

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

## Commentary on Govier

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# Commentary on Trudy Govier's "More on Dichotomization: Flip-flops of two mistakes"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trudy Govier's writings are consistently characterized by clarity, insight, thoroughness, and often social and moral relevance; her current paper is no exception. I shall focus in this commentary on two areas: (1) criterial issues concerning the Error of Vacuity; and (2) the language of continua (or spectra) and degrees as metaphorical or literal in the context of argument typology. My aim is to provide fruitful points of discussion rather than strongly supported conclusions. I am grateful for the "Objections Considered" section in her present paper and shall begin by focusing on Objection Two.

## 2. THE ERROR OF VACUITY AND CRITERIAL ISSUES

Some key excerpts from Objection Two are as follows:

Pragmatically, then, some dichotomies that are in the strict sense false are useful and defensible as such. Degrees of Q and not-Q, respects in which X qualifies as Q or does not, and even kinds of Q and not-Q may not actually matter for the purposes at hand. If this is the case, then a dichotomous framework will be the most convenient one. (p. 8)

Govier's response to Objection Two is as follows:

If this really is the case, then the dichotomous framework is defensible in such a context, but we should not forget that it is an oversimplifying framework that glosses over factors that may turn out to be significant after all. (p. 8)

The word 'false' in Objection Two presumably applies only to the Error of Contrariety, which is a *false* dichotomy, due to being nonexhaustive. The Error of Vacuity, being exhaustive, is a *true* type of dichotomy. Some, perhaps many, instances of the Error of Contrariety are *false but useful*, as indicated in Objection Two. Correspondingly interesting instances of the Error of Vacuity might provisionally be described as '*problematic but useful*' rather than as 'false but useful.' But what sense of 'problematic'

Fischer, T. Commentary on Trudy Govier's "More on Dichotomization: Flip-flops of two mistakes." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-4), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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is at work here for so-called ‘useful’ instances of the Error of Vacuity? And what more can be said regarding the nature of the normative criteria that the Error of Vacuity violates?

While Govier describes the Error of Contrariety as involving mistakes in “ordinary language use and meaning, correctly understood” (p. 1), she characterizes statements featuring the Error of Vacuity as providing “remarkably little content,” as “quasi-logical, in Perelman’s sense,” as Dewey’s “infinite negative,” and as “spuriously informative.”

The phrase ‘spuriously informative’ suggests to me that the Error of Vacuity can be appropriately classified as a violation of conversational norms of reasonableness, in particular Paul Grice’s *First Maxim of Quantity*: “Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).” (Grice 1989, p. 26) In *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*, van Eemeren and Grootendorst provide “speech act alternatives” (Eemeren van and Grootendorst 2004, p. 77) to Grice’s Maxims, including the first rule of language, “You must not perform any speech acts that are incomprehensible.” (Eemeren van and Grootendorst 2004, p. 77). In commenting on this first rule of language, van Eemeren and Grootendorst state:

Naturally, this [first rule of language] does not mean that a speaker or writer has to be completely explicit, but that the listeners or readers may not be *hindered* or even prevented from arriving at a correct interpretation.” (Eemeren van and Grootendorst 2004, p. 77, emphasis added).

It seems to me that the Error of Vacuity is usefully classified as a dialogical hindrance because the classes in not-Q appear to have been addressed in the discourse but have instead been effectively channelled out of the conversation.

The tug and pull over the proper use of not-Q discussed in Govier’s *Objection Two* can be understood as being between the First and the Second Gricean Maxims of Quantity. Grice’s *Second Maxim of Quantity* is: “Do not make your contribution *more* informative than is required.” (Grice 1989, p. 26, emphasis added) If a speaker believes that some categories do not pertain in an ongoing rational discussion, then the complementary class not-Q can be appropriately employed as a device for reducing the amount of the information being conveyed down to the appropriate level.

In a paper entitled *Disjunction and Alternativeness* (Simons 2001), philosopher and linguist Mandy Simons, interpreting Grice to an extent, characterizes a set of disjuncts in a proposition as a kind of *list* such that the speaker is not committed to any *single* item on that list, as would be the case with a list in the form of a *conjunction*. Lists are very context-sensitive tools; the exhaustiveness of a list is often not key within a given context and purpose. Govier’s warning regarding the Error of Vacuity remains nevertheless very important in selected contexts.

Adherence to maxims of reasonable cooperativeness in conversation seems to me to be crucially involved in *social trust* as understood by Govier in her book, *Social Trust and Human Communities*. (Govier 1997) Low-trust societies feature markedly low levels of cooperation, at least beyond the circle of one’s family and close friends. Two types of low-trust societies examined by Govier in this book are (1) “peasant” societies characterized by scarcity, and (2) societies with totalitarian governments. Philosopher and linguist Siobhan Chapman in her book, *Paul Grice, Philosopher and Linguist*, notes that the indigenous peoples of Madagascar do not follow Grice’s maxims of quantity because

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they view information as scarce and to be hoarded. (Chapman 2004, p. 198) Empirical studies might well show that the Error of Vacuity is more prevalent in totalitarian societies than in liberal, industrialized democracies.

Although these dialog-based criteria regarding the Error of Vacuity are helpful in my view, further criteria involving pragmatic, semantic, epistemic, or dialectical dimensions may also be needed. According to Siobhan Chapman, Grice himself was concerned with “categories as the building blocks of knowledge” (Chapman 2004, p. 71) Govier has argued in her paper “When They Can’t Talk Back” (Govier 1991, p. 183) that the dialogical model is not an adequate theory for contexts involving noninteractive audiences. These important issues, and other related issues, cannot be explored here.

### 3. CONTINUA, SPECTRA, DEGREES, AND RANKINGS

Govier writes,

But the continuum metaphor itself is a simplifying metaphor. Sometimes the models of continuum and spectrum are inapplicable. Interestingly, one such instance appears to be that of argument typology.” (p. 5)

She asks, “of *what* are these *degrees* [of argument strength] on the continuum or the spectrum? There seems to be no good answer to this question.” (p. 5) My aim in this second commentary section is to explicate three senses in which we talk of continua (or spectra) and degrees: (1) a literal sense; (2) a semi-metaphorical sense; and (3) a fully metaphorical sense. I shall then apply these developed distinctions to some issues related to Govier’s paper.

In a *literal* continuum, numbers both *individuate* and *rank order* the instances involved. A point in space is both named and individuated by a number, an example being the halfway points in Zeno’s famous Dichotomy paradox. A common example is the degrees of temperature, which are both individuated and ranked by numbers. In a *semi-metaphorical* use of “continuum,” numbers do not individuate the instances; but the instances are ranked by posting some of their measured features to a numerical scale. An example would be measuring the height of 1800 randomly selected people and then graphing this data, creating most likely a bell-shaped, normal mathematical curve, suggesting a trichotomous classification.

The *fully metaphorical* use of “continuum” and “degrees” involves rankings created without intrinsically using numbers. Consider a stack of 1800 randomly selected, one-page written arguments that we want to rank according to argument goodness, with the best at the top of the stack. Initially, two arguments are compared and ranked using accepted criteria. Then a third argument is compared to each of the first two, the third argument receiving a rank such that both (1) the argument immediately above it in the stack is stronger or of the same strength, and (2) the argument immediately below it in the stack is weaker or of the same strength. This process is repeatable indefinitely until all arguments are placed in the ordered set of ranked arguments. Applying “continuum” or “degrees” to the outcome of this ranking would be metaphorical terminology because there are no numbers directly utilized in the ranking process. After the ranking process is finished, ordinal numbers may be applied to the instances, i.e. first, second, third, etc.

Trudy Govier's paper has shown us how using this fully metaphorical language can facilitate the imposition of a false continuum on categories and thus on their instances. In attempting to rank our stack of 1800 written arguments, the outcome would likely not be a single stack of 1800 arguments but rather various shorter stacks of arguments labelled "abductive," "inductive generalization," "conductive," etc. Meaningful comparison of any two arguments in terms of goodness requires significant relevant similarities of scheme and/or context. The stubborn diversity experienced in the actual ranking of specific arguments can frustrate theory construction, creating a potential scenario for imposing a false continuum on diversity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In her response to Objection Seven in the present paper, Govier argues that her position is not post-modernist. She characterizes her position rather as featuring "an insistence on context and relevant differences." (p. 7) I fully agree; her role in this paper is that of a constructive critic cautioning about oversimplification and other mistakes with respect to categorical schemes and disjunctive propositions.

Her treatment of argument typology in the present paper seems to me to be congruent with the view that argument sufficiency is inherently comparative, quasi-quantitative in the non-numerical sense of 'more than' and 'less than,' and resistant to generalization, especially considering the context-centric nature of arguments. It seems to me that a further congruent view is that argument typology is substantially based on processes of argument evaluation. If these general points in theory of argument are accepted, then conductive arguments, which incorporate *comparative* weighing, may be in some ways more paradigmatic in argument evaluation than simple arguments.

[Link to paper](#)

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