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Common Ground, Argument Form and Analogical *Reductio ad Absurdum*

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ABSTRACT: Most arguments can be presented in different forms, e.g. with explicit data or with an explicit inference license and, in the latter case, with a *modus ponens*- or a *modus tollens*-inference license. It is arguable that one form is more appropriate or effective with regard to a specific piece of argumentation than another. However, in this paper it is argued that with regard to analogical *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation, its alleged persuasive effect is due to a successful appeal to common ground and not to its form.

KEY WORDS: analogical argumentation, argument form, common ground, humour, irony, persuasiveness, strategic manoeuvring, *reductio ad absurdum*, refutation by logical analogy, rhetorical strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

A study of the literature on *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation yields numerous examples of analogical argumentation (McBurney & Mills 1964; Thompson 1971; Hollihan & Baaske 1973; Freeley 1981; Jensen 1981; Tindale & Gough 1987). In those examples the listener is forced to reject a certain standpoint, for failure to do so, it is suggested, would entail a commitment to another, comparable standpoint which was patently absurd. The commitment to the absurd position, it is suggested, is implied in the assertion of the viewpoint under attack. The comparable standpoint is supposed to be absurd because it contradicts either generally agreed opinions or well-known facts. In the following argument the assertion that one should always reject the death penalty is attacked on the basis of this kind of reasoning:

There is no case where we should reject the death penalty and therefore not even in the case of Saddam Hussein, for if you reject the death penalty on principle in all cases, you also have to do that with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. (Letter to the *NRC Handelsblad*, November 9, 2006)

In this argument the absurd implication consists of an analogical situation that—according to the arguer—would be endorsed by any person who subscribes to the standpoint that one should never reject death penalty. The implicit premise of the argument can be supposed to be something like: no one wishes with retrospective effect to revoke death penalties sentenced and carried out in the Netherlands and in other European countries after World War II. In other words: that is an absurd idea.

Authors who discuss the *reductio ad absurdum* on the basis of examples of analogical argumentation consider this kind of argumentation a very effective rhetorical strategy because of its supposed irony and use of ridicule or humour (McBurney & Mills 1964, p. 288, Jensen 1981, p. 189, Tindale & Gough 1987, p. 13 ff.). It is also commended for its simplicity and directness (Freeley 1981, p. 23). Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that this effect is due to the typical form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Characteristic of the *reductio ad absurdum* form is the appeal to the consequences which are alleged to be logically implied by the viewpoint under attack—formulated as a conditional statement. Judging from Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, an appeal to consequences is an important means of making something appear ridiculous:

(...) so [ridicule attaches to] anyone who sets forth principles whose unforeseen consequences put him in opposition to ideas which are accepted in a given society, and which he himself would not dare to contravene. (1969, p. 206)

In this respect they explicitly refer to the *reductio ad absurdum* as a strong means of achieving this end; they even identify this as one of the strongest objections to be made in argumentation (p. 207).

These remarks are interesting in the light of my research on argument forms, because they suggest that from a rhetorical point of view analogical argumentation presented in the *reductio ad absurdum* form has advantages over other forms. For example, another form in which argumentation can be presented is the form with a direct appeal to the comparable case instead of presenting this case as an implication of the attacked viewpoint. The example about the death penalty of Saddam Hussein can also be presented in such a form:

There is no case where we should reject the death penalty and therefore not even in the case of Saddam Hussein, for you also don't do that with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

However, elsewhere (Jansen 2006) I argued that with regard to analogical argumentation both the argument form of *reductio ad absurdum* and the form in which a direct appeal is made to the comparable case are probably equally persuasive. In this lecture I will elaborate on this conclusion and add some further considerations. I will do so by exploring what makes an analogical *reductio ad absurdum* a persuasive argument and discuss whether this is better expressed in one form rather than the other. In order to contextualise the research, the paper starts with a discussion of the notion of argument form and some forms that can be distinguished.

2. ARGUMENT FORM

I use 'argument form' as a notion that concerns the reconstruction that can be made of the presentation of single argumentation. Apart from the specific formulations that can be used for the standpoint and the premises, a single argument can be presented with either explicit data or an explicit inference license, and with an inference license containing either a *modus ponens* or *modus tollens* presentation with regard to the order of content of antecedent and consequent and the distribution of negations.¹ Examples of these different presentations are: 'She's probably not at home, since her

¹ I am not sure yet whether this overview is exhaustive. See also footnote 3.

car is not outside' (explicit data), 'She's probably not at home, for if her car is not outside, she most likely isn't' (explicit inference license, *modus ponens*), and 'She's probably not at home, otherwise [if she were at home] her car would be outside' (explicit inference license, *modus tollens*). These forms require the following reconstructions in pragma-dialectical terminology (1 being the standpoint, 1.1 the explicit premise and 1.1' the unexpressed premise; see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992):

1	Y, because	Suzanne is probably not at home, because
1.1	X, and	her car is not outside, and
1.1'	if X, then Y	(implicit: if her car is not outside, then she's probably not at home)
1	Y, because	Suzanne is probably not at home, because
1.1	if X, then Y, and	if her car is not outside, she most likely isn't, and
1.1'	X is the case	(implicit: her car is not outside)
1	Y, because	Suzanne is probably not at home, because
1.1	if not-Y, then not-X	if she were at home, her car would be outside and
1.1'	not not-X (not-X is not true)	her car is not outside

Very often the same argument can be presented in any of these forms. In all three forms, the argument contains the same elements, sometimes with a slightly different wording. For example, the different wording can concern the presence of negations in the inference license. After all, the inference statement in *modus tollens* is the contrapositive of the inference statement in *modus ponens*, which means that the variables change places (being antecedent or consequent) and are each other's negation. Also the mood of verbs can be different (indicative or subjunctive), but this is not necessarily so.

Elsewhere (Jansen forthcoming 2007a) I've argued that the *reductio ad absurdum* is an argument *form*. That is to say: it is an argument type that is characterised by its form instead of its pragmatic content. When an argument type is defined by its pragmatic content, it is defined by the nature of the inference license, or—in other words—by the nature of the argument scheme that is expressed in the argument. Since all types of pragmatic content that may define an argument scheme can occur in a *reductio ad absurdum*, the *reductio ad absurdum* cannot be defined by a specific kind of pragmatic content. Instead, the *reductio ad absurdum* must be characterised as a form, a conclusion that is reinforced by the fact that arguments in *reductio ad absurdum* form can be restated into another form. I have shown this in the introduction with regard to the analogical *reductio ad absurdum* argument about the death penalty for Saddam Hussein, where a comparison is made between the death penalty imposed on Saddam Hussein and those imposed on World War II criminals. A reconstruction of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument looks as follows:

1. There is no case where we should reject the death penalty and therefore not even in the case of Saddam Hussein, for
 - 1.1 If you reject the death penalty on principle in all cases, you also have to do that with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, and

- 1.1' No one would do that (i.e. 'that would be absurd')

This argument can be restated into the form with explicit data:

1. There is no case where we should reject the death penalty and therefore not even in the case of Saddam Hussein, for
 - 1.1 You also do not do that with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, and
 - 1.1' If you do not reject the one thing, you should not reject the other thing.

However, in the case of analogical argumentation the form with an explicit inference license in modus ponens form is less likely:²

1. There is no case where we should reject the death penalty and therefore not even in the case of Saddam Hussein, for
 - 1.1 If you also do not do that with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, you also should not reject the death penalty in the case of Saddam Hussein³, and
 - 1.1' No one wants to reject the death penalty with retrospective force in respect of the death sentences pronounced and carried out after the Second World War in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

The form of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation is very similar to *modus tollens* (Jansen forthcoming 2007a). The difference between a 'simple' *modus tollens* and a *reductio ad absurdum* may be the stepwise presentation in the *reductio ad absurdum* and the explicit presentation of the antecedent as a hypothetical situation with 'suppose that....' (although in many examples such an explicit introduction of the hypothetical antecedent is absent).⁴ Some of the examples mentioned in the literature

² In Jansen (2006) I argued that this form is less likely to be used, because it puts the important element of the comparison in an unfocused position (the antecedent). However, my opinion now is that the peculiarity of analogical argumentation expressed in this argument form is caused by the 'newness' of the information presented in the antecedent. The antecedent of a conditional premise has to contain information that has been referred to earlier, or must be accessible by experience ('given' information; see for this terminology Östman & Virtanen 1999). An analogical case most often conveys new information and therefore this argument form seems less appropriate for expressing the analogical argument scheme (note that in the case of Suzanne not being at home, both the speaker and the hearer can be standing in front of Suzanne's house watching an empty parking space). For that matter, the observation that principles of information structuring influence the choice for a specific argument form downplays the role of rhetorical motives.

³ This inference license can also be presented the other way around, namely by starting with the consequent: 'you should not reject the death penalty in the case of Saddam Hussein if you do not also reject...'. This makes me aware that there is more to argument form than I have discussed here.

⁴ With regard to the stepwise presentation *reductio ad absurdum*-argumentation is similar to what Walton calls Slippery Slope-argumentation, that is to say: to those types of Slippery Slope argumentation that do not make an appeal to causal consequences, but to logical consequences (the sorites/linguistic and precedent types) (Walton, 1992, p. 74; 1996, p. 203). Walton himself points out a connection between these types and the *reductio ad absurdum*, but according to him these types of Slippery Slope are 'not the same as the familiar type of reductio, where a proposition is reduced to absurdity by deducing a contradiction from it' (1992, p. 259); apparently because he holds the mathematical view on *reductio ad absurdum* (see for a discussion of this view: Jansen forthcoming 2007a).

as *reductio ad absurdum*-arguments and that can be classified as counterexamples (a subclass of symptomatic argumentation) contain such an argument structure: the argument goes from the one consequence to the other before ending in the ultimate absurd consequence. For example: the standpoint that a sign saying no animals are allowed in a store cannot be taken literally is defended by an appeal to the implication that this would mean blind people could not enter the store, and consequently by the further implication that the person may thus starve (which makes the argument absurd) (Jensen 1981, p. 271). Also causal *reductio ad absurdum* arguments can contain this more complex structure: ‘Humans and other meat-eaters are innately friendly, for if they were not innately friendly, they would have eaten their offspring and would have died out long ago’. Such more complex forms of the *reductio ad absurdum* suit Hoaglund’s description of the *reductio ad absurdum* as ‘an extended version of the modus tollens’ (2004, p. 421). However, a more complex form is not necessary for classifying a certain piece of argumentation as *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation.

3. WHAT MAKES AN ANALOGICAL REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM PERSUASIVE

The fact that arguments can be presented in different forms legitimises the question why an arguer would choose one form above the other. It also suggests that the choice of one form or the other may be regarded as an instance of strategic manoeuvring with the presentation (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002). The choice of a particular argument form is largely determined by the correlation between its formal characteristics, as for example the explicitness or implicitness of the inference license, and the argument scheme that is expressed in the argument. For example, in Jansen (forthcoming 2007b) I argue that with regard to arguments based on a counterexample (the subtype of symptomatic argumentation), the formal characteristics of the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* make it more effective than other forms and that the form with explicit data is least persuasive. In contrast, with respect to analogical *reductio ad absurdum* I have defended the hypothesis that the *reductio ad absurdum* form and the form with explicit data are probably equally persuasive (Jansen 2006).⁵ Below I will present new, additional considerations with regard to these conclusions.

3.1 Characteristics of an analogical *reductio* and the effect of ridicule

Studying the literature and examples on *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation in which an appeal to an analogy is made, it can be concluded that this type of argument may contain a normative or a descriptive standpoint. The way in which the consequences are perceived as absurd depends on the type of standpoint. When the standpoint is normative, the absurd consequences consist in a contradiction with opinions that are generally agreed upon. The example about Saddam Hussein’s death penalty is an instantiation of such *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. When the standpoint is descriptive, the absurdity consists in a contradiction with well-known facts. An example of this latter type is that it is not true that a corporation cannot make an oral contract because it has no tongue, because, if it were true, a corporation

⁵ My main argument was that the *reductio ad absurdum* form seems to imply an appeal to common ground and that a suggestion of such an appeal can also be reached in the normal form with explicit data when these data are accompanied with indicators like ‘after all’ or when they are presented in the form of a rhetorical question.

could also not make a written contract because it has no hand (McBurney & Mills 1964, p. 288). Nevertheless, the standpoint remains implicit most of the time. In the examples found in the literature the attack starts immediately with repeating the attacked standpoint in the antecedent of the conditional premise and then the showing its absurd consequence in the consequent. It must be reconstructed as a negative standpoint towards a proposition that consists of the attacked viewpoint. This proposition can be formulated either in a positive or in a negative way, depending on the formulation of the viewpoint attacked. It has the following form: '(not-)X is [negative qualification]'. The negative qualification can for example be: 'not true' or 'ridiculous' or 'absurd'.

Characteristic of the examples that have been described in the literature as *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation is that they are all instantiations of a subclass of analogical argumentation, namely 'refutation by logical analogy'.⁶ This kind of analogical argumentation is used in order to refute the opponent's reasoning structure, or, in other words, the justificatory power of the premise that the opponent has put forward in order to defend that standpoint. Its justificatory power is attacked by comparing it with a similar but absurd way of reasoning. Take for example the argument about the oral contract: the *reductio ad absurdum* primarily focuses on the insufficiency of the premise of corporations not having a tongue as a justification for the standpoint that corporations cannot make oral contracts. In another example the reasoning that football should be abolished because it results in death and injury is compared with the reasoning that bathtubs should be abolished for the same reason (Jensen 1981, p. 271). Or the standpoint that third world countries should not get self-determination because they lack experience in democratic government is compared with not going near water without successful experience in swimming (Freeley 1981, p. 230). Either the structure 'A because B' is attacked with the absurd structure 'C because B' or 'A because B' is attacked by the absurd structure 'C because D'. That a way of reasoning is being attacked, is indicated by the formulations that are used: 'then, according to your own argument...' (McBurney & Mills 1964, p. 288), 'if this line of reasoning is valid...' (Thompson 1971, p. 223) and 'this reasoning should be logically extended to...' (Hollihan & Baaske 1973, p. 153). Also Dutch examples of refutational analogy in *reductio ad absurdum*-form that I have found in newspapers contain such like indicators: 'ideeën wat nader uitwerken...' [ideas which if developed], 'als je deze redenering door zou trekken...' [and if you follow this line of argument to its logical conclusion] en 'bij consequent voortgezette redenering' [from this line of thought it logically follows].

According to Jensen (1981, p. 189) a *reductio ad absurdum* obtains its alleged humorous and ironical effect because such an argument pushes the viewpoint under attack to the extreme: the comparison is so dissimilar that it creates exaggeration and humour. Also Whaley and Holloway (1996, p. 165) see it this way: 'The more exaggerated the base [i.e. the analogical way of reasoning with which the attacked way of reasoning is compared], the more ridicule the analogy creates'. These remarks suggest that the case being used for comparison is humorous in itself, because it is too absurd to contemplate. However, analyses of Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) and Tindale & Gough (1987) suggest that there is more to it than this. Combining their ways of looking at the irony of an appeal to consequences gives the following picture. First, humour is created when the case being used for comparison blatantly contradicts generally shared norms. In other words: the compared case is extreme in

⁶ See Govier (2001). The type of argument she refers to is called 'rebuttal analogy' by Whaley & Holloway (1996) and Whaley (1998).

the sense that it transcends ‘the basic agreement we have about the limits of reasonableness’ (Tindale & Gough 1987, p. 11). As a result, the one who holds the attacked viewpoint is accused of inconsistent commitments (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 206). Namely, on the one hand this person holds the viewpoint under attack, whereas on the other hand, by so doing, he is committed to another viewpoint that no rational person wishes to hold. Since it must be assumed that the person under attack considers himself a rational being, it is suggested that he actually does not want to hold the implied viewpoint and will withdraw the original viewpoint. However, for the time being he is accused of holding two incompatible viewpoints and, according to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (*ibid.*), this makes him look ridiculous.⁷

Considering the hilarious examples of the analogical *reductio ad absurdum* presented in the literature, it seems that the effect of absurdity can only be achieved when the line of reasoning held up for comparison blatantly contradicts norms that are shared by everyone. However, in my opinion the examples in the textbooks have this feature because they must make sense to any reader in order to illustrate the concept of absurdity. In contrast, an actual arguer does not have to deal with ‘any’ reader or ‘any’ listener. He only has to address the norms of his audience. For an arguer it is enough if the viewpoint with which the attacked viewpoint is compared is absurd in the eyes of his audience. So, an arguer has to refer to common ground between him and his audience. Consider the following examples:

Example 1

‘It is ridiculous that cannabis is banned because of its stupefying effects, for then alcohol should also be prohibited for being a drug.’

Example 2

‘It is ridiculous that we do not force the tobacco industry to pay for the illnesses of smokers, for then ‘the polluter pays’ principle should also not apply in the environmental sector.’⁸

In these examples a certain reasoning structure is attacked by comparing it with another reasoning structure, which, it is suggested, is obviously unacceptable. However, the viewpoint to be compared may only be absurd for a particular audience, for example an audience of vintners and a left wing audience respectively. For others there may be no appeal to common ground at all. An audience who have experience of alcoholism may very well favour a ban on alcohol and it is well-known that there are those who think that the polluter pays principle goes too far. Because these analogies do not appeal to common ground in the sense that any rational being would find the compared viewpoint absurd, they do not have the same strikingly hilarious effect of the examples in the literature. But if the arguer has correctly assessed the norms of his audience, he can actually reach the same effect if the compared viewpoint contradicts those norms. So, although we cannot regard examples 1 and 2

⁷ An analogical *reductio ad absurdum* is thus a very personal attack. Such an attack may be persuasive, at least with respect to a third party, but there is also the danger it may alienate people (Jensen 1981, p. 189). Also Whaley & Holloway (1996, p. 166) and Whaley (1998, p. 355, p. 360) signal the risk of being considered impolite when refuting someone’s standpoint by way of a rebuttal analogy. However, whether and how this would influence the argument’s persuasiveness is subject of their further research.

⁸ Example based on van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans (2005, p. 182).

as yielding a commonly agreed upon absurd consequence, they are also instances of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. After all, it is implied in these kinds of arguments that the viewpoint presented for comparison must be regarded as absurd. The argument, as it were, presupposes common ground about this.⁹

3.2 *The effect of argument form*

Having established that the *reductio ad absurdum*'s absurdity is derived from an appeal to common ground, I will now address the question whether these effects are better reached by the typical argument form of a *reductio ad absurdum* than the argument form with explicit data. As I have argued elsewhere, I think this is not the case. This time, I draw my evidence from the features that create the *reductio ad absurdum*'s ridiculous effect. Only when these features are present is there a chance that the audience will forget to consider whether the comparison is valid and thus whether the compared absurd viewpoint is indeed implied by the viewpoint under attack. In my opinion, this observation implies that if the condition of actual absurdity is indeed fulfilled, then it is less important to present the compared analogical case as a consequence. This opinion is supported by highly ironic examples of absurd analogies that are not presented in the typical *reductio ad absurdum*-form. For a start, many examples can be found in Whaley & Holloway (1996) and Whaley (1998). These examples begin by mentioning the attacked viewpoint, followed by formulations like 'that's like ...' and 'isn't that like....?' and then followed by the alleged analogical viewpoint. Also the following examples, taken from a letter to the Dutch newspaper the *NRC-Handelsblad*, show examples of analogical *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation not presented in the typical *reductio ad absurdum* form:

Example 3

An attack on the standpoint that judges cannot wear veils for they must give an impression of impartiality: 'Should a black judge also use powder to make himself white?' (September 4, 2001)

Example 4

An attack on the standpoint that Islamic legislation may be introduced when this is the democratic decision of the majority: 'Does the minister believe that in a democracy a majority can also re-introduce slavery?' (September 4, 2006)

Example 5

'Abolishing happy hours because fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds use them is too ridiculous for words. You wouldn't close down the motorway because it's possible to break the speed limit, would you? (March 26, 2007)

Despite their forms, we may very well regard these examples as instances of *reductio ad absurdum*: (1) they are refutations of an opponent's way of reasoning, (2) although the standpoint in example 4 remains implicit, the one in example 5 is typical for an analogical *reductio ad absurdum*, and—most importantly—(3) the alleged analogical viewpoint expresses a blatant inconsistency with common ground. Actually, in addition to these examples it must be noted that the formulation of some examples of *reductio ad absurdum* in the literature also suggests that those authors are less

⁹ Therefore the argument is still a *reductio ad absurdum* when an arguer has miscalculated the norms of his audience.

concerned with making the appeal to consequences explicit. Jensen (1981, p. 271) uses the formulation ‘such a contention is like saying...’ and Tindale & Gough (1987, p. 13) present an example of an analogical *reductio ad absurdum* in which the comparison is directly made by means of a rhetorical question.

Presumably, qualifying something as an analogical implication or consequence—as happens in the typical argument form of *reductio ad absurdum*—does not convey extra information with regard to qualifying something as an analogical relationship. In both situations the analogical argumentation focuses on the arguer under attack being committed to similar viewpoints. This commitment can be invoked by ‘then also’, but equally by ‘also’ alone. I think that an analogical viewpoint is the same as an implied analogical viewpoint, for being committed to an analogical viewpoint already means that the analogical viewpoint is implied by the viewpoint to which it is analogous. Therefore, I assume that with regard to analogical argumentation an express appeal to implied consequences has less literal meaning than with regard to other types of argumentation (symptomatic and causal argumentation). Its main objective is the appeal to common ground and this objective can both be reached in the argument form of *reductio ad absurdum* as in the form with explicit data.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented a piece of my research on argument form and rhetorical effect. It cannot be said in general whether a specific argument form is effective: this question is—among others—related to the question of the argument scheme that is used in the argumentation. In this paper I focused on analogical argumentation presented in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. In the literature this kind of argument is thought to be a very effective way of attacking a viewpoint due to the humour and ridicule which it conveys. My research question was whether its alleged effect can also be related to its specific argument form—being the form with an explicit inference license formulated as in *modus tollens*. I have argued that this is not the case. An analogical relationship may be viewed as an implication anyway, no matter whether the implication is explicitly formulated as such.

What makes an analogical *reductio ad absurdum* persuasive is caused by other factors than the argument form in which the argument is expressed. The most important factor is that the compared viewpoint that is presented as absurd is indeed absurd: the argument’s implied appeal to common ground must succeed. However, common ground does not have to be understood as contradictory to opinions that are generally accepted by any rational being, as is suggested by the way *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation is presented in the literature, in particular by the humorous examples presented there. Of course, contradiction with generally accepted norms creates the comic effect. Nevertheless, for an arguer who addresses a specific audience it may suffice to appeal to their specific norms, which may actually create a humorous effect for that specific audience as well. Such an effect may be achieved both in the case of the typical RAA form and in the case of an argument form with explicit data.

[link to commentary](#)

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