusations and allows for the development of soundness conditions to distinguish the reasonable cases of these responses from the fallacious ones (Mohammed 2010, forthcoming).

In this paper, I would like to discuss the implications of considering the different simultaneous discussions to which an accusation of inconsistency contributes when analysing its strategic function and assessing its critical reasonableness. On the one hand, giving a comprehensive account of the strategic function of the accusations requires that all these discussions are taken into account, but on the other hand, when assessing the reasonableness of the manoeuvring, different discussions sometimes require different political considerations to be taken into account. I will discuss these implications with the argumentative encounters in Prime Minister's Question Time as an example of a public context in which the accusations at issue occur. I will first identify and discuss the different discussions that can be associated with the argumentative practice in the parliamentary session of Question Time and to which the accusations at issue contribute (Section 2). With an example from an encounter between the Prime Minister and an MP from the Opposition in Question Time, I will then analyse the strategic function of the accusation, paying particular attention to its role in the different discussion associated with Question Time (Section 3). Finally I will evaluate the reasonableness of the accusation advanced by the prime Minister in view of these different discussions and discuss the possible inconsistency in the critical evaluation in these different discussions (Section 4).

2. SIMULTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS IN PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME

Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons is the weekly parliamentary session in which the Prime Minister provides oral answers to questions about his Government's policies, plans and actions posed by his fellow MPs. Despite its question-

¹ This characterisation is also in line with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1995), who understand an accusation of inconsistency as an attempt to get the accused to eliminate the inconsistency by retracting one of the inconsistent commitments (p. 195).

answer format, Question Time has been widely considered a mini-debate over the performance of the Government (Beard 2000; House of Commons Information Office 2005; Rogers & Walters 2006; Wilson 1990).² In this mini-debate, the Prime Minister and MPs from his party argue in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government and MPs from the Opposition argue in favour of a negative evaluation of it, based on arguments that address government policies, plans and actions.

Holding the Government to account is the institutional goal of Question Time. It is the goal for which the parliamentary session was established (House of Commons Information Office 2005; Rogers & Walters 2006), to which the discussants can be collectively committed by virtue of their participation in the session, and in the pursuit of which argumentative exchanges play a central role.³ Even though Question Time was established in order to hold the Government to account, there are a number of other aims that can be associated with the argumentative practice of the prominent parliamentary session. The most important of these institution-related aims is the promotion of party-political interests. As the House of Commons Procedure Committee reports, Question Time has been used as an opportunity to promote party's interest (2002: 11). Often, the questions of the MPs convey political statements that promote their party's policies or attack those of their adversaries, and similarly, the answers of the Prime Minister often convey pride in the achievement of his party's policies or criticism of those of the Opposition. Using contributions in Question Time for such party-political purposes has increased significantly as a result of the wide media coverage of the House's proceedings. The fact that the questions and answers can be followed by an external public made Question Time become an opportunity for both MPs and the Prime Minister to address and appeal to the general public of voters.⁴ Argumentation plays a central role in the pursuit of each of these aims.

In their attempt to hold the government to account, MPs and the Prime Minister engage in argumentative exchanges that are triggered by the controversy over the general performance of the Government, a controversy over something like whether the performance of the Government is up to standard or not. The Prime Minister and the MPs from his party are in favour of a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government, i.e. they defend a standpoint such as *the performance of the Government is up to standard*, and MPs from the Opposition are in favour of a negative evaluation, i.e. they defend a

² Despite its question-answer format, Question Time can hardly be considered an information seeking session. Questions of MPs are posed in such a way that an answer can hardly be expected. As Wilson observes, the questions are usually preceded by a set of assertions (both presuppositions and propositions) that constitute argumentation in defence of a standpoint, which 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 (1990: 131-178). In addition to the argumentative nature of questions, the debate-like nature of Question Time is manifested in the way the questions of MPs are divided: those in favour of the Prime Minister's policies pose supportive questions, and those against him pose challenging ones. The Speaker of the House is expected to keep a balance between the two sides as he gives MPs the turn to speak (House of Commons Information Office 2005).

³ By means of argumentative exchanges about government policies, plans and actions, the performance of the Government is scrutinised as a means to hold it to account.

⁴ Contributions in Prime Minister's Question Time are also used by MPs to promote their positions within their party. Because of the limited space, this institution-related aim will not be addressed in this paper despite its significance.

standpoint such as *the performance of the Government is not up to standard*.⁵ In their questions, MPs from the ruling party pose supportive questions in which they defend their positive standpoint by referring to a particular successful government policy, plan or action. MPs from the Opposition, however, pose critical questions in which they defend their negative standpoint by referring to some government policy, plan or action which they see problematic. In his answers, the Prime Minister defends his positive standpoint by means of arguments that relate to the same government policy, plan or action addressed in the question he responds to. Even though this initial disagreement about the performance of the Government underlies all argumentative exchanges of Question Time, the disagreement is seldom made explicit in the questions or in the answers.⁶

In their pursuit to promote their parties, MPs and the Prime Minister engage in argumentative exchanges that are triggered by the disagreement over the competence of their party and of that of the adversaries' in leading the country. In relation to this disagreement MPs and the Prime Minister address the general public of voters more than they address each other. Here MPs from the Opposition seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the ruling party, our party can provide good leadership*, and MPs from the ruling party and the Prime Minister seem to defend a standpoint such as *unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership*. However, as a result of rules and conventions of Question Time, this difference of opinion cannot be independent of the difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government discussed above. Because questions of MPs and answers of the Prime Minister have to address the latter's responsibilities only, MPs and the Prime Minister can eventually address the difference of opinion concerning the competence of a political party in leading the country only through addressing their difference of opinion concerning the performance of the Government. So an MP from the Opposition would need to base his defence of the standpoint that *unlike the ruling party, our party can provide good leadership* mainly on a negative evaluation of the performance of the Government, and the Prime Minister or an MP from his party would need to base his defence of the standpoint that *unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership* mainly on a positive evaluation of the performance of the Government.

These discussions are interrelated and they run concurrently. The questions of the MPs and the answers of the Prime Minister contribute to them simultaneously. In the next section, I shall show, with the help of an exchange from Question Time that the strategic

⁵ While it is usually the case that MPs from the party of the Prime Minister are in favour of a positive view of the performance of the Government that need not always be the case. Unlike the Prime Minister, MPs from his party have no parliamentary obligation to defend the Government: their obligation is rather a party-obligation observed by whips, who are MPs appointed by each party to maintain party discipline. But in spite of the strictness of the whipping system, cases of no support for government decisions from MPs of the ruling party are not impossible. In 2002, for example, Labour MPs have openly criticised the decision of the Labour Government to go to war against Iraq. Although possible, cases of opposition from MPs from the ruling party are not standard; they are rather a manifestation of a ruling party in crisis.

⁶ The controversial performance of the Government is in fact a preconditioned topic for the initial disagreement that gives rise to argumentative confrontations in Question Time. The rules and conventions of this kind of parliamentary sessions require MPs to address in their questions only matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Prime Minister as Head of Government. As a result of the general and broad nature of the Prime Minister's responsibilities it has become conventional that the questions and answers express and defend standpoints in relation to the general performance of the Government.

function of the Prime Minister's accusations of inconsistency described above cannot be fully grasped in any of the discussions independently.

3. THE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN SIMULTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS

In the exchange below, the at-the-time Labour Government led by Gordon Brown is criticised by the MP from the Conservative Party, then in the Opposition, Peter Bottomley. The criticism relates to the decision of the Labour Government to cancel a referendum on the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and to have the decision taken in Parliament instead. The exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Bottomley comes after a long and heated exchange between Mr. Brown and the at-the-time Leader of the Conservative Opposition, David Cameron, about the same issue. In the exchange between Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron, the latter fiercely criticised the Labour Government for cancelling the referendum that had been promised in Labour's election manifesto. Mr. Cameron even suggested that the Prime Minister cancelled the referendum because he was not confident that he would win it. Mr. Bottomley's criticism comes to add to the criticism advanced by Mr. Cameron.

Peter Bottomley (MP, Conservative Party):

To return to the European treaty, what polling or survey evidence did the Prime Minister have on what the result of a referendum would have been?

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):

The one poll that people look at is an actual referendum. In 1975 there was a referendum that recorded a yes vote, with more than two thirds of the population voting yes. I remind Conservative Members that most of those who were here in 1992 walked through the Lobby to oppose a referendum on Maastricht, and now they want a referendum on a treaty that is far less significant. They should think again about their position.

(House of Commons official report 2008)

In his question to the Prime Minister, Mr. Bottomley suggests that polls and surveys had shown the Prime Minister that the British people oppose the new EU treaty, implying that the Government's plan to cancel the referendum and to ratify the Treaty in Parliament instead would be against the preference of the British people. In response to the criticism, Mr. Brown attempts first to deny that one can conclude that the British people are against the Treaty on the basis of polls and surveys. He then accuses his opponent of being inconsistent in his attitude towards referenda: in 1992, when the Conservatives were in power, Conservative MPs voted against having a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, and now they criticise the Labour Government for not holding a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The accusation portrays the current criticism advanced by Mr. Bottomley as inconsistent with an earlier position that he has taken. The criticism is thereby portrayed as untenable, and the MP is advised to reconsider his position.

The criticism advanced by Mr. Bottomley can be seen as an argument in support of his negative evaluation of the performance of the Government. Mr. Bottomley argues that because the Government plans to ratify the treaty against the preference of the British people, the performance of the Government can be judged as not up to standard. In light of earlier discussions about the referendum, the question of the MP from the Opposition also implies that the Government's unwillingness to organise the referendum on the trea-

ty is in itself an indication that its performance is not up to standard, especially since the Government has, in its elections manifesto, promised that they would hold a referendum on the EU treaty. Mr. Bottomley's argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) (The performance of the Government is not up to standard)
 - 1.1 The Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people
 - (1.1') (If the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)
 - 1.1.1 Polls and surveys show that the British people oppose the treaty
 - (1.2) (The Government is not holding the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty)
 - (1.2') (If the Government is not holding the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard)

In his answer, Mr. Brown tries first to refute the argument that *the Government plans to ratify the Lisbon Treaty against the preference of the British people*. He rejects the suggestion that a referendum would have shown that the British people oppose the treaty on the ground that the results of surveys and polls cannot to be considered a reliable source of evidence; only the results of actual referenda can be such a source, he argues. He then refers to the referendum of 1975, which showed that British voters were in favour of UK's membership in the European Economic Community. Mr. Brown implies that if one considers those results, one would tend to think that British voters would approve the new EU treaty if a referendum were to take place.

The Prime Minister also needs to refute the argument that *the Government is not holding the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty*. Given that not holding the referendum is not something that can be denied, the Prime Minister can defend his Government only by challenging the justificatory power of the argument. In fact, the heated discussion between the Prime Minister and Mr. Cameron was about the linking premise that *if the Government is not holding the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In that discussion, Mr. Brown tried repeatedly (without success) to refute the linking premise on the grounds that *the Lisbon treaty does not have any constitutional nature anymore*. Mr. Brown's attempts did not seem to succeed and Mr. Bottomley's question implies the same critical argument. Mr. Brown accusation of inconsistency against Mr. Bottomley comes in response to this particular argument.

By means of the accusation of inconsistency, Mr. Brown attributes to his critic two mutually inconsistent commitments, A and $\neg A$, that relate to the Conservatives' attitude towards referenda on EU treaties. Mr. Brown argues that while the Conservatives' current criticism commits them to the proposition that *referenda on EU treaties should be held*, i.e. to A, their opposition to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty allows the assumption that the Conservatives' are also committed to the opposite, i.e. $\neg A$: *it is not the case that referenda on EU treaties should be held*. He manoeuvres strategically to challenge the Opposition's commitment to A, given their previous commitment to $\neg A$, and suggests that because the justificatory power of the critical argument commits the critic to A, Mr. Bottomley cannot maintain his linking premise, and therefore, has to retract the argument he has advanced. Because of institutional constraints, namely that an MP cannot have a supplementary question to his tabled question, Mr. Bottomley can in fact not respond to the accusation. The MP cannot challenge the alleged inconsistency or choose

to repair it in a way different than the way favoured by the Prime Minister, for example, by expressing that he regrets the Conservatives' position in 1992, i.e. that he retracts his commitment to $-A$. The Prime Minister's challenge to the current criticism on the basis of the alleged inconsistency is therefore the final word in the discussion, and his portrayal of the critical argument as untenable goes unchallenged.

The analysis above shows that the Prime Minister employs the accusation of inconsistency to steer the discussion about the performance of his Government to an outcome that is favourable to him. By appealing to the reasonable principle that an arguer may not hold mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, the Prime Minister attempts to lead his adversary to retract the critical argument in order to avoid a discussion about it. The accusation plays a role also in the simultaneous discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country. In this discussion, the Prime Minister uses the alleged inconsistency as an argument that supports the sub-standpoint that *the Conservative Party cannot provide good leadership for the country*. In this discussion, Mr. Brown can be seen to argue that

- (1) (Unlike the Opposition, our party can provide good leadership)
- (1.1a) (The Opposition cannot provide good leadership)
- (1.1a.1) (The Opposition is inconsistent)

After all, a political party that is inconsistent cannot provide good leadership.

4. THE EVALUATION OF STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN SIMULTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS

The reasonableness of the principle underlying the Prime Minister's response analysed above, namely that an arguer cannot maintain two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, does not necessarily guarantee that the response is a reasonable argumentative move. In fact, Mr. Brown's accusation does not seem to fulfil the conditions which are necessary for the Prime Minister's responses such as the above to be reasonable cases of strategic manoeuvring. In order for the accusation to be a reasonable response to the critical standpoint to which it reacts, the accuser needs to be justified (i) in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged, (ii) in attributing to the accused a commitment to $-A$ on the basis of the other position assumed and (iii) in attributing to the accused the commitments to A and to $-A$ simultaneously (Mohammed, forthcoming).⁷ Fulfilling these three conditions is necessary in order for the accusation of inconsistency to function as a legitimate challenge of the standpoint it challenges. Failure to fulfil the first condition results in cases of the straw man fallacy in which the standpoint challenged is distorted so that commitment to A seems to derive

⁷ See (Mohammed, forthcoming) for a discussion of these conditions. According to Mohammed, a reasonable accusation needs also to fulfil the following two conditions: (iv) the accusation of inconsistency needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him commitments to A and to $-A$ simultaneously and demands him to retract one of them to eliminate the alleged inconsistency, and (v) the choice of topic, audience frame, and stylistic devices of the accusation of inconsistency must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to $-A$ in case the accusation is accepted.

from it. Furthermore, unless the second and the third conditions are fulfilled, the inconsistency does not actually exist and the accusation is not a legitimate challenge to the standpoint. After all, if the inconsistency does not come about, the commitment of the accused to the standpoint challenged is not problematic. Because the accusation assumes as starting points that the accused can be committed to –A on the basis of the other position mentioned and that the accused holds commitment to A and commitment to –A simultaneously, failure to fulfil the second or third condition results in falsely presenting as commonly accepted starting points the assumptions above. Mr. Brown’s accusation advanced against Mr. Bottomley seems to violate the first and third conditions of these conditions.

Mr. Brown’s failure to fulfil the first condition results in a *straw man* fallacy. Mr. Brown is not justified in attributing to Mr. Bottomley the commitment to *referenda on EU treaties should be held*, at least not on the basis of the sub-standpoint that *if the Government is not holding the promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The commitment to A does not follow from Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint. What follows from Mr. Bottomley’s sub-standpoint is in fact a commitment to *a promised referendum should be held* rather than a commitment to *referenda on EU treaties should be held*. By over-generalising the commitment that follows from the sub-standpoint, Mr. Brown’s accusation distorts the sub-standpoint. Mr. Brown casts doubt on a sub-standpoint that is not advanced by Mr. Bottomley, namely that *if the Government is not holding a referendum on an EU treaty, then the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. The standpoint to which the accusation reacts is easier to attack than the one indeed advanced. The accusation of inconsistency would, hence, have been stronger as an attack on this sub-standpoint than on the one actually advanced by Mr. Bottomley.

Mr. Brown’s accusation violates the third condition above, as well. Mr. Brown is not justified in attributing to Mr. Bottomley the commitments to *referenda on EU treaties should be held* and *it is not the case that referenda on EU treaties should be held* simultaneously. The opposition to a referendum on the EU Treaty can justifiably be attributed to the Conservative Party, of which Mr. Bottomley is a member, on the basis of their opposition to a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992, and in fact Mr. Bottomley himself was one of those who walked through the no lobby opposing the referendum. However, the current discussion takes place in 2008. In the sixteen years that separate the two discussions, so many starting points have changed that the question becomes legitimate whether Mr. Bottomley’s commitment to *a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty should not be held* is simultaneously held with his commitment to *a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty should be held*.⁸

The un-reasonableness of the Prime Minister’s response discussed above is strongly dependent on the discussion in which it occurs. Only in the discussion about the

⁸ The need for the two inconsistent commitments to be held simultaneously, expressed in condition (iii), has already been highlighted by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003). In their discussion of the soundness conditions for strategic manoeuvring by pointing out an inconsistency, they explain that ‘from a pragma-dialectical point of view, an inconsistency between something that is presently said and something that was said on a different occasion matters only if it involves an inconsistency in one and the same critical discussion’. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser suggest criteria for determining whether or not it is possible to take as parts of the same discussion what is presently said and something that was said on a different occasion. The change in starting points between 1992 and 2008 would make it not possible to consider the two positions of Mr. Bottomley as being held in one and the same discussion.

performance of the government is the Prime Minister not justified in overgeneralising Mr. Bottomley's commitment from *a promised referendum should be held to referenda on EU treaties should be held*, and in assuming that the two mutually inconsistent commitments are held simultaneously. Both the overgeneralisation and the assumption that the commitments are held simultaneously seem to be justified in the discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country.

In the discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country, the actions, policies, and plans of the Government are discussed in relation to the alternative offered by the Opposition. Mr. Brown's overgeneralisation can be seen as a legitimate interpretation of the linking premise of Mr. Bottomley's argument. In this interpretation, the criticism advanced commits the critic not only to the principle applied to judge the current case, namely the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, but also to the general principle according to which the party judges similar cases, namely referenda on EU treaties in general. Unlike the discussion about the performance of the Government, which is a discussion about a specific subject matter that is to a great extent institutionally predetermined, the discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country is more general. In the context of the latter discussion, the overgeneralisation of commitments is often necessary in order to keep the different political parties accountable for their general policies.

Similarly, in the discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country Mr. Brown is justified in assuming that Mr. Bottomley, an MP from the Conservative Party is still committed to the position of the Conservative Party concerning referenda on EU treaties. Such an assumption would extend the scope of what can be considered as one and the same discussion and include in one discussion the two discussions about referenda: the one on the Maastricht Treaty as well as the one on the Lisbon Treaty. The assumption thereby contributes to holding the Conservative Party to account for its political program, which is necessary in the discussion about its political competence. Especially given the change of position of the Tories from Government to Opposition, it is a way of holding them accountable to seek for justification for what seems like a change of policy.

From the discussion above, it appears that the judgment of reasonableness of the Prime Minister's responses at issue is not consistent across the simultaneous discussions to which the accusation contributes. While the accusation can be judged fallacious in the discussion about the performance of the Government, the same accusation is reasonable in the discussion about the competence of the different political parties in leading the country.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined strategic manoeuvring between discussions that occur simultaneously in public political discussions. With an exchange from Prime Minister's Question Time as a case in point, I have shown that considerations from the different discussions render the strategic function of argumentative moves more salient. However, these considerations, which are necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the move, can lead to an inconsistent critical assessment of the same move. As the EU referendum case shows, the same accusation of inconsistency in response to criticism can be a fallacious move if one considers that the politicians are discussing the performance of the Govern-

ment, and reasonable if one considers that the politicians are discussing the competence of the different political parties in leading the country.

One way of avoiding the inconsistent judgment is to restrict the assessment of the reasonableness of a certain move to a particular discussion. In the EU referendum case, the analyst would then have to choose which of the discussions is the one he would take into account when evaluating the Prime Minister's response. This discussion would be considered a primary discussion, the other discussions secondary, and the analyst's judgment presumptive. Depending on the choice of the primary discussion, the analyst can determine whether or not it makes sense to extend the set of commitments that can be attributed to the accused to include commitments incurred on him on the basis of his or his party's earlier positions as well as those of his fellow party members. In Prime Minister's Question Time, the analyst would have to decide whether it is, in the situation at issue, more important to scrutinise the performance of the Government only or to assess the leadership competence of the different political parties. The choice is not always easy to make, especially that it is often the case that the pursuit of a greater accountability of the Government is achieved on the expense of the accountability of the party in the Opposition. The latter is a problem that might lead us to reconsider the way promoted above for reaching a consistent evaluation of argumentative moves in public political discussions, and to seek a different solution in which the assessment of reasonableness is both consistent and comprehensive.

STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN SIMULTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS

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Strategic maneuvering and the liberal public sphere. Commentary on “STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN SIMULTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS” by Dima Mohammed

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ABSTRACT: The idea of strategic maneuvering was created to account for the fact that argument is both a method of rational decision making and of persuasion. This approach presumes that strong arguments are generally persuasive arguments. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In the liberal public sphere, argument serves a third purpose, the production of clash. This clash can resolve the tension between the persuasive and the rational decision making purposes of argument.

KEYWORDS: liberal public sphere, rationality, strategic manoeuvring

1. INTRODUCTION

Theories and descriptive studies of strategic maneuvering have been used within pragma-dialectics to account for the fact that argument is both a method of persuasion and a method of rational decision making. In this view, “Argumentation theorists, however, are not just interested in the effectiveness of argumentation in convincing people of a certain viewpoint, but also in the standards of argumentative discourse should comply with in order to be sound” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 131). Professor Mohammed’s essay exemplifies the tradition of focusing both on how descriptions of strategic maneuvering can account for the “‘rhetorical’ aspect of argumentative discourse” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 135) and also the normative, what Mohammad calls a “judgment of reasonableness” (p. 9).

There is no doubt that the addition of a focus on strategic maneuvering to a normative analysis of an argumentative controversy produces “a better and more comprehensive grasp of what may rightly be called ‘argumentative reality’” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 135). That certainly is the case with Mohammed’s study of a particular case of Prime Minister’s Question Time. At the same time, there is an unstated premise in the research, a premise that normatively strong arguments are also persuasive arguments. It is on this premise that I focus in the remainder of this essay.

2. ARE STRONG ARGUMENTS ALSO PERSUASIVE ARGUMENTS?

At the heart of the pragma-dialectic approach to argumentation theory is the assumption that ordinary arguers value strong arguments. In this view, “People engaged in argumentative discourse are characteristically oriented toward resolving a difference of opinion

and may be regarded as committed to norms instrumental in achieving this purpose” including “maintaining certain standards of reasonableness” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 134). It is because people value strong arguments that “There is no reason to assume that the rhetorical norm of artful persuasion is necessarily in contradiction with the ideal of reasonableness” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 138). A failure to value the norm of reasonableness would create a situation in which the “persuasive effect of the move would be lost immediately” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 142). A similar faith in the persuasive power of normatively strong argument is typical not only of theorists operating within pragma-dialectics, but those favoring other approaches to argumentation. It is understandable that argumentation theorists so strongly value argument. The difficulty, however, is that there is a great deal of evidence that the faith in the power of reason is often not justified. How does this relate to the arguments developed by Mohammed? Mohammed is focused on determining whether an accusation of inconsistency in response to criticism should be considered fallacious. If fallacies are in fact “derailments of strategic maneuvering” as van Eemeren and Houtlosser have argued (2002: 142), but if the derailment does not result in loss of persuasive effect then that suggests the troubling conclusion that the argument critic may have a very difficult time influencing real audiences to support strong over weak arguments.

Unfortunately, there is strong evidence indicating that ordinary people often do not recoil against unreason. One problem is that a populist reaction against expertise is all too common a phenomenon. In the United States, for instance, while real climate scientists are almost unanimous in labelling Global Warming as both real and a significant threat to the planet, a sizable movement rejects the expert consensus (Jacoby 2008). Almost thirty years ago G. Thomas Goodnight (1982) worried that the technical sphere would usurp the role of the public sphere in making public policy. In fact, as the climate example indicates, precisely the opposite has happened with angry populists usurping the role of technical elites within the technical sphere itself.

Another sign that fallacious strategic maneuvering is often quite successful and fails to produce the audience backlash that theorists predict, can be found in recent controversies in which demonstrably false claims were widely accepted by a large portion of the public. The fact that approximately twenty-five percent of the American people believed the “birther” theory that President Obama was born in Kenya, despite the complete absence of supporting evidence for the claim that the president was born outside of the United States and the overwhelming evidence that he was born in Hawaii is strong evidence that sometimes fallacious unreason is awfully persuasive (Bronner and Kershner 2011: A16). Precisely the same point can be made about the claim that President Obama’s health care proposal included death panels that could deny care to Medicare patients (Ruttenberg and Calmes 2009). While these examples are somewhat extreme, they reflect the fact that at least in the United States a huge percentage of the people lack even the most basic knowledge about current events and how government functions (Kaplan 2007). As a consequence, there is very powerful evidence for the unfortunate conclusion that at least in the short term having the superior argument is often not much of an advantage in terms of persuading an audience.

Professor Mohammed uses an analysis of the conditions in which a claim of inconsistency is a valid response to a charge in order to argue that depending upon whether the claim is viewed as a judgment about the performance of the Government or a judg-

ment about the competence of different political parties the argument can be viewed as either reasonable or fallacious. I do not disagree with this judgment, but it points to the difficulties that argumentation scholars face when they attempt to comment on public controversies. The complex analysis of Mohammed will be untranslatable for ordinary citizens attempting to decide whether to back a particular policy, party, or candidate. If argument criticism can only speak to other experts in argumentation the value of the practice will be lessened.

3. THE LIBERAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND FALLACY TESTING

At first glance, the depressing set of facts would seem to indicate the unpleasant conclusion that better arguments don't tend to win out in free and open debate and that argumentation theorists are unlikely to be able to act as public commentators and nudge the public sphere toward productive resolution of any given controversy.

There is, however, an alternative worldview that focuses on a third function of argument, a function which is related to but different from either persuasion or rational decision making—production of clash between competing worldviews. It is this view of argumentation that underlies the theory of liberal democracy developed by theorists who have focused on how competition of worldviews is at the core of democratic decision making, including perhaps the two most important theorists of liberal democracy writing in English, James Madison and John Stuart Mill (Mill 1910; Madison 1999; Rowland 2003).

In the view of Madison and Mill, over time better arguments have a tendency to win out over inferior arguments as long as there is rigorous testing that is produced not by experts applying theoretical tests to claims, but by the give and take of impassioned, often fallacious or even uninformed, public debate. Mill wrote in "On Liberty," "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurances of being right" (1910: 81). Madison had similar views. He wrote in Federalist Number 41 that "A bad cause seldom fails to betray itself. Of this truth, the management of the opposition to the federal government is an unvaried exemplification" (1999: 231). From this viewpoint, the derailings associated with strategic maneuvering are both inevitable and in the long run not that important. They aren't that important because in the long run the better argument is more pragmatically suited to solving whatever problem is under consideration. It is this idea that clash leads toward pragmatically superior decisions over time that underlies what I have labelled the liberal public sphere (Rowland 2003, 2005, 2006).

The evolution of attitudes in the United States on race, gender and sexual identity over the last half century provides remarkable evidence that spirited debate in the liberal public sphere has a strong tendency over time to choose the superior argument. The civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights movements in the United States all produced angry bigoted reactions. But the progress in including people of color, women and gay Americans within the public sphere has been both all too slow and undeniable at the same time. The one thing that the angry opponents of rights for these groups could not contend with was the undeniable argument that the members of all three groups were human beings just like them. That fundamental truth and the progress toward human rights for all

Americans that it produced is testament to the fact that over the long run being right is a very powerful thing indeed.

A similar point can be made about the lack of knowledge of either principles of argumentation or basic facts about the world. In the short run, these failings often will derail argumentative encounters, but in the long run the better argument is likely to win out precisely because it is the more pragmatically useful argument. In this way, a focus on the pragmatic function of producing clash helps resolve the tension identified by Mohammed and others between productive and fallacious strategic maneuvering. After all, the ultimate test of any argument as van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002: 131) noted is “its problem-solving capacity.”

What is the role of the argumentation theorist in the liberal public sphere? While the most powerful force pushing toward productive resolution of any given controversy is the clash of competing advocates, the argumentation theorist can play an important supporting role. In recent years, for example, fact checking websites such as FactCheck.org have influenced public debate by systematically checking any number of the most controversial political claims (Clemmitt 2011). These websites, for example, played an important role in debunking the death panel charge and the “birther” narrative (Stelter 2011; “Vetting claims in a memo,” 2009, A16). While the websites and other media sources increasingly have checked the facticity of important claims, no similar effort has been made to test the reasoning in crucial debates in the public sphere. It is here that argumentation theorists could make a significant difference. The kind of analysis done by Mohammed could be quite important in this regard, but it will require translation to a form that ordinary arguers easily can understand. For example, it seems to me that the underlying principles that Mohammed applies to test accusations of inconsistency can be boiled down to two issues. First, the argumentation critic should test whether the two situations involved in the alleged inconsistency are in fact fundamentally similar. It is not inconsistent to behave differently than in the past or advocate a different position than in the past, if the situation has changed. Second, the critic should test the centrality of the inconsistency to the overall argument. My point is that the method applied by Mohammed and other argumentation critics can be translated into a system that ordinary arguers can understand. Undoubtedly, some of the intellectual rigor of Mohammed’s analysis would be lost in that translation effort, but if the argumentation critic is to influence real public debate, the translation is vital.

4. CONCLUSION

On a host of contemporary issues, public debate seems anything but reasoned. While I have focused on the United States in making this point, I suspect that a similar conclusion could be drawn about many countries. It would be easy to conclude that the forces of unreason are ascendant, a conclusion that drives an argumentation theorist to despair. Viewed in another way, however, there is no need for despair and great need for the intellectual rigor that argumentation theorists can add to public debate. President Barack Obama (2010) quotes Martin Luther King Jr. as having argued that arc of history bends toward justice. That arc occurs in large part because over time better arguments win out over inferior arguments as long as there is free and open debate. History moves toward justice because of the pragmatic power of reasoned argument. Viewed in this way, falla-

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cious examples of strategic maneuvering are quite likely to derail resolution of many controversies in the short term, but over time arguers will use pragmatically better arguments to get the engine of democracy back on the tracks and moving toward both justice and reasoned problem solving. In this journey, pragma-dialecticians, along with informal logicians, and other argumentation scholars can help nudge the public sphere toward those arguments that are most pragmatically useful.

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