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Commentary on Frans van Eemeren's and Bart Garssen's "In Varietate Concordia—United in Diversity: European Parliamentary debate as an argumentative activity type"

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the past ten years, Frans van Eemeren and his colleagues at the University of Amsterdam have been engaged in a project they call "strategic manoeuvring." What has been most noted about this project is that it incorporates rhetorical considerations into a dialectical analysis, by focusing on choices made by arguers about how to meet their dialectical obligations. At least as important, though, is that the strategic manoeuvring project focuses on the study of specific contexts. It presumes that general standards or rules of argumentation (such as the famous "ten commandments" of the pragma-dialecticians) are both implemented and shaped by the particularities of the context. Theory is strengthened if it is able thereby to account for actual cases of argumentation. This being so, the question of how to determine what the context is (or what counts as the context) is especially important.

Frans van Eemeren and Bart Garssen have shared their initial thinking in a research focus on the European Parliament. They suggest that debate in the European Parliament can be considered as an argumentative activity type. I understand their use of "activity type" to mark out genres and sub-genres of argumentation that take place in particular contexts. The paper is an enlightening discussion of the characteristics of the European Parliament that make for differences in argumentation compared to the individual national parliaments of EU member states. I would like to address my remarks to three issues raised by their analysis.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ACTIVITY TYPE

In their paper, van Eemeren and Garssen define communicative activity types as "empirically-based prototypes of conventionalized communicative practices." These become argumentative activity types if the communicative activity is inherently or largely argumentative, or if the communication is examined as a case of argumentation. The

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claim they advance is that European parliamentary debate can be seen productively as an argumentative activity type. This claim invites obvious questions: What makes it so? How do you know?

The paper suggests that the special feature of the European parliament is that its members have dual loyalties: both to the European Union as a whole and to their home countries. But does this distinguish the European Union adequately from such bodies as the U.S. Congress (whose members are loyal both to the nation and to their own state), the House of Commons (whose members are loyal both to the nation and to their own party), other national parliaments (whose members may have both regional and national loyalties), or—for that matter—a Faculty Senate (whose members are loyal to the interest of the university as a whole but are also representatives of their individual departments)? I wonder if it might be more productive to hypothesize that the argumentative activity type is something like “decision-making in legislative bodies with mixed loyalties” and then to examine each of my examples for the light it could shed on the more generic activity type, rather than assuming in advance that a particular parliamentary body is itself a distinct activity type.

Deciding what is an activity type is not a trivial matter, because, as van Eemeren and Garssen suggest, “it is at the level of an individual activity type that the institutional preconditions for strategic manoeuvring manifest themselves most specifically.” In other words, to characterize the opportunities for and constraints on strategic manoeuvring in an accurate way, we have to be confident that we have identified the activity type properly. There is a particular danger in proliferating activity types. Slicing the distinctions too thinly may limit the generalizability of analytical claims. Taken to the extreme, if each case of argumentation can be seen as its own activity type, then it is impossible to transcend the facts of the particular case. This would involve the pragmatodialecticians in the radical individuality of the rhetorical situation—the belief that rhetoric is always about the particular situation—just by another name. It would defeat their ability to make theoretical generalizations.

If I had to identify one major weakness in the strategic manoeuvring project, a weakness reflected in this paper, it is the absence of clear criteria for determining what counts as a distinctive activity type. Fortunately, however, van Eemeren and Garssen promise in footnote 2 of their paper that this “will be explained in more detail in van Eemeren (to be published).” I, along with many other argumentation scholars, eagerly await this promised publication.

3. DISPUTATION AS THE GENRE OF POLITICAL ARGUMENTATION

In their paper, van Eemeren and Garssen propose that disputation is the genre of communicative activity within the domain of political communication, of which General Debate in the European Parliament is an activity type. But the selection of “disputation” is arbitrary; at least, no reason is advanced for it in the paper. The choice is important because it affects the categorization of activity types.

For example, van Eemeren and Garssen stipulate that the assumed presence of a third-party audience is vital for the strategic manoeuvring taking place in disputation. But a third-party audience is not always a characteristic of parliamentary debate. Sometimes the parties will engage in posturing, especially in the early stages of considering

legislation. They may stake out positions as initial negotiating points, only to engage in compromise later. To stipulate the need for a third-party audience will predispose what types of strategic manoeuvring we look for—such as the primacy of appeals to the local constituency. Our arbitrary designation of a genre of communicative activity may affect how we examine the case.

Moreover, there is an obvious alternative to “disputation” to characterize this genre, namely “deliberation.” Parliamentary bodies engage in deliberative discourse in that they focus on the future and on the realm of practical action. The United States Senate, for instance, is popularly known as “the world’s greatest deliberative body,” yet according to van Eemeren and Garssen it would be engaged in disputation rather than deliberation. Other candidates for naming the genre of communicative activity might include mobilization, reconciliation, and posturing.

My point is not that “disputation” is a poor choice of terms and that an alternative would be better, but rather that *any* characterization of the communicative activity needs to be justified, not simply stipulated. Attending to *how* genres of communicative activity are selected is as important as being more precise about what counts as an activity type.

4. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY AUDIENCES

It is understood that political communication typically has multiple audiences. There are audiences immediately present to the arguer and audiences that the arguer ultimately wants to reach, and these are not necessarily the same. Like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, van Eemeren and Garssen regard the primary audience as the one the arguer ultimately wants to influence. This means that the audience actually being addressed may turn out to be the secondary audience. Other writers do exactly the opposite, labeling the immediately present audience as the primary audience and the others as the secondary audience. Neither view has any advantage over the other in principle, but to avoid confusion it is important to make clear which view is intended, rather than to use the terms “primary” and “secondary” as if their referents were obvious.

What is more troublesome, however, is the assumption by van Eemeren and Garssen that legislative debate always or typically (rather than “sometimes”) takes place with the local constituency as the primary audience. This is a theoretical speculation that outruns the evidence they provide from their case study. If they are right, then how can one explain cases of “statesmanship” in which legislators “rise above politics” and support moves that are in the interest of the whole polity even if they are not in the interest of one’s local constituency? Legislators do occasionally vote for tax increases even though the public does not like them; they do approve foreign aid to benefit other nations and peoples; they do agree to funding formulas from which they and their constituents do not benefit. The *a priori* assumption of who is the primary audience can bias our understanding of institutional constraints on strategic manoeuvring.

5. CONCLUSION

What these three topics have in common is the concern that van Eemeren and Garssen may be making *a priori* stipulations that entail a reductionist view of political argumentation, which is at once deliberation, disputation, mobilization, placation,

DAVID ZARESKY

celebration, reaffirmation—just to name a few of the communicative activities it embraces. If we are to make sense of strategic manoeuvring in political argumentation, we must come to grips with political argumentation in all its complexity, rather than simplifying the phenomenon or fragmenting it into a proliferating number of activity types that defy the ability to compare and to generalize. Careful attention to these matters of definition and classification should help the strategic manoeuvring project better to realize its great explanatory and analytical potential.

[Link to paper](#)