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Commentary on Thomson

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In Response To: Christopher Thomson's [Are all the pragma-dialectical rules pragmatic?](#)

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Christopher Thomson's paper, as I see it, is basically concerned with two problems:

1. with the concept of burden of proof in pragma-dialectics, and
2. with the status of normativity in pragma-dialectics.

In this short gloss, I will therefore restrict my comments mostly to these two problems.

Against Thomson's concern is "that the casual reader [of pragma-dialectical literature] can be left with the impression that the notion of the burden of proof is 'merely' part of a pragmatic apparatus geared specifically to 'resolving disputes'". And what he is proposing is "that this notion has deeper normative roots than a pragma-dialectical treatment of the subject would have us believe".

Thomson is especially worried about the second pragma-dialectical rule that states: "Whoever advances a standpoint is obligated to defend it if asked to do so", and about van Eemeren and Grootendorst's grounding of this rule. If I may quote a passage from van Eemeren and Grootendorst that Thomson is relying on:

The claim of acceptability which we attribute to these rules is not based in any way on metaphysical necessity, but on their suitability to do the job for which they are intended: the resolution of disputes. The rules do not derive their acceptability from some external source of personal authority or sacrosanct origin. Their acceptability should rest on their effectiveness when applied. Because the rules were developed exactly for the purpose of resolving disputes, they should in principle be optimally acceptable to those whose first and foremost aim is to resolve a dispute. This means that the rationale for accepting these dialectical rules as conventionally valid, is philosophically speaking, *pragmatic*. (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1988: 285).

Thomson thinks that the "implied message seems to be that the pragma-dialectical rules (and *a fortiori* the burden of proof) are normative *to the extent that* these rules give speakers the capacity to facilitate the resolution of disputes insofar as speakers are interested in achieving this particular goal". And he claims "that there is a case to be made for the existence of a more 'commonplace' burden of proof that is not restricted to the domain of argumentation and not necessarily oriented to the resolution of polemical differences".

I would say that Thomson is 'knocking on the open door' here, as we say in Slovenian. I can't remember van Eemeren and Grootendorst (or anybody else working within the framework of pragma-dialectical theory) ever claiming that the burden of proof is normative only to the extent that it gives speakers the capacity to facilitate the resolution of disputes or (in other words) that it is something that applies only in and to argumentative discourse. But I do remember them claiming many times that in developing pragma-dialectics, they made use of Austin and Searle's speech act theory, Grice's logic of ordinary discourse, Lorenzen's dialogue logic, and Barth and Krabbe's formal dialectics (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkemans 1996: 274). And I see the second rule of pragma-dialectics as the field-specific application of Grice's conversational logic (which is supposed to be universal, or at least very general), especially his maxims of relation and manner.

What I do see as a problem against is the (normative) status of these rules. Remember that acceptability of these rules is supposed to be based on their suitability to do the job for which they are intended (i.e. the resolution of disputes), and should rest on their effectiveness when applied. Or, as Thomson puts it: "these rules are normative simply because they 'do the job for which they are intended'".

The question I would like to raise in relation to that (though I don't have a definite and clear-cut answer to it) is: is that enough? May we say that some rule (or conduct, based on a rule) is acceptable just because it does the job for which it was intended (and designed)?

Let me give you an analogy you probably won't like, you may even find it inappropriate in the given circumstances, or in bad taste, so let me stress once more that it is *just an analogy*, and it has nothing to do with pragma-dialectics, let alone van Eemeren and Grootendorst, personally.

I was writing this comment (and my paper) with NATO bombers humming over my head. They were heading towards Serbia to stop what, since the war in Bosnia, became known as 'ethnic cleansing'. And here is my question: is ethnic cleansing acceptable? I am sure you would agree with me that it isn't. And yet, it is definitely the most suitable and above all the most effective way for the job for which it was intended (and designed): getting rid of another ethnic group, another nation.

Is bombing cities, destroying the infrastructure, causing considerable 'collateral damage', and leaving people without electricity, gas and food acceptable? I'm sure you would agree with me that *in principle* it isn't. *But*, if it forces a regime that is performing ethnic cleansing to change its politics, you (and I) may think it over.

In other words (and going back to pragma-dialectics), I don't think that rules (and conducts based on them) that rest (only) on their empirical effectiveness have much to do with normativity proper, they are above all descriptive: first we see that something, some conduct, is effective, and describe it as such, later it

becomes a rule. I think it would be more appropriate to define such rules as being 'descriptively normative': what was once just a description, became a norm afterwards. Just like the old structuralist distinction between language (*la langue*) and speech (*la parole*): to be able to become a part of the language-system, to qualify as such, some expression has to keep appearing in the speech first.

Thomson claims that "what makes the burden of proof rule normative runs deeper than any description oriented toward a particular pragmatic concern", and in relation to that uses the expression "the pragmatics of language use". I have to make a small correction here: pragmatics *is* language use. When Charles Morris wrote his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* in 1938, his fundamental concern was the delimitation between syntax, semantics and pragmatics; while syntax studies the relationship of signs to other signs, and semantics deals with the relations of signs to the objects to which signs are applicable, pragmatics studies *whatever relations there are* between signs and their users or interpreters. Or, if I may quote Morris (1938: 30) himself:

By 'pragmatics' is designated the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters. [...] Since most, if not all, signs have as their interpreters living organisms, it is sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs.

All rules that have to do with language use - and pragma-dialectical rules are concerned with language use *par excellence* - are therefore necessarily pragmatic. But since pragmatics *is* language use, I don't think Thomson really has a quarrel with pragma-dialectics when he concludes

... what renders the burden of proof normative for speakers is not exclusively [...] attributable to its role as part of a particular pragmatic apparatus for argumentative success. Beneath this particular goal lies a more universal requirement upon speakers to exercise semantic and communicative competence at the most basic level of language use.

There is, however, a basic, if not fundamental, component of the pragma-dialectical theory that has always made me wonder: why in the world should we strive to resolve differences in our opinions? Surely, that would mean the end of pragma-dialectics, if not the argumentation theory as a whole! But since this is not Christopher Thomson's concern, I guess I'll have to tackle that problem some other time.

References

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