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# Second Order Intersubjectivity: The Dialectical Aspect of Argumentation

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**ABSTRACT:** Following Rescher's (1977) conception of dialectics, I argue for the view that the dialectical aspect of argumentation enables a "second order intersubjectivity", to be understood in terms of the recursive nature of the activity of giving and asking for reasons. This feature underlies that most argumentative discourses represent the explicit part of a dynamic activity, "a mechanism of rational validation" (Rescher, 1977: xiii) which presupposes the possibility of attaining objectivity.

**KEY WORDS:** Dialectic, dialectics, intersubjectivity, recursivity

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to give an account of the dialectical dimension of argumentation in terms of the recursive nature of the activity of giving and asking for reasons. I aim to show that this recursivity promotes what we may call a "second order intersubjectivity". In dealing with it, we will face that most argumentative discourses represent the explicit part of a dynamic activity, "a mechanism of rational validation", as Rescher (1977) suggested, which presupposes the possibility of attaining objectivity.

Additionally, I would like to show that this dialectical dimension is present in argumentation understood either as a justificatory or as a persuasive device, so as to leave open the door for an integration of the logical and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation too.

## ARGUMENTATION AS A JUSTIFICATORY AND AS A PERSUASIVE DEVICE

The activity of arguing plays two basic roles, both fundamental to humans as rational and social beings: on the one hand, argumentation is a tool for knowledge because it is the way we justify our beliefs and claims; on the other hand, it is also a tool for individuals interplay because it promotes persuasion. I think that both roles are idiosyncratic of the activity of arguing, and consequently I take that an account of argumentation is *prima facie* committed to deal with them and to make sense of the way they relate to each other.

Nonetheless, the possibility of giving a unitary account of the persuasive and the justificatory aspects of argumentation seems far from obvious. The traditional theoretical view was mainly concerned with the semantics of argumentation, that is, with arguments as abstract objects that endorse semantic properties, specially, validity and truth. According to the traditional account, argumentation should be conceived, above all, as a means to justify claims and beliefs, that is, as a means to achieve and determine knowledge. Yet, as criticised by most argumentation theorists, the classical

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approach had to face inescapable difficulties in dealing not only with real argumentation in natural language, but also with the normativity of argumentation as an activity which is not only semantically, but also pragmatically constrained.

For its part, the pragmatic approach that at present characterizes Argumentation Theory has tried to counterbalance the semantic hegemony by stressing the fact that argumentation is, above all, certain sort of activity. This perspective has underlined the pragmatic properties of argumentation, like the constrains of communicative rationality respecting argumetative exchanges, or the conditions for its success. In considering argumentation from a pragmatic point of view, current approaches have dealt with argumentation as a form of human interplay, focusing on its role and features as a means to coordinate actions and beliefs.

In principle, the instrumental rationality of argumentation as a means to coordinate actions and beliefs seems to be dependent on its internal-inherent rationality as a means to justify. But acknowledging this relationship between the justificatory and the persuasive dimensions of argumentation does not necessarily requires to take the persuasive force of particular acts of arguing as the output of their justificatory force: as pointed out in Bermejo-Luque (2006), there are several ways in which to determine that a piece of argumentation is a good one, i.e. that it supports or justifies its conclusion, does not involve coming to believe that conclusion.

But certainly, the rationality of argumentation as a means to coordinate actions and beliefs is dependent on its promoting agreement on what the case is, and this ability finally depends on its being a good means to show that our claims and beliefs are correct. Argumentation is, in general, a rational means for persuasion because good argumentation is able to show that our claims or beliefs are correct. And that is indeed a good way of generating agreement among beings like us, who tend to involuntarily believe what they think is correct. Consequently, we can say that argumentation promotes legitimacy in two senses: on the one hand, it legitimates our acts of coming to believe when offered good reasons; on the other hand, it is also a legitimate means of persuasion.

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Yet, there are different means to coordinate beliefs and actions other than argumentation: suggestion, coercion, seduction, etc. Surely, they all are necessary and even instrumentally rational means for higher level coordination in complex societies constituted by individuals which are not only rational, but also responsive beings in general. Yet, argumentation is a particularly interesting form of persuasion because it promotes what we may call a 'second order intersubjectivity'.

First order intersubjectivity is intersubjectivity accomplished by communication in general, but argumentation makes possible the communication of reasoning. What is the difference?

Any information exchange is a form of interplay. But communication is an intersubjective form of information exchange, as it involves standards of rationality related to its being intentional. According to the traditional pragmatic account of meaning, when a speaker utters a sentence in the appropriate conditions, she gets to communicate her beliefs. By contrast, when she argues, she communicates not just her beliefs, but also the reasons that she has for them. That is, by saying that  $p$  under the appropriate conditions, others will attribute her the belief that  $p$ , while by arguing for  $p$ , others will be in a position to consider her reasons to believe that  $p$ , being these reasons not the mere explanation of her believing that  $p$ , but rather being reasons to

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show that  $p$  is true, acceptable or probable, and therefore, being reasons for whoever to believe that  $p$ . So to speak, in argumentation, rationality is not only the input, but also the output of the activity: by arguing, we make rational our beliefs to others. In this sense, argumentation enables the coordination of beliefs and actions among individuals by promoting agreement about what the case is.

Thus, the sort of agreement that argumentation enables is radically different from any kind of pact, or the result of negotiations. Rather, it is the product of generating conviction about what are the right or adequate things to do or to believe. In distinguishing between agreement by conviction and agreement by pact or contract, it is interesting to notice that, despite argumentation makes it possible the coordination of both, beliefs and actions, this coordination is always brought about *via* beliefs. That is, argumentation coordinates actions and beliefs by promoting agreement about what the case is. This explains one of its principal features, namely, that this sort of agreement cannot be forced. It is because argumentation promotes agreement about what the case is –which, of course, includes what we “should”, “need”, “shouldn’t”, “must”, “cannot”, etc ... do, etc.- that it cannot promote agreement as a result of a negotiation: this agreement is not based on compromises, but on beliefs. We can negotiate what to do, but we cannot negotiate what to believe because, in principle, we do not decide on our beliefs: my belief that  $p$  is my thinking that  $p$  is the case; we can only believe just as we think it is the case. Actually, “believing that  $p$ ” and “thinking that  $p$  is the case”, are *prima facie* the same thing. As far as agreement by argumentation cannot be negotiated, it cannot be forced either. That is the main reason why argumentation is, on the other hand, not just a legitimate, but also a legitimating means of interaction among individuals.

Argumentation as a second order intersubjective activity enables a path for improvement because of its recursivity. The normative output of the activity of arguing, i.e. the justification of our beliefs and claims, involves second order intersubjectivity because it requires regulated feedback rather than mere interplay upon communication as a first order intersubjective activity. This regulated feedback constitutes in fact further argumentation. When we try to justify a claim by offering a reason, we might be required to firstly justify the reason, the warrant that would license the step from this reason to that claim, or both. Additionally, when we aim to persuade of a claim because of a reason, we may need to firstly persuade of our reasons or to persuade of their relevance for our claim. At any step, further argumentation may be advanced or required in order to justify our claim, or to succeed in inducing the corresponding belief. In this sense, argumentative discourses’ recursivity expresses the way argumentation is able to test its own cogency, either as a means to persuade or as a means to justify. Such is, in the present account, what I call “the dialectical dimension of argumentation”.

### COORDINATION VIA BELIEFS

R. Pinto (2001) has defended that we should broaden the concept of argumentation so as to characterize it as “an attempt to modify conscious attitudes through rational means” (2001: 10). In his view, it is a mistake to consider that argumentation only aims at promoting certain sort of “doxastic” attitudes, namely, beliefs and belief-like attitudes. We can also give reasons for adopting different kinds of attitudes towards propositions other than doxastic ones. Thus, argumentation can be considered a means to justify beliefs and claims, but also other types of doxastic attitudes like “suspecting that  $p$ ”, “being inclined to believe that  $p$ ”, “considering that  $p$ ”, etc; at inducing non-

doxastic attitudes towards propositions, like “hoping that  $p$ ”, “fearing that  $p$ ”, etc; and even at inducing conscious attitudes other than propositional ones, like “approving something”, “disliking something”, etc. According to this, Pinto would refuse the idea that argumentation always coordinates beliefs and actions *via* beliefs.

My first response to this position consists in pointing out that to be successful in persuading a subject  $S$  of doing  $A$  does not necessarily imply that  $S$  actually does  $A$ : think of a case in which  $S$  just cannot do  $A$ , though she tries to. If I want to persuade you of hating John, I can succeed in persuading you of hating him without achieving your actual hate. Thus, my success in persuading you of hating him would consist in my success in inducing the belief that this person is to be hated. As Pinto seems to acknowledge in recognizing at least that the intended effect of argumentation is to promote “conscious attitudes”, if I manage to persuade you of  $x$  (for example, “hating John”),  $x$  cannot pass “unnoticed” to you. But noticing something as awful, lovely, sensible, etc. does not necessarily involve “moving our passions” in the corresponding direction (“Yes, it’s awful; I shouldn’t do it, but I can’t help it!”). At its best, it involves regarding, i.e. being conscious of, certain qualities in the intentional object of our attitude. That is the difference between persuading of something and just inducing an attitude: induced attitudes can be neither conscious nor intentional, contentful attitudes, like certain feelings towards objects and situations. According to my proposed account, to give reasons for an attitude, whether propositional or not, and whether doxastic or not, would be to give reasons for a claim that the object of our attitude has such and such characteristics, and to give reasons for doing  $A$  would be to give reasons for a claim that  $A$  should, must, can, etc be done. Accordingly, to justify an attitude would be to show that the corresponding claim is correct.

I think that an additional difficulty of Pinto’s conception would be to explain in which sense argumentation could be distinguished from other discursive devices with rhetorical power which are merely grounded on the addressees’ responsiveness to different kinds of stimuli. After all, is it not “an attempt to modify conscious attitudes by rational means” to induce fear on an addressee by raising a threat on her? I think that there is at least one sense in which we can say that a threat is a rational means to induce fear, just as we can say that it is rational to feel fear when threatened. So, which sense of ‘rational means’ would be Pinto appealing to? Is it equivalent to ‘reasons’? But in that case, in which sense can we give reasons for an attitude? If this attitude is something already held by someone, our reasons can only serve to manifest its adequacy, morality, efficiency, etc; that is, they are reasons for the claim that this attitude is adequate, fair, useful, etc. On the other hand, if the attitude is to be done, our reasons must also be reasons for the claim that  $A$  should, must, can, etc. be done, otherwise no appraisal of the suitability of these reasons would be available excepting its actual efficiency in inducing someone to entertain such and such attitude. That is, we would have no means to distinguish ‘reasons’ from mere ‘stimuli’, and consequently, we would have no means to distinguish argumentation from other types of discursive devices having rhetorical effects.

## DIALECTICAL NORMATIVITY

So far, I have characterized the dialectical dimension of argumentation as a second order activity. I have outlined the recursive character of this activity, both as an attempt to show that a target claim is correct and as an attempt to induce beliefs. Let me now continue by outlining the relationship between the dialectical dimension of

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argumentation, so understood, and the procedure that, since Socrates, is known as *dialectics*.

First of all, following some of the ideas that N. Rescher presented in *Dialectics. A Controversy-Oriented Approach to the Theory of Knowledge* (1977), I would like to make a distinction between ‘Dialectic’ as a discipline, and ‘dialectics’ as certain type of procedure. I think of Dialectic as an instrumental discipline devoted to the improvement of dialectical abilities and to the appraisal of discourse as a dialectical procedure. Aristotle’s *Topics* would be, mainly, a foundational work for such a discipline, although the practice grounded on dialectical principles, i.e. what I propose to name ‘dialectics’, is regarded as a Socratic invention.

The first thing to notice about Dialectic is its wholly prescriptive nature: the discipline is constituted by rules prescribing the development of certain activity whose goal, as Plato put it, is not persuasion but truth. But on the other hand, the activity itself is constitutively determined by these rules, so that an activity failing to fulfil dialectical rules is no more dialectics. That is why it would be senseless to talk about good or bad dialectics. In this sense, rather, dialectical normativity would determine whether or not certain activity is dialectical, and the features of any dialectical activity should be elucidated by reference to these constitutive rules. Consequently, the question of whether dialectical normativity could be considered as argumentative normativity *tout court* is to be answered by considering whether good argumentation and dialectics are the same type of activity after all. As we are going to see, good argumentation cannot be reduced to dialectics, and for that reason, argumentative normativity cannot be identified with dialectical normativity *tout court*.

To begin with, I must say that we should not ground a difference between argumentation and dialectics by identifying dialectics with dialogue and, then, pointing out that argumentation is not necessarily dialogical. The question of whether argumentation is essentially dialogical or not has been already discussed in the recent literature, mostly regarding the suitability of Pragma-dialectics as a normative theory of Argumentation.

In “The Dialogue Model of Argument” (1998), Blair has argued that not every piece of argumentation can be casted in a dialogical form. According to Blair, there are forms of argumentation which are, characteristically, “non-engaged”. Such is the case, for example, of argumentation carried out in defending a thesis in a book. Despite the whole book can be conceived as a big communicative movement within a wider exchange, in point of fact the writer is not really engaged with the presuppositions, objections and alternative thesis of any particular party, so that she sets herself free of addressing her argumentation to any particular audience. If a communicative act is non-engaged, in this sense, then, according to Blair, it does not count as a dialogue, but as a monologue –or two.

Whether or not we agree with the view that not every argumentation can be interpreted as an exchange between two parties, we may be able to determine whether or not dialectics is the same type of activity than dialogue. In my view, neither every dialogue counts as a dialectical exchange -mainly because, as mentioned above, if we fail to fulfil dialectical rules our activity is not dialectical at all, whether or not it was dialogical- nor every dialectical exchange is dialogical: dialectical rules prescribe the way certain type of theoretical inquiry must proceed. Consequently, whereas a dialogue is certain form of communication essentially determined by the existence of

two parties, dialectics is a method of inquiry that does not necessarily require of parties<sup>1</sup>.

In my view, the main problem of identifying dialectics and dialogue is that such conception has undermined the appreciation of argumentation both as dialectical and rhetorical. The reason is that in most cases, there has been a tendency to distinguish between dialectical and rhetorical activities as dialogical versus monological speech acts, i.e. as communicative exchanges carried out by two parties versus speeches directed to a rather passive audience, respectively. This assumption has obscured a conception of the dialectical nature of argumentation in terms of its recursivity, and of the rhetorical nature of argumentation in terms of its ability to persuade.

## DIALECTICAL RULES

So far, I have characterized a dialectical procedure as the activity of following dialectical rules. Now, I would like to give an account of the dialectical dimension of argumentation as the development of a dialectical procedure. So, which are its rules?

If an act of arguing is an act of putting forward a claim supported by a reason, then dialectical procedures regarding acts of arguing will be the result of carrying out three types of movements: 1) subjecting an assertion to a certain condition, i.e. making a *proviso*, (“*a*, given that *c*”) 2) questioning the meeting of a condition, i.e. suggesting a *defeater*, (“really *c*?”) and 3) questioning the bearing of a condition to legitimately making certain assertion, i.e. suggesting a *confutation* (really if *c*, *a*?”). The constitutive conditions and consequences of these movements would determine the dialectical rules involved in argumentation. Thus, if a proviso is an assertion that the meeting of condition *c* suffices for asserting *a*, then its main conditions are both that *c* and that *c* actually suffices for legitimately asserting *a*. In accordance, its main consequence is to establish that *a* can be put forward because *c*. Consequently, dialectical rules respecting provisos would be: 1) “show that *a* given that *c*”, and 2) “if a proviso is accepted, you can put forward that *a*, given that *c*”.

On the other hand, a defeater is a reservation on whether the condition of a proviso is actually met. Its main condition is lacking reasons for accepting that condition *c* has been actually met, and its main consequence is suspending our acceptance that this condition has been met. Thus, dialectical rules respecting defeaters would be: 3) “question whether condition *c* has been met”, and 4) “if making a defeater is an acceptable move, i.e. if we do not have reasons to accept that condition *c* has been met indeed, the supposition that it has been met, and its consequences, are to be dismissed”.

Finally, a confutation is a reservation on whether condition *c* really entitles to assert that *a*. Its main condition is lacking reasons for accepting that *c* is positively relevant for *a*, and its main consequence is suspending our acceptance that whenever condition *c* is met, *a* can be put forward. Thus, the dialectical rules for confutations are: 5) “question whether *c* is positively relevant for *a*”, and 6) “if making a confutation is an acceptable move, i.e. if we do not have reasons to accept that

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<sup>1</sup> Blair himself considers that despite not every argumentation is dialogical, every argumentation is dialectical (1998: 338). That is, in his view, dialogue and dialectics would represent different categories too.

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condition  $c$  is positively relevant for  $a$  indeed, the assumption that it is and its consequences, are to be dismissed”.

Notice that each of these moves can be carried out either by just one party or by more than one. In the first, case, what we have is a researcher taking into account possible reservations regarding the correction of her own assertions. Additionally, this dialectical process can be carried out either as strong or weak opposition between parties: whereas in strong opposition dialectics the assertions of each party are incompatible, so that each party’s advance amounts to a backward on the other’s side, in weak opposition dialectics, the opponent’s role is just to suggest rebuttals and defeaters to the proponent’s assertions and provisos. In any case, according to this account, it seems apparent that the dialectical development of argumentation is a procedure that by itself cannot settle the question of the correction of our claims. Rather, it would constitute a means for investigation.

At first sight, N. Rescher’s *Dialectics. A Controversy-Oriented Approach to the Theory of Knowledge* seems to be an attempt at characterizing dialectics, mainly, as dialogical argumentation. The sorts of movements that he recognizes in a dialectical process are: categorical assertion, cautious assertion and provisoed assertion, which are movements that seem to require of a proponent and an opponent. Nonetheless, he admits that the rules determining a dialectical process, as he specifies them, can shift from disputation, a dialogical process, to a methodology of inquiry, a monological process (Rescher, 1977: 46). According to Rescher, this shift requires an abrogation of merely conventional rules for dispute to “purely rational” rules for inquiry. Nevertheless, as Rescher himself recognizes, “since this process is intrinsically nonterminating (...), there must be some additional rules –extrinsic to the dialectical process itself- for fixing a stopping point to the process” (1977: 19). Therefore, he would also be admitting that dialectics, so conceived, is not really to be identified with argumentation tout court, because it is not a means for claiming, but a means for searching.

Nevertheless, it is possible to cast argumentation, at least in part, as a dialectical procedure by taking each reason-claim unit as a proviso. In doing so, we question the cogency of the corresponding argumentative act. On the other hand, as far as reasons, either as a means to persuade or to justify a claim, can be questioned – both respecting their truth-value and their positive relevance to a claim- any piece of argumentation can incorporate reasons for undercutting possible reservations. Finally, an argumentative dialogue can also be cast, at least in part, as a dialectical exchange in which each party aims at advancing its viewpoints either by raising doubts on the other’s, or by offering new arguments against the doubts raised by the other party.

## ARGUMENTATION AS THE SEARCH AND REQUEST OF OBJECTIVITY

The dialectical nature of argumentation, its recursivity, implies that, in point of fact, most argumentative discourses are the explicit part of a dynamic activity without a predetermined end: new provisos, defeaters and confutations might await us at any time, (unless the field of our inquiry is previously or independently settled –for example, because of the existence of armoured claims stopping further questioning). That would be the sense in which Rescher’s conception of dialectic as “a mechanism of rational validation” (1977: xiii) is rather a means to underline the dialectical nature of argumentation as an activity whose normative output is a decision on the correction of our claims and beliefs: the very activity of appraising argumentation develops into further argumentation. The activity of giving and asking for reasons often involves

participants as evaluators. And in appraising argumentation we may need to dialectically deepen in the act of arguing as stated. The dialectical nature of argumentation is not only a matter of its being brought about as a dialectical procedure by two parties, but also of the fact that, in order to determine the truth-values that we should really ascribe to the propositions being the content of reasons and warrants, the evaluators may need to produce further argumentation for them. In case they cannot find positive reasons to determine these truth-values, they may need to produce themselves possible defeaters for the reasons or confutations for the warrants to show that they are incorrect.

If we cast an act of arguing as a dialectical procedure, defeaters would be movements directed to question the acceptability of the reasons adduced. They may constitute argumentation themselves, so that an evaluator should appraise them in order to decide on the value of the target reason. For its part, a confutation is a reservation on whether the condition of a proviso really entitles to make certain assertion. In argumentation, confutations would be movements directed to question the relevance of a reason for a claim, and, as in the case of defeaters, they may constitute further argumentation to be appraised. This appraisal would result in an ascription of a truth-value to the warrant of the original act of arguing.

Because of its recursive, dialectical nature, argumentations is, at its minimum, an *als ob* activity regarding objectivity: people engaged in argumentative practices behave as if it were possible to attain objective beliefs. The assumption that objectivity is available is what makes sense of their confidence in achieving others' persuasion by offering reasons: on the one hand, because good reasons are normative respecting beliefs; and on the other hand, because the goodness of a reason is not a matter of subjective acceptance: the recursivity of argumentation would vanish if reasons were accepted or refused in the name of our beliefs, because at any step, an actual belief, either of the arguer or of the addressee, would stop further inquiry, and further attempt at persuading or justifying. Reasons and claims are stated in the name of objectivity. Thus, objectivity is the spur of arguers' activity –whether or not, in the last resort, they are completely hopeless. Additionally, there is no other means to test the objectivity of our beliefs than trying to show them to be correct, that is, to justify them. And this is, essentially, to argue.

Consequently, in regarding the dialectical nature of argumentation as the search and request for objectivity, we will have to be clear that, when determining the degree of support that an argumentative discourse is able to confer on its claim, we are actually valuing the stated part of an open process.

[link to commentary](#)

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