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Criticism in need of clarification

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ABSTRACT: A critic often conveys what underlies her criticism, but imprecisely, leaving it unclear to the arguer what argumentative strategy to adopt. I elaborate on the opponent's "burden of criticism" by using argumentation schemes. For example, the critic may challenge a thesis by saying "Why? Says who?," without conveying whether she could be convinced with an argument from expert opinion, or from position to know, or from popularity. What are fair dialogue rules for dealing with unspecific criticism?

KEYWORDS: ambiguity, argumentation scheme, burden of criticism, challenge, dialogue rule, presumptive commitment, request for argument, specificity

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the dialogical approach to argumentation, arguments are inextricably bound up with critical dialogue, so that in order to get a hold on the nature of argumentation, as well as on the norms with which to evaluate arguments, we should get clear on the nature of criticism, as well as on the norms that govern critical reactions. It is assumed in this paper (and defended in Van Laar and Krabbe, 2012) that an opponent (also labeled: the critic, or antagonist of an opinion or an argument) has a responsibility, and sometimes even a dialogical obligation to provide the proponent (also: the arguer, protagonist of an opinion or argument) with a counter-consideration that explains her critical stance. An argumentative dialogue improves when the opponent, spontaneously or on request, provides her motivations for being critical, and thereby provides the proponent with some strategic advice about how to convince her. For example, in addition to a mere challenge, "Why would you think it's going to rain?" the opponent might add a counterconsideration, "As far as I know, no weatherman forecasted rain," that both explains to the proponent what underlies her critical stance and provides him with an implicit suggestion about how to convince her.

In this paper, I expand on this normative theory by examining the required level of specificity of counter-considerations. The question to be answered is: To what extent should the opponent specify, or disambiguate, or elaborate on her critical stance by way of such counter-considerations? Sometimes, a counter-consideration does provide the proponent with some information about what underlies the opponent's critical stance, but not enough for choosing an appropriate argumentative strategy that might satisfy the opponent's needs. What set of fair

dialogue rules would enable the proponent to urge the opponent to specify her critical attitude further, without making it too hard on an opponent who has no special expertise on the topic at hand, or lacks otherwise resources that enable her to be sufficiently precise about her critical position? Four norms shall be proposed that can be implemented within a more or less formalized model of dialogue.

In Section 2, I shall emphasize the importance of criticism for understanding argumentation by distinguishing between three ways in which criticism directs the development of argumentative dialogue. In Section 2, 3 and 4, I shall deal with conceptualizing the various types of criticism (based on Krabbe & Van Laar, 2011) and with the norms for raising criticism (based on Van Laar & Krabbe, 2013). In Section 5, I shall discuss how a critical reaction can be more or less specific, and thereby less or more in need of (further) clarification. In Section 6, I shall propose dialogue norms for dealing with less than fully specific criticisms. In Section 7, some consequences for the dialogical theory of ambiguity shall be examined.

2. THE IMPACT OF CRITICISM

According to dialogical perspectives on argumentation, an argument is an attempt to answer criticism of a particular position by offering reasonable grounds (Finocchiaro, 1980; Krabbe, 2007). For example, within the pragma-dialectical theory, argumentation is an attempt to persuade an antagonist who, within the framework of a critical discussion, probes and assesses the protagonist's standpoint and his arguments (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). Within the formal dialectical theories that have their roots in Hamblin's *Fallacies* (1970), such as the model for *permissive persuasion dialogue* (Walton & Krabbe, 1995), a proponent of a thesis tries to answer all challenges in such a way that the result is a sequence of reasoning that starts from propositions that the opponent is willing to commit herself to, and that results in the proponent's conclusion.

The opponent, then, should not be a passive recipient of the proponent's attempts to build his opinion on unshakable grounds. Instead, the proponent's argumentation is for a large part the result of the opponent's decisions. In existing normative dialogue theories, the opponent's discretionary power becomes apparent in her right to make three types of decisions. Before listing these, I shall expound on a typical, though highly simplified normative model for critical discussion, so that we have a point of departure for discussing the functions of criticism, as well as for proposing dialogue norms with which to answer the question of the current paper.

The model is dubbed "basic critical discussion" (presented in van Laar, 2007), and it includes only some essential features of the four stages of the normative model of a critical discussion, as developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004). At a preliminary stage (cf. *opening stage* in Van Eemeren and Grootendorst), the opponent determines her initial concessions. Concessions are propositional commitments that the opponent cannot challenge, or criticize otherwise, at least not without further ado, but the opponent does not have a burden of proof for them. (Below, we shall discuss presumptive commitments, which are dealt with as a special kind of concessions, that can also be incurred at a later stage of the dialogue.) At the first stage (cf. *confrontation stage*), both

participants express their single, non-mixed difference of opinion. In the example in Figure 1, the proponent has expressed a positive attitude towards proposition *A*, whereas the opponent makes it clear that she takes a critical attitude towards *A*.

The common goal of the participants is to find out whether they can resolve their difference of opinion, and if so, in whose favor. The examination of this issue takes place within the second stage, the *argumentation stage*, where the participants exchange arguments and criticisms. At this stage, the participants distribute tasks, according to a dialectical division of labor.¹

According to this division of labor, the individual aim of the proponent is to show to the opponent that her critical attitude towards his opinion is inconsistent, or otherwise untenable. His strategy is to develop a configuration of reasoning that starts from the opponent's concessions and that results in his standpoint. Such a configuration of reasoning, used for persuasive purposes, is what I call *argumentation*.

The individual aim of the opponent is to explain to the proponent that her critical position is consistent, or tenable. Her strategy is to raise critical questions, and other types of criticism, in an attempt at showing how she can resist the proponent's standpoint consistently, notwithstanding her initial concessions. Note that in the model the opponent does not defend a thesis of her own, and that the dispute is and remains non-mixed.

According to the dialogue rules that underlie the sample dialogues in Figure 1, the dialogue starts with the proponent's standpoint, *A*, and the opponent's challenge of it. After this confrontation, the proponent at each turn either provides an argument in favor of a challenged proposition, or he gives up. The opponent at each subsequent turn either challenges the regular premise of the proponent's last argument (*B*, in the proponent's argument at the third stage), or she challenges the connection premise, which is the conditional statement that expresses the argumentative connection between the regular premise and the proposition it supports (*If B then A*, in the proponent's argument at the third stage),² or the opponent gives up. Note that a move of the form "Why (ϕ)?", throughout this paper, is a request for an argument and not a request for explanation. A separate locution shall be introduced for expressing requests for explanation, below. The move of giving up concludes the dialogue, and constitutes its final stage. One essential rule for the argumentation stage is that the opponent is not allowed to challenge a statement that is in her set of initial concessions. In other words: These concessions can function as the proper points of departure of the argumentation that the proponent stepwise develops in response to the critical reactions. In Section 5, I shall propose how to extend this system so that it may accommodate the right of a proponent to urge the opponent to explain her critical stance by way of a counter-consideration.

¹ Rescher refers to this division of labor as a *probative asymmetry* (1977, pp. 17-18).

² The only reason to assume that there is a separate connection premise is that the opponent can make a point of contention of the argumentative connection between the argument's premises and its conclusion.

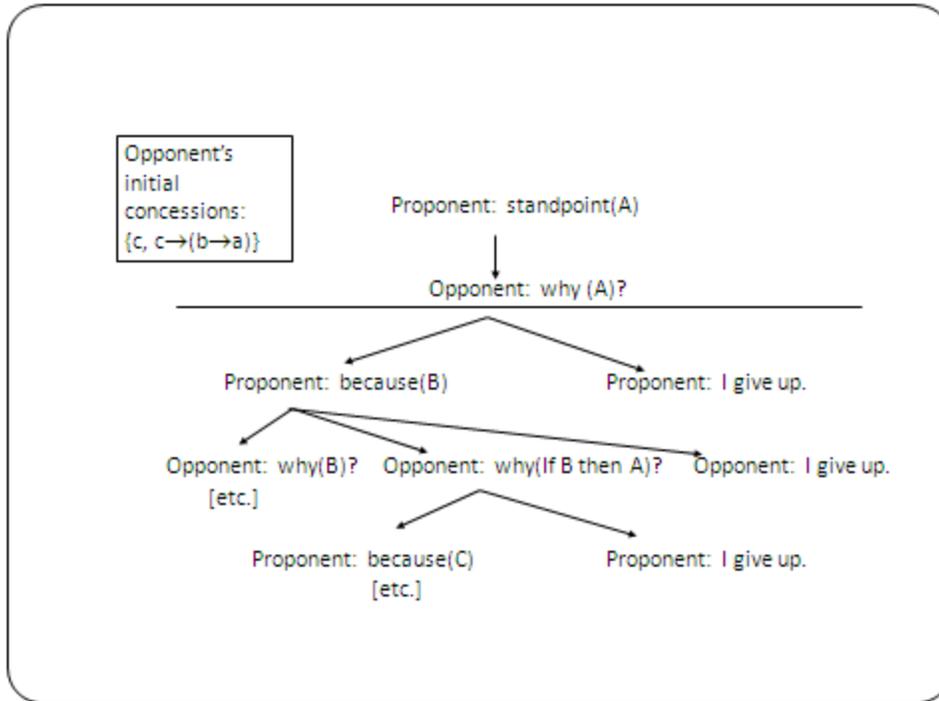


Figure 1: A profile of dialogue, showing a number of possible dialogues in accordance with the model for *basic critical discussion*

In this kind of framework, the opponent influences the development of the proponent's argumentation in two ways.

First, the opponent decides what propositions to concede, and thereby determines what propositions the proponent can use as the starting points of his defense. This can be done, as in basic critical discussion, at a preliminary stage, but in more advanced models the opponent may as well concede propositions in the course of the argumentative exchange. In order to enable the proponent to make a serious attempt to realize his individual aim of persuading the opponent, there should be a responsibility on the opponent's part to be fully clear about the substance of her commitments. Otherwise, the proponent does not stand a chance at developing an interesting, high quality, *ex concessis* argumentation. Of course, this also implies an obligation to phrase concessions in a sufficiently clear and unambiguous manner.

Second, the opponent decides what parts of the proponent's standpoint to criticize, as well as what premises to put to the test. Note that she can also challenge reasons that have been left implicit, such as in our model, connection premises. To use Searle's term in a somewhat different way, all critical reactions are *directive* (Searle, 1979), in the sense that they direct the proponent to make particular choices. With her critical reactions, the opponent actively steers the course of the dialogue, and thereby the structure and substance of the proponent's argumentation, if the proponent is receptive to the opponent's demands.

In an enriched model, that has been suggested in (van Laar & Krabbe, 2013), the opponent has a third device for directing the course of the proponent's

argumentation. According to that proposal, the opponent decides whether to inform the proponent about the kind of argumentation that she would consider convincing, or about the propositions that he should refute, and if so, with what counter-consideration she informs the proponent about it. Consequently, even in a non-mixed discussion, the opponent may put forward reasoning, though not for persuasive purposes, but for the explanatory purpose of informing the proponent about her motivations for being critical. It is the proponent who discharges a *burden of proof*, and the opponent who, in trying to explain what her critical position amounts to, tries to discharge a rather different *burden of criticism*.

3. THE WAYS OF CRITICISM

Criticism, as understood here, is a speech act, or complex of speech acts, with which a participant either puts forward a negative evaluation of an argumentative contribution by her interlocutor, or at least alludes to such a negative evaluation by making it clear that if the interlocutor will not respond satisfactorily to the criticism, a negative evaluation will be forthcoming (Krabbe & Van Laar, 2011). A simple challenge forms an example of the latter kind of criticism: “Why A? I’m not convinced yet; Can you give me an argument?” A particular type of critical reaction can be characterized by specifying each of four parameters: the *focus* of a critical reaction, the *norm* appealed to in a critical reaction, the *level* at which a critical reaction is put forward, and the illocutionary *force* of a critical reaction (Krabbe & Van Laar, 2011). A criticism could be insufficiently clear with respect to each of these four aspects, and I shall indicate some of these unclear criticisms. A more in-depth treatment of the level of specificity of explanatory counter-considerations, which is the central issue of this paper, shall be postponed until Section 5.

3.1 Focus

A critical reaction is about a contribution by the interlocutor, and the *focus* of a critical reaction specifies what exactly the criticism is about. For example, if the focus is on the main standpoint, for instance “It is going to rain next week,” or on a regular reason, for instance “weatherman Erwin says so,” the criticism is called *tenability criticism* (Krabbe & Van Laar, 2011; cf. Krabbe, 2007): “why should we think it rains next week?” or if the reason has been offered, “Why should I accept that Erwin made this very forecast?” Alternatively, the focus can be on the connection between a regular reason and the supported standpoint, called *connection criticism* (Krabbe, 2007): “Why should we accept it is going to rain next week, if weatherman Erwin says so?”

The opponent may also target the argumentation scheme that underlies the proponent’s argument. In addition to raising a connection criticism, with which the opponent challenges the specific connection between the premises and this particular conclusion, the opponent may also choose to challenge the underlying argumentation scheme, with, what I refer to as, a *scheme criticism*: “Why (If some expert says A, then A)?”

A critical reaction may have an unclear focus, and stand in need of clarification on that account. A critical reaction “Why so?”, in response to an argument “A so B” may, within a particular situation, be both interpreted as *tenability criticism*, and as *connection criticism*. And a critical reaction “What do you mean?” in response to a standpoint *A* may, dependent upon context, express a request for further argumentation, but it might also be meant more literally as a request for linguistic clarification. As with similar kinds of unclearness, if these specific readings play a role in the dialogue, either because the proponent needs to know in more detail what the critical reaction amounts to in order to respond adequately, or because the proponent misinterprets the focus of a critical reaction as intended by the opponent, then the criticism can be seen as – what I call – *actively ambiguous* (see also Section 6).

3.2 Norm

A critical reaction evaluates, or at least prepares for an evaluation, and the *norm* appealed to specifies from what normative perspective the – prospective – evaluation takes place. First, the critic may appeal to a *rule for critical discussion*. For example, a critical reaction may appeal to the obligation-to-defend rule, simply by posing a request for argumentation, so that it becomes clear to the proponent that if he does not respond with an argument, the opponent will remain unconvinced. Second, a critic may appeal to an *optimality norm*, a norm that distinguishes between non-fallacious moves of higher and of lower quality. For example, an argument may be judged as non-persuasive. Or it may be alleged that a more interesting argument is available. Third, the critic may appeal to an *institutional norm*, a norm that governs a particular argumentative activity type (cf. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2005). For example, in court, the evidence may be objected to as “inadmissible” for having been obtained with inadmissible methods, regardless of its non-judicial persuasiveness. In many types of conversation, politeness can be seen as an “institutional” requirement, and some opinions, then, can be charged successfully as being offensive.

But then, the critical reaction may be imprecise in this respect, so that the receiver reckons, or ought to reckon, with more than one reading. For example, the critic’s “You can’t say this” might both appeal to: (1) the obligation-to-defend rule, on the ground that this, apparently, cannot be proven; (2) some optimality rule, on the ground that this is unconvincing; (3) or to an institutional rule, on the ground that this, apparently, is situationally inappropriate.

3.3 Level

A critical reaction contributes more or less directly to the step-wise construction or destruction of the argumentation of the proponent. If it does so in quite a direct way, then the critical reaction can be seen as part of the *ground level dialogue*. For example, a challenge “Why A?” quite directly contributes to the construction of the proponent’s argumentation, by inviting him to add an argument in favor of *A*. However, the critical reaction may also be much more indirectly relevant to the

proponent's argumentation, by dealing with the course of the dialogue, rather than with the topic at hand. In such cases, the critical reaction initiates, or continues, a *meta level dialogue*, which is a dialogue about a dialogue. A fallacy charge (i.e., a charge that the other side has violated a rule for critical discussion) is a prime example of starting a meta dialogue (Krabbe, 2003). Secondly, discussing strategic issues, for example when criticizing an argument as weak, flawed or even as a blunder, can be located at a meta level of dialogue. Third, a violation of an institutional rule may be labeled as a *fault*, and charging one's interlocutor with a fault and can be seen as a meta level contribution.

A critical reaction may be unclear as to whether it aims at contributing to the continuation of the ground level dialogue, or whether it aspires at a meta dialogue. An unspecified critical reaction such as "that's too stupid" could both be taken as a rough way of challenging a statement, but also as a way of pointing out a weakness in the proponent's strategy. Similarly, responding to an argument by saying something to the effect that "this is improper" may, by lack of specification of the kind of norm appealed to, constitute a charge of fallacy, or a charge of fault.

3.4 Force

Finally, a critical reaction instances a particular type of speech act, and exhibits a particular illocutionary force, or it forms a complex of such speech acts (Searle, 1979). A critical reaction can be a directive, such as a request for clarification, or a request for an argument – which I refer to as a *challenge*. Or the critical reaction can be an assertive, when denying a statement by the interlocutor, or when pointing out some flaw or fallacy in the interlocutor's contribution.

A critical reaction may be unclear by leaving the interlocutor with more than one option when having to decide about how to understand the illocutionary force of the critical response, and thereby about how to respond to it. For one, a response such as "No!" may be expressive of a denial, but the context might leave open the option that it expresses a mere request for an argument for *A*.

Special mention must be made of a critical reaction that is complex by containing reasoning. Reasoning constitutes argumentation, as I use the term, only if it serves a persuasive purpose. In that case, the opponent tries to reason from what her interlocutor is or should be prepared to concede toward a thesis of her own, and thereby she becomes a second proponent. For example, she may defend that the other side has committed a fallacy, or she may defend the denial of his standpoint (counter-argumentation). But then, the critical reaction may also contain reasoning that serves an explanatory purpose only. In that case, the opponent offers reasons in order to show to the proponent what motivates or underlies her critical stance. In such a situation, the reasoning does not constitute argumentation, for it does not claim to start from the other side's concessions, and neither does it aim at persuasion. A reason put forward in such an explanation of a critical stance is what we earlier have referred to as an (explanatory) counter-consideration. Norms for introducing counter-considerations are the subject of the Section 4, whereas Sections 5 and 6 deal with the required level of specificity of such counter-considerations.

4. THE BURDEN OF CRITICISM

Suppose that, in support of his standpoint that we ought to cancel our hike, the proponent offers the argument that it is going to rain next week, and that the opponent offers tenability criticism, requesting for argumentation in support of the proponent's weather forecast. In such a situation, the proponent has a burden of proof. But before discharging his burden of proof, he may first want to obtain information about what motivates the opponent not to accept his reason, so as to enable himself to devise an argument that stands a serious chance at convincing this particular opponent. So, instead of giving a reason in support of the weather forecast, the proponent first puts forward a request for explanation: "Please, explain why you do not accept that it is going to rain next week?" I shall code this request as "Explain (Why A?)." (See Van Laar & Krabbe, 2013 for a statement of the theory put forward in this section.)

If the opponent provides such an explanation, she does so by expressing a proposition that Krabbe and I have referred to as a counter-consideration, and that has been coded as "Counter C" (2013). In the example, the counter-consideration is the proposition: "No weatherman says that it is going to rain next week," and this counter-consideration can be presented by the opponent in two different ways to the proponent. When offering a counter-consideration, an opponent may stress her aim of showing the tenability of her critical position: "As far as you've shown, the weathermen didn't say so." Exactly the same message, however, could be expressed more modestly, "How about the weathermen? What do they say about it?" in which case the opponent, as it were, provides the proponent with a strategic advice, stressing his individual aim of persuasion. The implicit advice to the proponent, then, is to refute the counter-consideration, by saying something to the effect that "This weatherman did make this very forecast," or to refute it by stating that his forecast stands, even if no weatherman were to vouch for it.

In both cases, it is important to note that the opponent does not really assert that there is no weatherman who forecasted the rain, at least not in the sense that she incurs a burden of proof for this proposition. Rescher introduced the notion of a "cautious assertion," which clarifies the typical illocutionary force of a counter-consideration. According to Rescher, a cautious assertion of a proposition P, indicated by $\dagger P$, stands for: "P is the case for all that you (the adversary) have shown" or "P's being the case is compatible with everything you've said (i.e., have maintained or conceded)" (Rescher, 1977, p. 6). Consequently, it is possibly for the opponent to raise a critical reaction that is highly informative to the proponent by conveying her motives for being critical and thereby giving him strategic advice, without, however, becoming strongly committed to these propositions.

What set of norms for critical discussion should govern counter-considerations, according to this theory? First, the opponent has a responsibility to make her contributions more than minimally directive, because the quality of the dialogue improves if the opponent, in addition to raising a mere challenge, also offers a counter-consideration, so that the probability increases of a qualitatively good argumentative response by the proponent.

Second, in some situations this responsibility of the opponent becomes a genuine obligation to provide a counter-consideration, but only if the opponent has criticized a proposition that counts as one of her *presumptive commitments*. A presumptive commitment, as understood here, is a commitment to a proposition *A*, such that if you withdraw your commitment to *A*, for example by challenging *A*, you incur the obligation to explain the withdrawal of *A*, if the other side requests so, or to provide a (meta level) argument in favor of the (institutional) appropriateness of the withdrawal of *A*, if the other side requests so (Van Laar & Krabbe, 2013). Thus, if *A* is a presumptive commitment, and the proponent requests the opponent to explain her challenge of *A*, the opponent must offer a counter-consideration. Whether a proposition counts as such a presumption is, of course, highly dependent on the context of the dialogue. In a situation where it is considered common knowledge *that it rains halfway May*, the opponent in that season must explain her reluctance to accept this proposition, whereas in other situations, her counter-consideration is welcome, but not really obligatory. Another example would be that by entering the gym, even a philosophical skeptic incurs a presumptive commitment to having a physical body, whereas in a company of skeptics, challenging the existence of your physical body does not force you to explain yourself (cf. Rescorla, 2009).

5. REQUESTS FOR ARGUMENTATION, AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SPECIFICITY

In this section, I shall focus on the most basic type of critical reaction, where the opponent focuses on the propositional content of the proponent's standpoint, or of one the reasons of the proponent's argument, or of its connection premise, thereby appealing to the obligation-to-defend rule, at a ground level of dialogue. Following the pragma-dialectical theory, we can characterize its illocutionary force as that of a request, in this case a request for an argument. Argumentative dialogue is to a limited degree competitive, and in order to stress the game-like nature of critical discussion, one might legitimately refer to these requests as *tests*, or *challenges* or even as *attacks*. However, even if the focus of the attack, challenge, test or request, has been made fully explicit by the opponent, so that the proponent knows what proposition(s) to defend, the criticism may lack specificity by refraining from making it fully explicit what response would answer the criticism satisfactorily: What would count as a test passed? What as a challenge met? What as a successful defense against the attack? What kind of argument, exactly, has been requested for?

In this paper, I shall restrict myself to situations where the opponent specifies her critical stance by informing the proponent about what *kind* of argument might turn out to be convincing to her, and more in particular, instances of what argumentation schemes could be convincing. First, I shall summarize some key elements of the theory of argumentation schemes, and then return to the issue of more and less specific critical reactions.

An *argumentation scheme* is a scheme for deductive or defeasible reasoning, containing a number of variables. A rule with which to give argumentation schemes their binding force is the following, which will be referred to as *The Binding Rule* (cf. van Laar, 2011).

The Binding Rule: If the opponent has adopted an argumentation scheme as *prima facie* acceptable, and the proponent offers an argument that clearly instantiates that scheme, the connection premise of that argument counts as a presumptive commitment of the opponent, so that if she wants to challenge this connection premise, she must offer a counter-consideration that explains her criticism of the connection premise, if the proponent requests so, or she must explain her criticism towards the argument's conclusion in a different manner, or in a more precise manner, if the proponent requests so.

I shall list four argumentation schemes, taken from Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008), albeit simplified and adjusted to the purpose of this paper:

- The argumentation scheme From Expert Opinion: "Expert E says that A. Therefore A."
- The argumentation scheme From Popularity: "Almost everybody says that A. Therefore A."
- The argumentation scheme From Position to Know: "Person P is in a position to know A and says that A. Therefore A."
- The argumentation scheme From Consequences: "Action A has positive consequences. Therefore we should do A."

So, if From Expert Opinion is a *prima facie* acceptable scheme to the opponent, and the proponent argues: "Weatherman Erwin says that it's going to rain, therefore it is going to rain", then the opponent can only raise a connection criticism "Why would it rain next week if weatherman Erwin says so?" if she is prepared to offer, on request, a counter-consideration (which in this context is often called a *defeater*, cf. Pollock, 1995), such as "Erwin might have been confused, or drunk, or maybe he was joking," or to offer, on request, a different or more specific challenge of the argument's conclusion, such as "Why do you think it is going to rain; What meteorological indications did you find?" Note that connection criticism must be distinguished from scheme criticism, which would amount to a challenge of the *prima facie* acceptability of an argumentation scheme: "Why would we accept some proposition of the say-so of some expert?"

I return now to the issue of more or less specific critical reactions. At the lowest level of specificity, a mere request "Why P?", not accompanied with any counter-consideration, provides no further indications to the proponent whatsoever, about how to respond to it, except conveying the most general advice to offer some argument or other. A challenge at this lowest level of specificity, focused at a regular reason or at a connection premise,³ can be characterized as not giving

³ A request "Why (If A then B)?," in response to an argument "A so B," must be seen as a request to the proponent to provide an argument such that the connection from A to B becomes acceptable, and there are two ways in which the proponent may choose to do so. First, the proponent may choose to put forward a new argument in favor of the connection premise under attack. Second, he may

any clue as to what argumentation scheme should be used by the proponent in order to convince the opponent. It is a most general request for argumentation, inciting the proponent to offer an argument, of whatever type, in favor of the proposition challenged.

At a somewhat higher level of specificity, a challenge dissuades the proponent from using some argumentation schemes, but still leaves open a range of options. For example, the critical reaction “Why so? Says who?” makes it quite clear that the opponent does not request for an argument from consequences, but rather an argument from expert opinion, or from position to know, or possibly from popular opinion, that is, an argument that starts from the premise that one or more persons said something.

At an even higher level of specificity, the counter-consideration makes it fully clear what kind of argumentation scheme might be convincing to the opponent, for example: “Why so? Is there an expert who vouches for it?” This might be labeled a *scheme bound challenge* (see Krabbe, 2007, for the related notion of a bound challenge). The proponent, in those cases, is invited to apply the argumentation scheme From Expert Opinion to the case at hand. So, the move “Why so? Is there an expert who vouches for it?” conveys the counter-consideration “There is no expert who vouches for it,” and the invited argument refutes it: “It is going to rain next week, because weatherman Erwin says so.” (Note that a challenge might even be fully specific, by stating the very proposition to be refuted by the proponent: “Why so? As far as you have shown, weatherman Erwin hasn’t made this very forecast”.)

Scheme bound challenges are highly specific, and provide the proponent with quite clear advice. However, at all lower levels of specificity, the challenges may not provide the proponent with sufficient information, and the proponent may want to request the opponent to specify her challenge further. In particular contexts, quite unspecific counter-considerations may generate ambiguities, for example if the opponent means to express a request for an argument from expertise, but does so with an overly general formulation “Why so? Says who?”, so that the proponent comes to misinterpret it as a request for an argument from popularity. The resulting argument from popularity, “Because everybody says so!”, might not satisfy the opponent’s needs, and remain non-persuasive to her. The proponent’s choice of this argument, however, has not been the sole responsibility of the proponent. Part of the responsibility might be traced to the opponent’s choice to use an imprecise formulation of her challenge, that, to some degree, also pointed in the direction of the argumentation scheme From Popularity. I will return to this issue in Section 8.

Of course, a challenge at a low level of specificity can be perfectly appropriate, for the opponent may have no clue about what might convince her, and simply is curious about what strategy the proponent might come up with. Consequently, dialogue rules should balance between the desirability of highly informative counter-considerations on the opponent’s part, and leaving the discharge of the burden of proof to the proponent.

strengthen the connection between the earlier adduced premises and conclusion, by adding one or more premises to *A*, such that *A* together with the newly added premises provide sufficient support for *B*. In response to tenability criticism, the preferred response is simply an argument in favor of *A*.

6. RULES FOR DEALING WITH UNSPECIFIC REQUESTS FOR ARGUMENTATION

I shall propose four general rules that accommodate challenges at different levels of specificity. The rules start from the following points of departure: (1) The opponent should be encouraged, but not obligated, to specify her criticism up to the level of scheme bound challenges; (2) A fair mechanism for implementing this is to consider (at least temporarily) the opponent to have *adopted* the argumentation scheme (if any) that underlies the proponent's argument in response to the opponent's challenge, if this challenge does not exclude that argumentation scheme, such that The Binding Rule applies and the argument's connection premise comes to count as a presumptive commitment on the opponent's part; (3) At no point does the opponent incur a genuine burden of proof by challenging a proposition or by explaining such a mere challenge, at least not in the sense of incurring the obligation to offer an argument that starts from concessions made by the interlocutor. Instead, she is only concerned with discharging a burden of criticism, which pertains to providing motivating explanations, or equivalently in this kind of context, strategic advice.

Rule 1. The proponent is allowed to request for an explanation of any challenge that is not a scheme bound challenge.

Rule 2. In response to a request for an explanation, the opponent is allowed to specify her challenge, put forward at an earlier stage, with a more or less specific counter-consideration, but she also has a right to make a remark to the effect that she has no further explanation to offer, if at least she had not challenged a proposition that counts as a presumption. The “no further explanation” option is needed, because we should not discourage persons from adopting the role of the opponent in a discussion, if they are not sufficiently knowledgeable, or otherwise geared to offer more informative criticisms. The dialogue in Figure 2 conforms to these first two rules: At the stage 3 and 5, the proponent does not pretend to discharge his burden of proof, but invites clarification, or further clarification, of the opponent's critical stance, in preparation of a future discharge of his burden of proof.

| | |
|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Proponent: | A |
| 2. Opponent: | Why A? |
| 3. Proponent: | Explain (Why A?) |
| 4. Opponent: | Why A? Says who? |
| 5. Proponent: | Explain (Why A? Says who?) |
| 6. Opponent: | No further explanation |

Figure 2.

Rule 3. Suppose, the opponent challenges a proposition *A* in a quite unspecific way, for example with a pure challenge or with a challenge that gives some

directions but is not yet scheme bound, and suppose that request leaves the proponent with the option to apply a particular type of argumentation scheme. Then, if the proponent does apply that argumentation scheme, the opponent must be seen, at least in the course of the discussion about this very thesis, as having adopted the argumentation scheme used. More in detail, it means that the connection premise of the argument becomes a presumptive commitment of the opponent. Consequently, by the Binding Rule, the opponent incurs the obligation to explain her challenge of the connection premise, if so requested by the proponent, as well as the obligation to further explain her challenge of *A*, if so requested by the proponent. By including this rule of a dialogue system, the opponent is encouraged to provide scheme bound challenges, for the reason that they bring less (presumptive) commitments than challenges that leave more options open to the proponent. See figure 3 for two courses of a dialogue that illustrate the resulting dialectic.

| | | |
|---------------|--|---|
| 1. Proponent: | A ("It's wise to accept this policy.") | |
| 2. Opponent: | Why A? | |
| 3. Proponent: | Expert Erwin says that A. Therefore A. | |
| 4. Opponent: | Why (If Erwin says A then A)? | |
| 5. Proponent: | Explain (Why A?) | Explain (If Erwin says A then A)? |
| 6. Opponent: | Why A? What positive consequences would result from this policy? | Why (If Erwin says A then A)? This is not to be settled on the basis of his alleged expertise |

Figure 3.

Suppose, the opponent's challenge is either scheme bound, or at least not fully unspecific, and clearly excludes, say, the argumentation scheme From Consequences: "Why A? Says what expert?" or "Why A? Says who?" Then, if the proponent offers an argument from consequences, this does not result in a presumptive commitment on the opponent's part to the connection premise of that argument. And neither does it lead to an obligation to be more precise about the initial challenge. (Note that the opponent may be committed to the argumentation scheme on separate grounds, so that in such situations, the connection premise constitutes a presumptive commitment, after all.) So, in that situation, the opponent has a right but not an obligation to make her initial challenge more specific, if it were not scheme bound already, or to explain her challenge of the connection premise. See Figure 4.

| | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| 1. Proponent: | A ("It's wise to accept this policy.") | |
| 2. Opponent: | Why A? Says who? | |
| 3. Proponent: | Accepting this policy has positive consequences. Therefore A. | |
| 4. Opponent: | Why (A, if this policy has positive consequences)? | |
| 5. Proponent: | Explain (Why A? Says who?) | Explain (A, if this policy has positive consequences) |
| 6. Opponent: | No further explanation | No further explanation |

Figure 4.

Consequently, criticism is never completely noncommittal, because the proponent has the means available to force the opponent either to make her challenge scheme bound, or to make her adopt his choice of argumentation scheme.

Fourth, the opponent becomes committed to a particular argumentation scheme as soon as she makes an explicit request for argumentation of that particular type. If so, the opponent can no longer raise a scheme criticism. If an opponent explicitly requests for an argument from expert opinion, the proponent may assume that the opponent holds the argumentation scheme from expert opinion to be *prima facie* acceptable. It would be fair to deal with the argumentation scheme as a *fixed* (non-presumptive) concession on the opponent's part for the remainder of the discussion. If the opponent is thus committed to an argumentation scheme, she cannot raise a scheme criticism against that very scheme, although she retains her right to raise a specific connection criticism which is directed against a specific application of the scheme. In other words: A scheme bound challenge binds the opponent to adopt the argumentation scheme indicated. The inadmissibility of a move is in Figure 5 indicated with asterisks.

| | | |
|---------------|--|--|
| 1. Proponent: | A | |
| 2. Opponent: | Why A? Is there an expert who vouches for A? | |
| 3. Proponent: | This expert Erwin says that A. Therefore A. | |
| 4. Opponent: | Why (If this expert Erwin says A, then A)? | *Why (If an expert says something, then that's the case)?* |

Figure 5.

7. AMBIGUITY

There is a close link between criticism that lacks specificity, and criticism that is ambiguous. In an earlier paper, I have adopted the term "active ambiguity" from Arne Naess (1966). As I use the term, an expression as used in a particular dialogue context is *actively ambiguous* if and only if: (1) the expression is *contextually ambiguous*, by linguistically allowing of more than one reading, even after having taken the contextual clues into account; (2) the ambiguity is *covert*, in the sense that

the proponent does not make it clear that it forms a figure of style, or a joke, or that he intends the expression to be understood in more than one sense in another way; and (3) the ambiguity is *interactionally relevant*, such that a participant's choosing, or starting from, the one reading instead of another is consequential for the course of the dialogue (van Laar, 2010). Are there situations where an active ambiguity within the proponent's argument can be traced back to an active ambiguity in the opponent's criticism?

I shall use one of Hamblin's examples of (subtle) equivocation: "All acts prescribed by law are obligatory. Non-performance of an obligatory act is to be condemned. So, non-performance of an act prescribed by law is to be condemned." The opponent may want to resist the conclusion (taking "condemned" in a moral sense) on the ground that she distinguishes between a legal and a moral sense of the expression "obligatory." Given the two occurrences of this term in the reasoning, there are four possible disambiguations of the reasoning. And neither of these generates an argument that both has two acceptable regular premises, as well as an acceptable connection premise.

Hamblin (1970) explains that it is not feasible to devise dialogue rules that exclude this kind of equivocal reasoning, for the participants may disagree on whether an expression is ambiguous. In the example above, the proponent may contend that there is no distinction between moral and legal norms. Hamblin's conclusion is that dialogue systems should be extended with *points of order*, with which the participants can talk *about* their dialogue, and monitor its course. Hamblin's student, Mackenzie, elaborated on this idea by devising a dialogue system that enables a participant to initiate this kind of meta-dialogue, by saying something to the effect of "Distinguo! I make a distinction between a moral and a legal sense of the expression *obligatory*." In this way, the participants improve upon their own language by introducing more precise expressions if the need for more precision arises (Mackenzie 1988). Translated to the situation of a simple critical discussion, it is up to the opponent to charge the proponent with equivocation, and it is up to the proponent to repair this flaw by choosing a (possibly mixed) disambiguation.

In line with other scholars (see Walton, 1996, chapter 2), Mackenzie conceives of the fallacy of equivocation as a problem on the proponent's side. But, given the close connections between argumentation and criticism, there is some room for doubt. It seems plausible that in at least some situations, the proponent's equivocal argument can be partly blamed on the opponent, on account of her insufficiently specific, or even actively ambiguous counter-consideration. Take the example where the proponent airs his opinion that "Non-performance of an act prescribed by law is to be (morally) condemned," and that the opponent challenges it by saying "Why so? Is the performance of an act prescribed by law a matter of obligation?" Then the proponent is invited to offer an argument along the lines of "Because all acts prescribed by law are obligatory, and non-performance of an obligatory act is to be condemned" (an instance of some argumentation scheme From Rules, see Walton, Reed, & Macagno, 2008, p. 343-344). Now, if the opponent justly points out the active ambiguity in the expression "obligatory," it seems reasonable if the proponent retorts by saying something to the effect that it is the opponent who is responsible for introducing this ambiguous expression, and that

she should first disambiguate her counter-consideration, at least before the proponent proceeds by disambiguating his argumentation. Consequently, it is quite plausible that in some situations, the opponent is partly responsible for a fallacy of ambiguity by the proponent, for the reason that the ambiguity can be traced back to an active ambiguity in one of the opponent's counter-considerations.

To buttress my hypothesis that counter-considerations can be actively ambiguous, I shall elaborate on a different example. Suppose, the proponent states his opinion that we should keep spending 0,7% of our gross national product to development aid (as has for long been practice in the Netherlands), and that the opponent challenges it in a quite, but not fully specific way, by saying "Why so? As far as you've shown, this policy's positive consequences might not outweigh its negative consequences." The opponent, then, clearly requests for an argument from consequences. But then, the proponent might make a distinction between an argumentation scheme From Consequences In The Light Of A Common Good, and an argumentation scheme From Consequences In The Light Of A Private Or At Least A Partisan Interest. The opponent's counter-consideration is ambiguous in leaving both options open. The ambiguity is interactionally relevant, for if the proponent interprets the request for argumentation as a request for an argument from consequences in light of a private or a partisan interest, the dialogue shifts towards an interest-based negotiation dialogue, whereas, if he understands it to be a request for an argument from consequences in light of a common good, the dialogue can be expected to steer towards a value-based persuasion dialogue (see on dialogue types, Walton & Krabbe, 1995). Therefore, the proponent may want the opponent to be clarify, or even disambiguate her challenge.

The same initial situation may also lead to a reading by the proponent that does not fit the opponent's intention. In that case, the opponent herself must raise the issue of ambiguity, for now *she* probably wants to repair the miscommunication. So, if the proponent's standpoint "We should spend 0.7% of the GNP to development aid" is met with the opponent's challenge "Why so? How to assess this policy in the light of its consequences?", and the proponent in return argues "In return for your acceptance of our policy, we are willing to accept your preferred austerity measures", then the opponent may want to point out the ambiguity in her counter-consideration, by saying something to the effect "I meant: How to assess this policy in the light of the consequences for a common good?" In these cases, I prefer not to label the point of order an ambiguity criticism, but rather an ambiguity correction, which forms a kind of self-criticism.

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I contributed to the theory of criticism by examining to what degree an opponent should specify her critical challenges. The proposed rules strike a balance between on the one hand making the opponent's criticism as directive, informative and specific as possible, and on the other hand, enabling the opponent to examine and discuss topics that are outside of her field of expertise. The idea has been that the opponent may, initially, raise highly unspecific criticisms, but that the proponent should have the means available for inciting the opponent to become ever more

specific about her critical position, until at least her challenges have become scheme bound challenges. It has become clear that unspecific criticism is closely connected to ambiguity in both criticism and in argument. How rules for dealing with ambiguity and rules for dealing with lack of specificity in criticism should be combined in a dialogue system is an open issue to be left for a future occasion.

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