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Commentary on Henrike Jansen: “Common Ground, Argument Form and Analogical *Reductio ad Absurdum*”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leo Groarke and Tony Blair have expanded the scope of argumentation to include visual aspects. Michael Gilbert has expanded the scope to include emotional or non-verbal aspects. With an analysis of the *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation, Henrike Jansen has directed our attention to another human act: humorous effects. In this comment, I first attempt to summarize her points. Then I attempt to critique them.

2. SUMMARY

In section 1 of the paper, Jansen introduces the topic of the *reductio ad absurdum*. In this type of argument, "the listener is forced to reject a certain standpoint, for failure to do so...would entail a commitment to another, comparable standpoint which was patently absurd" (Jansen 2007, p.1). The assertion of the viewpoint under attack implies the commitment to an absurd position, and another comparable position is also absurd "because it contradicts either generally agreed opinions or well-known facts" (Jansen 2007, p.1). As a phrase "comparable" in her paper suggests, Jansen links the *reductio ad absurdum* with an analogical argument, and she develops her points about *reductio ad absurdum* by referring to the relation between argument form and analogical argument throughout the paper. In her opinion developed in a different paper, she holds a view that regarding analogical argumentation the argument form of the *reductio ad absurdum* and the form in which an arguer appeals to the comparable case are equally persuasive, and she attempts to draw some implications of this thesis.

In section 2 of her paper, Jansen describes the notion of argument form. It is "a notion that concerns the reconstruction that can be made of the presentation of single argumentation" (Jansen 2007, p.2). According to her, a single argument can be presented with (1) a claim and explicit data, (2) a claim and an explicit inference license containing a *modus ponens*, or (3) a claim and an explicit inference license containing a *modus tollens*. The same single argument can often be presented in any of these forms, but in Jansen's opinion, the use of *modus ponens* is less likely with regard to analogical argumentation. Since the *modus ponens* is the less likely form in analogical argumentation, her position is that "[t]he form of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation is very similar to *modus tollens*" (p.4). This would leave us two options for consideration: a

reductio ad absurdum argument presented with a claim and explicit data, and a claim and a *modus tollens* inference license.

In section 3, Jansen focuses on persuasive dimensions of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. The choice of a particular argument form depends on its formal characteristics and the argument scheme. From her previous research, she holds a view that the analogical *reductio ad absurdum* form and the form with explicit data are equally persuasive, and Jansen attempts to provide additional considerations.

Section 3.1 talks about characteristics and ridiculing effects of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. In presenting a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, an arguer can offer a descriptive or normative claim. In case of the normative claim, the absurd consequence goes against generally agreed opinion; in case of the descriptive claim, it goes against well-known facts. With regard to its relation to analogy, analogical *reductio ad absurdum* is regarded as "refutation by logical analogy" that Trudy Govier talks about, and it is used to undermine justificatory power of an opponent's argument. Addressing the original argument 'A because B' advanced by her/his opponent, the arguer uses 'C because B' or 'C because D' and weakens the opponent's argument according to her/his own argument. The effects that this line of refutation creates are humor or irony. In short, the arguer uses reasoning of the opponent argument, advances an analogue with a normative or descriptive claim, and creates ridiculing effects either because it goes against generally agreed opinion (the normative claim) or well-known facts (the descriptive claim). In addition, Jansen provides an insight into the audience. The previous discussion of the *reductio ad absurdum* tends to appeal to norms shared by everyone. However, since an argument is presented to a specific audience, she holds a view that the *reductio ad absurdum* argument may only have to appeal to norms shared by the specific audience that the arguer addresses. Although Jansen does not extend her point to description, it seems to follow that the *reductio ad absurdum* argument advancing the descriptive claim may only have to appeal to well-known facts among the specific audience.

Section 3.2 discusses whether ridiculing effects depend on the way of presentation: is the typical *reductio ad absurdum* form more persuasive than the argument presented with a claim and explicit data? Jansen's answer to this question is 'no'. In her opinion, if the condition of actual absurdity is met, it is less important to provide the compared analogical case as an implication/ a consequence. If the refutation appeals to common ground (shared norms or recognized facts), the same effects are expected whether an arguer present an argument in the *reductio ad absurdum* form or with explicit data.

3. CRITIQUES

Having summarized Jansen's paper, I offer several points for consideration. As a constructive critique, I will attempt to follow Aristotelian epideictic: praise and blame. I will start with the act of praising, and then the act of blaming, hopefully in a humorous but not ridiculing way.

As I have initially mentioned, the topic that Jansen has picked up, humorous or ridiculing effects of argument, can be a meaningful area for argumentation scholars. Since argumentation scholars generally tend to be sober in their choices of research topics and ways of writing, humor, irony, and ridiculing have not been among the main focal

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points of the research in the community. As several scholars have attempted to expand the notion of reason or include emotion into argumentation, laughing can be an important dimension of argumentation. If we turn our attention to rhetoricians or dramatists who study the suasive dimension of human discourse (persuasion and dissuasion), comedy has been a major genre along with tragedy. Modern rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke has also used comic as a frame to analyze human discourse. Although Jansen identifies herself with reason-centered argumentation and treats the ridiculing dimension as a way of demeaning the opponent's argument, I doubt if the use of humor, irony, or ridiculing is limited to the act of demeaning. Given the power of laughing in our lives, the *reductio ad absurdum* probably does not exhaust the constructive possibilities for argumentation. However, Jansen's act to call our attention to ridiculing is so significant, and I hope scholars in cognate fields (rhetoricians, communication scholars, literary critics, etc.) may explore potential implications that this topic can have on argumentation.

Another important point of this study is her attempts to weave several important topics into a single whole. Those topics are, among others, argument form, *reductio ad absurdum*, analogy, causal reasoning, and the role of the audience. What ways of presenting an argument is persuasive as well as logically cogent? Is the *reductio ad absurdum* a subtype of causal reasoning, symptomatic reasoning, or analogy? What should an arguer know about the cognitive states of her or his audience, and how should s/he arrange the discourse to better achieve the goal of argumentative process/procedure? Now that it has been about thirty years from the First International Symposium of Informal Logic, ALTA argumentation conference or Argumentation and Rhetoric Sections of the Conferences of the Dutch-Belgian Speech Communication Association, limiting one's research to one perspective of argument is not a good way to conduct serious scholarship of argumentation. Jansen's use of Govier's logical analogy, in light of Eemeren and Houtlosser's rhetorical manoeuvring, seems to be on the right track. The use of multiple perspectives of argument may provide more problems than it solves at the outset, but it is nonetheless a path we have to take, for making argumentation a more serious and significant area of scholarly inquiry.

Having praised Jansen's choice of the research topic and approaches to it, I would like to offer constructive, and hopefully humorous criticisms. They are on coverage of literature, classification of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument, and the nature and significance of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

With regard to coverage of literature, I would have liked Jansen to review her own work to remind her audience of current scholarship of the *reductio ad absurdum*. This is more of a readability problem and does not weaken her overall thesis. However, incorporating the gist of her points would have let her reader understand where she has reached with her previous research, and what points are advanced for the first time in this paper. For example, since she has already defended a thesis that the *reductio ad absurdum* form is as persuasive as the argument with a claim and explicit data, I was a little confused what are new points she advances with regard to analogical *reductio ad absurdum*. Does she apply her previous findings on the Reductio Ad Absurdum to a special subclass of analogical arguments? Or does she mean something else? If I use an analogy (not analogical *reductio ad absurdum*), I feel that I have a five-chapter book with chapters 2 and 3 missing. My feeling is, "Give me the two chapters, even in a form of digest!" I can find some reference to and textual fragments of these missing chapters, but

including it in the section of literature review would make things clearer about where we are, and better prepares us for the upcoming stories on the *reductio ad absurdum*.

The second point, classification of the *reductio ad absurdum*, may partly derive from the first point. In explicating the *reductio ad absurdum*, Jansen mentions a counterexample (the subtype of symptomatic argument), an analogical argument, and causal argument. Do they constitute subtypes of the *reductio ad absurdum*, or do each of the three argument types contain the *reductio ad absurdum* as a subtype of their own? Or does she mean something else? Her writing suggests the second option because she explicitly states "causal *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation" (p.4) and analogical *reductio ad absurdum*. If I rightly understand her position on this matter, then my question would be: are there any other types of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation than causal or analogical? Are these two exhaustive, or are there more types? I do not raise this criticism for the sake of argument. Classification of types of argument can affect adequate evaluation of those argument types, and thus it has pedagogical as well as theoretical implications. For example, causal *reductio ad absurdum* may call our attention to slippery slope fallacy; contrastively, analogical *reductio ad absurdum* may require us to pay attention to similarities between two compared cases. Since the issue of classification may reveal how significant the overall research project on the *reductio ad absurdum* is, I would like her to discuss this issue.

Here I come to the last point: what is the *reductio ad absurdum* in the first place, and why is it significant? Is it a type of reasoning used in argument?; is it an act of violating procedural rules of argumentative dialogues?; or is it constituted by the combination of these two? Although Jansen offers a conception of the *reductio ad absurdum*, different ways of presenting it, and its ridiculing effects, I am not clear about what it is in light of the above questions, and which room or how much space it should occupy in the building called 'Argumentation: An Interdisciplinary Scholarship'. The nature and significance may emerge out of a series of studies on this topic, or she may already have had some provisional ideas on it. Whatever the case may be, she can advocate for the *reductio ad absurdum* what it is, and where its own room or space is in the building. By doing so, she can let us recognize possible directions of the research on the *reductio ad absurdum* as well as its significance to the study of argumentation. Given the growing interest in argumentation and the increase in the scholars and research topics of this field, each one of us must be conscious of the significance of our own research project and communicate it, so that we can build a community of researchers who engage on serious and significant scholarship. In other words, such remarks that the topic has not been researched and it is interesting to me are not good enough as a justification of the research topic in addressing the community of argumentation scholars.

4. CONCLUSION

As I have stated at the beginning, Jansen's research on the *reductio ad absurdum* can be regarded as another attempt to broaden the scope of argumentation to include another emotional dimensions with the help of multiple perspectives of argument. Although issues of the classification and the nature and significance of the *reductio ad absurdum* seem to call for further development, they can be fixed by further research rather than destroy the whole research project. I argue that this state of affairs is not to be deplored at all. Why? Her writing in future can offer us not only with the missing two chapters, but also more chapters to follow the current final chapter. We should wait and see.

[link to paper](#)