May 17th, 9:00 AM - May 19th, 5:00 PM

Ideal Argumentation

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Title: Ideal Argumentation
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ABSTRACT There are a number of critical distinctions used in models of argumentation. In this talk I suggest that while these distinctions may be heuristically useful, they are difficult to apply. My focus is on the separation of arguments into categories dependent on allegedly separable and identifiable characteristics, especially in the Pragma-Dialectic enterprise. In particular, I will question the distinction between "settlement" and "resolution" in the Pragma-Dialectic programme.

I have been arguing for some time now that argumentation cannot be viewed in an idealized way, that to do so is to exclude vast parts of argumentation from the realm of study, and that, moreover, naturally occurring arguments do not unfold in an ideal manner (Gilbert 1997). I further argue that to capture the richness and subtlety of marketplace (or kitchen) argumentation, a framework that is less than ideal and that does not depend on a division of arguments or argumentative moves into precise categories is required. Not surprisingly, I suggest that my own model of multi-modal argumentation goes a good way toward meeting this need.

It seems to me that the time is right for a concerted move toward an integration of approaches to argument study that opens up more possibilities. I believe that we cannot hold that argument is only respectable if carried out, somehow, within the bounds of "dialectic" or "critical discussion" or "inquiry," if we are going to achieve results that are relevant to the general population. Moreover, I know that this goal is shared by most theorists, as their examples most often go back to that domain. Everyone wants to be able to analyze, discuss, dissect and evaluate ordinary argumentation,

So what is the problem? The problem, it seems to me, has to do with the ascendant role of the logical understood in the sense of the dialectical and the linear. No one seriously maintains that formal logic provides a model for argumentation, but the role of logic as an underpinning, as a model of how reasoning ought follow, of how claims and reasons ought be connected holds a great deal of attraction. While there is agreement that the logical, certainly in its purer forms, is not the only communicative form used in real argumentation, this often seems to be seen as a fault or a lack. On this view argument ideally follows a more or less clinical path, where reason precludes emotion, and linearity, where not explicit, is seen as the proper intention that needs be brought out through some sort of analytical tool such as Pragma-Dialectic modeling or Informal Logic diagramming. Theoretically we give primacy to this mode in terms of what we concentrate on, what we write about, and pedagogically we put the logical mode before students as if it is the only way in which one can or ought argue. Both Willard (1981) and I (1995) have argued about this limitation, but the pedagogical inertia seems very strong.

Let me be perfectly clear that I have nothing against logic, even formal logic. In fact, I think logic has a poetic beauty deriving from its internal symmetry and balance that easily stirs aesthetic sense. Moreover, I believe that we frequently use logical or quasi-logical techniques when communicating argumentatively, and that when these techniques dominate the interaction, there is good opportunity for worthwhile communication as well as resolution. However, I also believe that there are, *more often than not*, other, non-logical communicative activities that are at least if not more important than the dialectical ones. Important to what? Important to

understanding the positions being presented, the cases being made, and for locating the possibilities of resolution and/or compromise and/or agreement.

I believe that we can find a way through this if we are willing to loosen certain categories and allow that a number of distinctions relied upon may not correlate to separations. That is, we may be able to use certain terminological categories as heuristic devices, but we need to abandon the idea that we will be able to separate every candidate for one of those categories into one basket or another. It is necessary to move away from the idea that our heuristic distinctions correlate to actual separations. Put another way, we must remember to take our reification with a grain of salt. To examine this issue, my task today is to review the bipartite distinction, embraced by the Pragma-Dialecticians, between resolution and settlement. In another venue, I will, in a separate enterprise, apply the same sort of analysis to Walton's argument categorization difficulties with which I will only allude to today.

The distinction occurring within Pragma-Dialectics that I want to discuss is that between "resolution" and "settlement." Consider the following from van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans chapter on Pragma-Dialectics in *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*.

> We first need to realize that resolving a difference of opinion is not identical with settling a dispute, the point of settling a dispute being that a difference of opinion is brought to an end…. A difference of opinion is resolved by argumentative discourse only if the parties involved have reached agreement on whether or not *the disputed opinion* is acceptable. This means that one party has either been convinced by the other party's argumentation, or the other party, realizing that its arguments cannot stand up to the first party's criticism, withdraws the standpoint. (Eemeren, et al. 1996, emphasis added.)

The sense of this passage is that when two people enter into an argument, 1] there is a clearly identifiable originally contested standpoint (i.e., claim); 2] that the argumentation focuses on this standpoint; 3] that at the end of an "ideal" or "proper" or "successful" critical discussion, *the very disputed opinion* has been accepted by the antagonist or rejected by the protagonist. This seems to mean that if the standpoint has changed from its original form, then a resolution, as opposed to a settlement, is not possible.

The difficulty is that, strictly understood, two dispute partners who see value in each other's point of view, cannot both change their stance and agree to some third standpoint *within the framework of a critical discussion*. This understanding of the concept is quite clearly stated in 1990: "A dispute is only resolved if the parties reach an agreement on whether or not the disputed opinion –the standpoint as issue—is acceptable. This means that either one party retracts the doubts because he or she has been convinced by the other party's argumentation, or the other party withdraws the standpoint after realizing that the argumentation cannot stand up to the criticisms leveled at it" (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1990 89).

The result of this, and the ground of my concern, is that if two arguers, John and Susan, commence a disagreement about John's assertion that A which is in opposition to Susan's belief that B (i.e., they are contraries,) and at the end they accept the standpoint C, which is yet a third alternative, then they must be said to have settled rather than resolved their disagreement. Note that if they settled rather than resolved their dispute, then it is, *ipso facto*, not an ideal critical discussion, or, presumably, a critical discussion at all. Now, this may not be a problem. First of all, I might just have gotten it wrong, and misunderstand the distinction in some basic way. Or, it might be possible to model the interaction in such a way as to allow that it does follow the strict

guidelines of a critical discussion. It might, for example, look like this.

Example 1.

John & Susan	Formal Model
John	A
Susan	B, B 6 ~A
John & Susan	yadda yadda yadda
John	~A, but also ~B
John & Susan	yadda yadda yadda
Susan	~B
John	C
John & Susan	yadda yadda yadda
Susan	C

This model allows that the interaction might have been, depending on the observation of other relevant rules, a critical discussion [CD], or, at least, a series of them. In other words, there was a CD about A, then a second about B, and, finally, a third about C. This could become apparent if the PD transformation rules turn something like the following into something like Example 1.

Example 2.

John & Susan – One Possibility

John: I am of the opinion that the next appointment we make must be in Argumentation Theory.

Susan: I don't think so. I think there's a more pressing need for someone in Applied Ethics.

yadda yadda yadda

John: Well, I see your point about Argumentation Theory and must reluctantly concur, but even so I think Epistemology has to come before Applied Ethics, which is, after all, a passing fad.

yadda yadda yadda

Susan: Hmm, I hadn't realized that about Epistemology, and, sure, that has to come first.

Example 2 is presented as a very "reasonable" argument, though it might of course, have ranged far and wide. Still, the transformative powers of the PD rules in the hands of a competent analyst can wreak miracles. So, it is possible that an argument such as this one could be a critical discussion if it is allowed that the larger CD be broken down, via transformation, into smaller CD units each of which resolves itself appropriately.

The activity of abandoning two standpoints, one from each side, and adopting a third, may be closer to the sense of resolution offered in Eemeren, et al, 1993, *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* [RAD]: "Any resolution oriented system is structured in such a way as to assure that if it comes to any settlement at all, the settlement is one recognized by both parties as correct, justified, and rational" (25). This form of the meaning of resolution, seems to allow

that if two parties come to a third conclusion, then, *ceteris paribus*, it can be called a resolution. But what is not clear here is whether or not the newly adopted standpoints need be *more* correct and justified than the abandoned ones. One assumes that this must be so since the heart of the settlement-resolution distinction rests on the idea that we can determine the *truth* through a critical discussion. This is essential, however, because on the Pragma-Dialectic model, the party abandoning the relevant standpoint *believes in the truth of the newly adopted standpoint*. In other words, even if we soften or otherwise ameliorate the concept of resolution so that a third option is acceptable, it is crucial that the standpoint finally adopted *not be a compromise*.

There is one apparent difficulty with this, and that concerns PD's avowed distaste for anything psychologistic. The simple fact is that the difference between a resolution and a settlement may depend on someone's *attitude* to the newly adopted standpoint. Imagine that John sees that Susan will not in any way agree to his desire to hire someone in Argumentation Theory, but believes that his interests are better served by hiring a department member in epistemology rather than ethics. As a result, he agrees with Susan that AT will not be the next appointment, and instead moves to make a case against ethics but for epistemology. When Susan agrees to this latter standpoint, we do not have, I believe, a resolution, because John still believes that the correct standpoint is to hire an argumentation theorist, but has compromised to come out better than he thought he otherwise could. The end result is that whether or not there was a resolution or a settlement depends on John's internal belief states. Susan, let us suppose, has been convinced (in the strong, traditional sense of the word,) that epistemology ought take precedence at this time over ethics. But has John? Perhaps he *says* he has been convinced, but really has only been *persuaded* that epistemology is the best he can do. Now Susan believes there has been a resolution, when in fact, there has been a settlement. How, in this case, are we to determine that, really, a settlement rather than a resolution has taken place?

I might add, that I don't think it will do to simply say that John is being duplicitous. Nor do I think that he has committed an illicit dialogue shift, at least in any interesting sense (Walton 200). John may have thought to himself, "This isn't going anywhere. I'll never persuade Susan to hire an AT person, but the last thing we need is someone else in ethics. We've no one in epistemology, so…" Now Walton might say that since the apparent dialogue was a critical discussion or inquiry, that moving to a negotiation is an illicit shift because the truth of the matter is no longer the first issue. But John and Susan began their interaction with each believing that they were correct and that, within the context of the realities of their department, student demands, etc., etc., the correct thing to do is to hire in area thus and such. When John switches, what happens is that he has moved to a fall back position because he believes he cannot make his case in a sufficiently compelling way. Surely, this is a very common occurrence, and John's internal mental attitude is the only thing that marks the difference between his first position and his second. As a result, an analyst might never know that John really did not abandon his original standpoint, or, put another way, that he moved from a CD to a negotiation.

Of course, there is one solution to this difficulty, if difficulty it is, and that is to simply point out that the discussion in question was not a *critical* discussion, but some other sort of argument such as a persuasion dialogue or negotiation. This is apparently what happens when the end result is a settlement and not a resolution. But surely this does not mean that the Pragma-Dialectic apparatus can have no application: why should we assume that it can only be applied to critical discussions? There can still be analysis, recommendation, transformation, and so on. Moreover, there is potential for very odd occurrences if we take the division too seriously.

Imagine an argument following along ideal CD lines for some considerable time, at which point one party introduces a new standpoint acceptable to both. What is the classification of the previous argument? Was it a critical discussion that suddenly metamorphosed into a negotiation? Do we have to wait until a discussion is complete before we can classify it? That seems odd.

These issues, and others, arise from an insistence that a categorization be applied too seriously. It is understandable to differentiate between a situation in which we are both focused on determining the truth or falsity of a given proposition. In some cases, as per ideal conditions, neither of us are attached to the outcome, and we do not compromise or try to find a mutually agreeable alternative. Rather, we investigate the standpoint at issue from a disinterested point of view and pay attention wholly and solely to the arguments being presented. But two points must be made. First, this is by far the exception rather than the rule, and secondly, it is not at all clear that some degree of leakage, some element of attachment, rhetoric, settlement or what you will, will enter into the considerations.

The idea that arguments can occur without a rhetorical element seems to be heading for a well-deserved demise. More and more, Weimer's early claim in "All Knowing Is Rhetorical," (1983) is being embraced, even if reluctantly and at the edges. For example, Eemeren & Houtlosser (2000) explain that "...there is a rhetorical (pragmatic) aspect to all argumentative discourse: the participants are always aiming for the effects that suit them best" (2). Naturally, "people who take part in argumentative discourse try to resolve the difference of opinion in their own favour, and their use of language and other aspects of their behaviour are designed to achieve precisely this effect" (ibid). This is a happy change from earlier assertions where, in RAD, we are told that the Pragma-Dialectic ideal model "...require[s] that participants be disinterested in the outcome of the discussion, in the sense that they are willing in principle to give up a position if it is shown to be indefensible or if a competing position is shown to be more defensible. An ideal participant has no stake in the outcome; considerations of gain and loss, winning and losing, are irrelevant if the objective is to resolve the disagreement 'on the merits'" (1993 32). This statement requires an extraordinary degree of detachment from an arguer who wants to be "ideal". It is one thing, after all, to be "willing in principle" to give up a position, but quite another to be so totally disinterested that "considerations of winning and losing" do not come into play at all. Certainly, the authors are aware of the stringency of this requirement. They freely admit that "...actual human interaction is not 'naturally' resolution oriented. People involved in disagreement are not normally disinterested in the outcome but have a heavy interest in one outcome or another" (1993 34).

There is no question but that in RAD and other writings, the idealized, as opposed to practical, nature of the model is recognized. It "...is not, of course, a model of any actual phenomenon; the system presumes ideal participants and ideal conditions…" (1993 30.) It has been suggested to me in conversation with van Eemeren and Grootendorst that the term 'ideal' as used by them should be taken to mean 'abstract' rather than 'perfect.' The text, however, does not support this interpretation, but rather seems clear that the term 'ideal' *is* being used in a normative sense, so that actual argumentation that falls short of the ideal is in a more or less unfortunate state. Thus, it is explained in RAD, that, "For the ordinary arguer, a model of critical discussion is not so much a set of prescriptions for engaging in actual argumentative conduct as it is a set of standards against which actual practice is to be compared" (118). Where there are standards there are, necessarily, failure to meet the standards. That the ideal is not merely intended to be an abstraction but a goal of perfect argumentation is also revealed by the adoption

of the pragma-dialectic version of the Principle of Charity: "In unclear cases, if the discourse could or could not be aimed at resolving a dispute, it is a good policy to employ the strategy of *maximally dialectical analysis* and interpret the (part of the) discourse concerned as if it were (part of) a critical discussion" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, 105). Regular argumentation requires the analyst to be generous in order that it be interpreted as argument, or, at least, critical discussion.

It might be thought that my examples are unfriendly to the theory being inspected. So let me try to take a case that would be more amenable to the idea that there is a correct or true answer, rather than some compromise that might, to one degree or another be negotiated. The problem is that no matter how hard I try to put aside my prejudices regarding truth (or the somewhat mysterious Pragma-Dialectic concept of 'correct') I have difficulty finding anything *worth arguing about* that does not involve some level of settlement rather than resolution. I can imagine having an absolutely critical discussion over something like, "It costs $6.70 to take Highway 407 from the beginning to the end." What I cannot imagine is why one would argue about it rather than telephone the 407 people and ask them. On the other hand, the assertion that it is quicker to get to Windsor from Peterborough if you take the 407, seems to me open to all sorts of compromises and agreements. Well, one party might say, if you drive like Gilbert, then perhaps, but if you obey the limit, then no, not at all. Or, one party might say that the standpoint is true if considered during rush hour, but not at other times. If the dispute partners agree that time of day is relevant, and conclude that therefore they "are both right," then there has been a settlement rather than a resolution, and they have fallen below the ideal.

On the RAD definition, the above might auger a resolution since both parties believe that the new standpoint is correct. If this is the case, then there is more flexibility than indicated by various other, even later, expressions of the distinction. It seems to me that even when there are reservations about conclusions, a resolution might have been reached because both parties believe that important aspects of their position, important considerations regarding their standpoints have been included in the finally adopted position. In other words, part of the difficulty arises from an oversimplification of the idea of position. When a standpoint is viewed as a complete discursive object that encapsulates a position rather than representing something immeasurably more complex, then the distinction makes sense. Otherwise, it must be loosened to be useful.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that moving away from the abstract to the actual, from the ideal to the real, is a move that can only benefit Pragma-Dialectics and Argumentation Theory. What is needed is a continuation of the acknowledgement explicit in Eemeren and Houstlosser (2000) that the ideal does not really exist, and that the rhetorical imbues all argumentation. The consequence of this goes far beyond fuzzing distinctions like that between settlement and resolution: it must lead to an understanding of the contextual and essentially human nature of argumentative discourse.

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