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# Polylogical fallacies: Are there any?

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**ABSTRACT:** Dialectical fallacies are typically defined as breaches of the rules of a regulated discussion between two participants (di-logue). What if discussions become more complex and involve multiple parties with distinct positions to argue for (poly-logues)? Are there distinct argumentation norms of polylogues? If so, can their violations be conceptualized as *polylogical fallacies*? I will argue for such an approach and analyze two candidates for argumentative breaches of multi-party rationality: false dilemma and collateral straw man.

**KEYWORDS:** argumentation, dialectic, fallacies, false dilemma, polylogue, straw man

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The argument of this paper proceeds as follows: The chief goal of normative theories of argumentation is to define (a system of) correct argumentation and thus, *a contrario*, define fallacies: *incorrect* argumentations that happen but should not. Among various possibilities, argumentative correctness can be co-defined with “intelligent interaction” (van Benthem, 2009, p. vii). An interaction is “intelligent” (rational, reasonable, critical) as long as it is governed by normatively powerful adversarial practices characterized by high error-correcting potential; ideally, errors are mutually eliminated by agonistically-minded discussants. Argumentation is incorrect (fallacious) to the extent it violates some idealized norms of such interaction. Further, an intelligent or rational interaction is, arguably, a species of the genus interaction. But what is interaction? Typically, for the purposes of argumentation theory, it is a dialogue in which two adversaries (proponent-opponent) argue on both sides of a contested issue, “in accordance with a set of rules or conventions” (Hamblin, 1970, p. 255). Such *di-logues*, however, do not exhaust the genus interaction. Discourse analysts recognize many other species – *tri-logues*, *tetra-logues*, etc.; for short: *poly-logues* – that generate their own “rules or conventions.” Supposedly, then, an intelligent di-logue is not identical with an intelligent poly-logue. So is there a possibility of, indeed a need for, capturing the rationality of such extended interactions? That would bring to its logical consequence the idea of tying argumentative correctness (and fallaciousness) with norms of intelligent interactions. I argue here for a “yes” answer in three basic steps: 1) I define the concept of a polylogue and review its theoretical treatment (section

2); 2) I discuss the underpinnings of the interaction-related notion of a fallacy and argue that room for a normative model of an *argumentative polylogue* should be made (section 3); 3) I analyze two examples of what seem to be *polylogical fallacies*: false dilemma and collateral straw man (section 4).

## 2. POLYLOGUE

### 2.1 Basic definitions

A *polylogue* is what it says – a *poly-logos*, discourse (λόγος) between many (πολύ). Given the capacious, and very central, meaning of the notion of “logos” in ancient Greece – which may refer to a ‘word,’ ‘discourse,’ ‘opinion,’ ‘thought,’ ‘account,’ ‘reason,’ ‘argument,’ ‘rule,’ etc.<sup>1</sup> – it is common to follow Aristotle and understand ‘logos’ with a normative edge as “reasoned discourse” (e.g., Chen, 2010, p. 55; Johnson, 2000, p. 161). This paves the way for conceiving polylogues as ‘reasoned’ (based on reason-giving, argumentation) and thus, at least ideally, also ‘reasonable’ (intelligent) interactions between many.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in the following, an *argumentative polylogue* will be understood as a form of verbal interaction which involves argumentation between multiple parties with distinct positions. The notions of ‘positions’ and ‘parties’ are significant here. A *position* is a verbally expressed stance (standpoint) on a disputable issue formulated as an open Wh-question: Who should receive the Blair prize of 2013? How to solve the financial crisis? In this case, we can get a genuine multiplicity of positions simultaneously defended and objected to in a multi-party dispute. (In the case of yes/no questions, one would speak of two contradictory *sides*, rather than multiple, possibly contrary, *positions*; see Lewiński, forth.; Jacqueline, 2007.) Finally, *parties* are bearers of distinct positions: they are thus defined by what they hold and defend. A collectivity of participants (e.g., a political party in a parliament, a ‘tag-team’ in group argument) is taken to constitute one argumentative party so long as they consistently argue for a given position (Lewiński, 2010). Such an understanding of argumentative polylogues differs from pragma-linguistic approaches distinguishing between each individual participant,<sup>3</sup> and from general philosophical approaches where “participants need not be persons” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 89).<sup>4</sup> It pictures argumentation

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the entry for ‘λόγος’ in *A Greek-English Lexicon* by Lidell & Scott, available here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3DLo%2Fgos>.

<sup>2</sup> “A positive understanding of the term [polylogue - ML] finds many different ways of thinking reconciled and articulated reasonably” (Chen, 2010, p. 55).

<sup>3</sup> “[...] [W]e will not speak of ‘multi-party conversations’ but of *multi-participant conversations*, or rather *multi-participant interactions* [...] Thus, we will refer to as *polylogical* all communicative situations which gather together several participants, that is, real live individuals.” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004, p. 3, italics original).

<sup>4</sup> “In a polylogue the participants need not be persons; some or all may be computers, as in a parallel computing network. The folklore committee comprising three men and a dog furnishes a polylogue setting.” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 89).

as a clash of positions, rather than personalities, and thus focuses exclusively on elements pertinent to normative analysis of argumentation – a crucial requirement for discussing fallacies.

### 2.2 “Introducing polylogue” in pragmatics (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004)

The first discipline directly relevant to the investigation of argumentative polylogues is pragmatics (in a broad sense including conversation, interaction, and discourse analysis).<sup>5</sup> The chief goal of pragmatic analysts is “the description of all the phenomena which characterize the functioning of polylogues” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, p. 2), that is, an empirical account of the pragmatic and conversational features of multi-participant interactions (such as: convoluted patterns of turn-taking, co-production of discourse by different participants, simultaneous talk, strategic targeting of utterances to various ratified and non-ratified participants, ‘crowding’ and ‘splitting’ of conversations, etc.).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the basic criticisms of polylogue analysts concern the empirical validity of the dominant dyadic scheme used in conversation analysis (with notions such as *a-b-a-b* sequences of ‘adjacency pairs’) and speech act theory (felicity conditions defined in terms of dyads consisting of Speaker and Hearer): “Even if such a scheme is intended to be a model, for descriptive work it cannot be” (Hymes, 1972, p. 58). Thanks to their empirical orientation, pragmatic analyses of polylogues contribute a great deal to our understanding of the unique constraints and opportunities of actual multi-participant interactions. Yet, they reject the ambition of passing any normative judgments, whether conversational at large, or argumentative in particular. The notion of a polylogical fallacy is not there.

### 2.3 “Introducing polylogue theory” in formal dialectics (Sylvan, 1985)

Here, I can refer to only one, but very interesting paper “dedicated to the memory of Charles Hamblin” (Richard Sylvan, aka Richard Routley, belonged to the same group of Australia-based logicians-turned-formal-dialecticians as Hamblin and Mackenzie). A somewhat more ambitious title indicates we are dealing with an attempt to build a certain overarching and consistent theory (or *system*) of what a polylogical interaction – and polylogical argumentative interaction in particular – may consist of. Analysis of *polylogue systems*, similarly to Hamblin’s *dialectical systems* (1970, Ch. 8), can be conceived of as either a *descriptive* or a *formal* (and

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<sup>5</sup> There are also conceptions of polylogues which are not directly relevant here. In literary studies, Kristeva’s *Polylogue* (1977) extends Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism to capture the inherent multi-vocality (poly-phony) of a literary work, i.e., a constant multiple ‘conversation’ with its co-texts and contexts that constitutes the sense of the work. See Tindale (2004, Ch. 4) for a fruitful incorporation of Bakhtin’s dialogism in argumentation theory.

<sup>6</sup> Various aspects of polylogical conversations have been tackled, among others, by: Bruxelles & Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004; Clark & Carlson, 1982; Goffman, 1981; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990; Haviland, 1986; Hymes, 1972; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, 2004; Levinson, 1988; Maynard, 1986; Traverso, 2004.

normative) undertaking: “polylogue theory [...] affords a setting for theories of dialogue, conversation and communication, and differently, for a theory of fallacies” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 107). While leaving this issue open, Sylvan largely follows Hamblin who “lean[s] towards a formal approach” (Hamblin, 1970, p. 256). This is clear in how “the rules controlling polylogues” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 96) – namely: linguistic, logical, procedural, and commitment rules – can be instrumental in normatively defining rationality and its flipside, fallaciousness. However, Sylvan stops short of even sketching any such polylogical ‘theory of fallacies.’ I will return to this possibility in the next two sections, where some details of Sylvan’s polylogues are also discussed.

#### 2.4 “Intercultural polylogues in philosophy” (Wimmer, 2007)

Finally, a surprisingly relevant account of polylogues comes from the discipline of ‘intercultural philosophy.’ An Austrian philosopher Wimmer (1998, 2007), takes as a point of departure for his “model of a polylogue” the global, and thus often inherently *inter-cultural*, challenges of our times:

There are tensions in probably every society or country in our days, demonstrating the need of polylogic argumentations: tensions between traditions and modernity, between ethnic groups within a society, between laicist and religious convictions. (Wimmer, 1998, p. 8)

Polylogue is thus a form of communication fit for engaging various participants in these tensions, often differing in their cultural background:

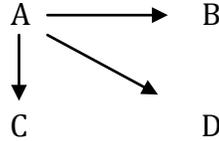
In a polylogue, individuals are confronted with several dialogue partners from different cultures simultaneously; the term is used to emphasize that many perspectives need to be considered, rather than just two, as the word *dialogue* seems to imply. (Chen, 2010, p. 54)

At first glance, broad concerns of intercultural philosophy seem far off the topic of this paper. However, with a somewhat charitable interpretation which abstracts from the intercultural details unnecessary for the limited purposes set out here, we can make a significant step towards grasping strictly *argumentative* polylogues. This step is facilitated through simple schematic representations of various forms of multi-party discussions proposed by Wimmer. Before presenting his diagrams, let us assume that a simple dialogue (di-logue) – as in dialectical models – has the following structure (arrows indicate communication in the direction of the arrow; thus double arrow = interaction):



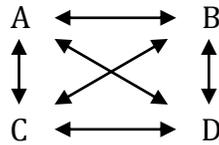
Aiming precisely to go beyond this dualistic model, Wimmer (1998, 2007; Chen, 2010) takes as a basic template a situation in which four parties are engaged. Then, the simplest, and least preferable, situation depicts “unilateral centrist influence,”

such as when a privileged culture (e.g. colonizers) communicates to “barbarians” (e.g. colonized), who do not interact among themselves:



On an abstract level, this model nicely renders a rhetorical situation of A’s speaking to a *composite* (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1959/1968), *heterogeneous* (Zarefsky, 2008), or *multiple* and *mixed* (van Eemeren, 2010) audience consisting of three distinct factions (B, C, D). As noted (e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1959/1968, pp. 21-22, 31ff.), such a situation requires special argumentative strategies, such as marshaling multiple lines of argumentation that would individually resonate with B, C, and D, or appealing to a *universal audience* (or *public reason*), the perceived common ground between all of them. However, for Wimmer, despite involving many parties, this situation is emphatically *not* a polylogue.

Starting from here, he goes through a number of intermediary options (such as “partially bilateral and multilateral dialogues”), to arrive at the final model of a polylogue – “complete multilateral influence”:



Here, while we can distinguish six di-logues (six double arrows), they are intricately related to each other and constitute one polylogue. Importantly, Wimmer understands such a polylogue as an “idealistic model” whereby rational speakers (e.g. philosophers) aim “to convince others with enlightening arguments” (Chen, 2010, p. 58). To reach the goal of mutual rational conviction, arguers *should be* open to multilateral influence by engaging the many perspectives on the discussed issue: “the polylogue differs from [...] descriptive models [...]. Rather than reconstruct processes in reality, the polylogue suggests a virtual or ideal condition in which communication should take place” (*op. cit.*, p. 63).

Unfortunately, we will not get any further with intercultural philosophers on how to precisely define their ideal “polylogic argumentations” and what to make of violations of the ideal – possible polylogical fallacies. Admittedly, they do not have such objectives and tools. As in Sylvan’s case above, a normative approach to arguments in polylogues is merely suggested and left on the table.

### 2.5 Example: reciprocity vs. transitivity

Before moving to the issue of polylogical fallacies, I will present a very simple example, which also serves as an introduction to the forthcoming problems. Consider the following fragment of a polylogue between 3 discussants:

A: I think we should buy an (A)merican Airlines ticket – it gets us from Lisbon to Windsor in a mere 16hrs for just €800.

B: I'm not so sure... Look! I found a (B)ritish Airways offer for the same price, and it takes only 14hrs.

In a di-logue, B (the antagonist of the (A)merican position and the protagonist of a contrary (B)ritish position) “wins” this line of argument without much ado – s/he has a (rather obvious) winning strategy. However in a polylogue, B can be easily “outflanked” by some other party, e.g.:

C: If 2 hrs are so important to you, how about flying Air (C)anada: 12 hrs for €800!

We can see here that the simple dyadic *reciprocity* is extended by the problem of *transitivity*. A and B are not only accountable to one another (in that, for instance, they are expected to practice what they preach), but also to “someone else.” In this case, the (B)riton is killed by the (C)anadian with her/his own weapon: a better deal = a flight that is 2 hrs faster at an equal price. (Are we speaking of something like a *transitive tu quoque* here?) Shortly, there is possibly a different set of considerations to be taken into account when practicing and evaluating polylogues (as opposed to simple di-logues).

## 3. FALLACY

### 3.1 Fallacies of argument and fallacies of argumentation

Before discussing possible polylogical fallacies, it is worth mentioning the theoretical rationale behind considering them in the first place. For clarity, I distinguish here between two basic ways of theorizing fallacies, without claiming that they are jointly exhaustive and strictly mutually exclusive.

The first of them can be called an argument-based approach. It is based on the idea that argumentation (an activity) amounts to the use of arguments (objects). Therefore, it starts from defining the simplest basic unit of inference (an argument), for instance, major premise + minor premise ∴ conclusion in syllogistic logic. Then it formulates the axioms and rules that define valid operations between elements in this basic unit. Fallacies are arguments that are not valid, but by some carelessness may seem to be (see Hamblin, 1970, p. 12). The locus of fallaciousness is thus in the very unit of inference. From it, larger and larger units can be assembled, allowing an investigation of “the uses of argument” in realistic contexts such as a dialogue,

public speaking, group discussions, etc., understood as mere displays or conduits of reasoning.<sup>7</sup>

The second way can be dubbed an argumentation-based approach. It builds on the idea that arguments are products of the activity of argumentation (e.g., Johnson, 2000); they are functional units of reasoned interaction (e.g., speech acts), rather than independent objects, whether understood Platonically or otherwise. Hence, this approach begins by stipulating the basic framework of the entire system of argumentation, for example, Hamblin's *dialectical system*: "a regulated dialogue or family of dialogues" (1970, p. 255). The chief task is to formulate basic rules which regulate dialogue systems. Fallacies are those verbal acts that violate these dialogical rules. The locus of fallaciousness is thus the entire dialogue system. From there, one can move on to analyzing parts and special, often simplified, instantiations of the system. Important parts of the system are reconstructed inferential units (arguments as products) which discussions within the system can generate or incorporate. Special instantiations include sub-systems that add specific assumptions or limitations to the basic framework.

This is a simplification that requires at least three further remarks. First, while the distinction drawn here seems to be covered by the logic-dialectic divide, this need not be so. On the one hand, the argumentation-based approach has been gaining traction among theorists traditionally satisfied with the former view where "the other" plays a redundant, if not distractive, role in correctness, understood as a "clear and distinct" process of solitarily assembling valid arguments. Logicians and cognitivists alike have recently claimed that anything from reasoning in general (Mercier & Sperber, 2011), to logical reasoning (Stenning, 2002), to formal deductive reasoning (Dutilh Novaes, 2012) is best understood as originating in demands of critical argumentative interactions: "Logic arose originally out of reflection on many-agent practices of disputation" and today should "return to this broader agenda of rational agency and intelligent interaction" (van Benthem, 2009, p. vii). On the other hand, and only to a limited degree, the former procedure is not alien to dialectical approaches; for instance, in pragma-dialectics the basic unit of an argumentative exchange is a "single non-mixed dispute" from which all the more complex types of disputes (multiple, mixed) can be assembled (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 120). Shortly, this distinction is not meant to render some well-known disciplinary differences, but rather to outline two contrasting theoretical tendencies in understanding fallacies.

Second, the distinction quite neatly mirrors the general discussions between "reductionists" and "holists". For the proponents of the former disposition, theorizing anything in the latter way would simply amount to not "thinking clearly" (Plumer, 2011, p. 1548). One crucial failure of clear thinking would be a fallacy of

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<sup>7</sup> For instance: "I mean 'argument' in the logical sense of a timeless, Platonic object, as opposed to a rhetorical or historical creation that is dependent in an essential way upon the circumstances or intentions of the audience or author [...]. The logical or philosophical notion of arguments taken to be abstract sequences of propositions seems to be the ordinary notion, at least when we are thinking clearly. The contrasting relativistic notion of an argument seems to be a product of confusing the means by which we *access* arguments with arguments themselves." (Plumer, 2011, p. 1548).

division – unjustified imposition of the qualities of the whole (argumentation as interaction) on its constitutive parts (arguments as objects used or accessed in argumentation). The proponents of the latter view would claim that “reductionists” commit in turn a *pars pro toto* mistake, by taking inferential infelicities within arguments *qua* objects to be the only source of argumentative fallaciousness. For them, the argument-based stance focuses on “an artificially isolated reasoner” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 90) and thus is guilty of an unjustified reductionism which abstracts from what are relevant, indeed crucial, features of an argumentation system. Even if all the carefully isolated parts were duly described and assembled, one would not get a satisfactory whole due to a fallacy of composition. “Holists” would thus gladly echo Wittgenstein’s critique of St. Augustine’s description of language (“a system of communication”): “Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §3).

Third, the distinction can easily be subsumed under the protracted realism versus anti-realism debates in the philosophy of logic. Realists are precisely those who approach arguments as transcendent and timeless Platonic objects we should unmistakably access in our reasoning, whether solitary or interactive. Anti-realists would define arguments as human constructs and model them with a view on how this construction is to be best understood. Logical dialogism, which maintains that arguments are best modeled within a framework of interactive *dialogues* or *games* (for a recent overview see Marion, 2012 and Rahman & Keiff, 2005), has become one of the most prominent positions among the anti-realists. Getting into this discussion with an intention to solve it is perhaps a hopeless undertaking – we are speaking here of deeply entrenched philosophical dispositions of a rather unyielding character.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, whether you “buy it” or not, I will sketch an argument within the latter (argumentation-based, holistic, anti-realistic) disposition that is meant to give a theoretical basis for discussing polylogical fallacies.

### 3.2 Hamblin: *logic* $\subset$ *dialectical system*

Let me start with Hamblin, a good representative of the argumentation-based approach to fallacies. As is known, Hamblin argued that the notion of a fallacy is most fully elaborated in a formal dialectical system. In a classical logical sense, begging the question is not an invalid inference, and a fallacy of many questions is not an inference at all. That is, something is amiss in the mono-logical, argument-based approach, that a well-developed dia-logical approach can fully grasp:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Part of why the tempest in the British teapot over realism versus anti-realism seems so hard to follow may be that everyone tries to unload the burden of proof on someone else; the less one shoulders, the less is accomplished. So where Dummett seemed to promise a positive defense of intuitionism, we get criticism to the effect that the realist has not refuted the anti-realist.” (Hart, 1989, p. 1486).

<sup>9</sup> Although, expectedly, proponents of the argument-based approach “don’t buy it”: *petitio principii*, they argue, can be fully elucidated “on entirely logistical principles” in a way “closely resembling the Standard Treatment” (Botting, 2011, p. 23).

Dialectic, whether descriptive or formal, is a more general study than Logic; in the sense that Logic can be conceived as a set of dialectical conventions. It is an ideal of certain kinds of discussion that the rules of Logic should be observed by all participants, and that certain logical goals should be part of the general goal. (Hamblin, 1970, p. 256)

It is clear that Hamblin does not aim to *replace* Logic with dialectic. He instead claims, similarly to Wittgenstein, that Logic is best conceived of as a certain precisely “circumscribed region” (subset) within a broader dialectical system (superset). Thus, a dialectical system can embrace as “its own” all the logical fallacies, and add those that are purely dialectical (by Hamblin’s reading): e.g. begging the question (*petitio principii*). They can simply be called dialectical fallacies. Fallacies in general are thus violations of the rules of dialectical systems – systems of regulated (reasonable, intelligent, rational, critical) dialogue. Interestingly, while a dialogue may “have a number of participants – in the simplest case, just two” (*op. cit.*, p. 255), Hamblin’s systems are exclusively dyadic (the two participants are Opponent and Respondent or Questioner and Answerer). So how about dialogues with a number of participants exceeding two (polylogues)? Will they be defined by the same rules and thus involve precisely the same fallacies? Or will they generate some additional (or different) norms of reasonableness?

### 3.3 Sylvan: *dialectics* $\subset$ *polylogue system*

Some preliminary answers to these questions have been given in the aforementioned paper of Sylvan. This is how it starts:

Polylogue generalises upon dialogue. [...] Dialogue suggests, for one thing, a central focus, a spotlight on one person, the speaker, at a time – limitations that polylogue can abandon. Dialogue is a conversation or discourse between two or more persons. No restriction to two persons is implied by the term *dialogue*, though a two party form is commonly suggested by use of the term. [...] Use of the term *polylogue* is designed to break all such presuppositions. [...] Finally, the sole participant in a polylogue may be an eccentric hermit or an artificially isolated reasoner: polylogue includes monologue. (Sylvan, 1985, pp. 89-90)

It seems as though Sylvan takes Hamblin’s reasoning to its logical consequence, and suggests a yet bigger superset – later defined as a *polylogue system* – which includes the study of reasoned monologues (logic), dialogues (dialectic), and more. While for Hamblin logic is a certain precisely circumscribed part of the dialectical system, for Sylvan Hamblin’s dialectical discussions are in turn special sub-systems within a polylogue – with their additional assumptions and limitations; e.g., a discussion is focused on one central issue debated by two persons. As such, it does not cover the whole story. So what is the rest of the story?

For Sylvan, it is a polylogical system of communication, not unlike a computer network, with numerous connections between multiple participants. Polylogues involve “holistic restraints” defined through “certain sets of rules” (*op. cit.*, p. 96) which control phenomena extending beyond simple dyadic interactions. Sylvan does not explicitly put it this way, but polylogues basically require looking

anew at the notion of common ground, a central feature of dialectical (and also rhetorical) approaches to argumentation. In a dyadic encounter, common ground is what is shared by the two interlocutors – it is there or it isn't, and when it isn't, any reasonable communication, let alone argumentation, is precluded (“sorry, I don't speak your language”; *deep disagreement*). In a polylogue, one can distinguish between a *global* common ground, what is shared among all participants, and some *local* common grounds, what is shared by some sub-set of participants.<sup>10</sup> For instance, *linguistic rules* need not be fully shared: “a polylogue is not ill-formed should it include sub-dialogues in different languages” (*Ibid.*) – one can resort to other participants as translators and communicate reasonably without common language. Similarly for *logical rules* and *commitment rules*: new solutions (e.g., some meta-system of translation between various logics) need to be found to account for a *reasonable* multiplicity of logics and complex commitment stores in one multi-party discussion. This is what Sylvan begins doing, even though he considers it to be “a rather academic concern” (*Ibid.*). What is surely not a purely academic concern is the simple observation that polylogues require a different set of *procedural rules* – compare the discussion procedure of a dyadic legal trial with a parliamentary debate to which many members of various parties contribute. Speaking of Hamblin's dialectical systems, Sylvan claims that “there is little doubt that his rules resemble the rules of court procedure and order” (1985, p. 110). By contrast, polylogues would require something akin to the famous *Robert's Rules of Order* meant to secure an orderly conduct of multi-party assemblies (*op. cit.*, pp. 102-103). This difference in discussion procedures is significant, as different verbal interventions would be relevant (‘in order,’ ‘legal,’ ‘acceptable’) in court and in an assembly. This can inspire Walton-type accounts where different dialogue types generate different fallacy assessments precisely because different moves are considered out of order (Walton, 1998).<sup>11</sup> Yet, a concern with polylogical fallacies points to a ‘different difference’: it seeks to abstract from the broad functional particularities of Walton's dialogues (all of which are dyadic) and focuses on the strictly argumentative aspect of multi-party discussions which lies beyond a purely dialectical treatment. As mentioned above, Sylvan himself does suggest that polylogues may generate their own fallacies but does not elaborate on this suggestion. This is my task in the next, final section.

#### 4. POLYLOGICAL FALLACIES

##### 4.1 False dilemma

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<sup>10</sup> “Even if the principle ‘No common logic, no communication’ held, it would not follow that there must be a one logic for each polylogue, only common ground for each pair of parties in a polylogue that manage to communicate” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 110). Of course, on the flipside, there is always a danger that “different voices [in a polylogue] are ensnared in their own particularities; consequently, no common ground can be found” (Chen, 2010, p. 55).

<sup>11</sup> Purely functionalistic approaches to dialogue types surely need some qualifications: “What is in order, such as properly affirming the consequent, may be fallacious” (Sylvan, 1985, p. 103).

#### 4.1.1 Example

Good examples of polylogues are easily found in political discourse. Take for example discussions during the first free presidential elections in Egypt in spring 2012 – a year after president Mubarak’s 30-year long dictatorial rule ended in a revolutionary upheaval. Considering Egypt is a presidential republic, the immediate electoral question – Who should be the president? – can also be formulated as a basic political issue: Who should govern Egypt? Many views emerged on this issue, with three of them dominating the public discourse:<sup>12</sup>

- 1) Morsi: Muslim Brothers! (Islamist anti-regime)  
“I will go on with the challenge of knocking down the corrupt regime. [...] I am the legitimate candidate, the candidate of the revolution and the revolutionaries.”
- 2) Shafiq: Mubarak’s supporters! (secular pro-regime)  
“I represent the civil state and the Al Ikhwan (the Muslim Brotherhood) represents the sectarian state. [etc. - ML] I represent stability and they represent chaos and hindrance to people’s lives.”

Debates between the Islamist Morsi and an ex-regime official Shafiq are interesting examples of a dialectical clash of what seem to be contradictory positions. In pragma-dialectical terms, Morsi and Shafiq engage in a clear-cut *mixed* difference of opinion. Interestingly, if they share any common ground, it is the idea that differences between them are contradictory: if one is right, the other is wrong, and vice versa. This is evident in the terms they use: corrupt-legitimate, civil-sectarian, stability-chaos. They thus “dichotomize” the debate (Dascal, 2008) by constantly resorting to mutually exclusive and, possibly, jointly exhaustive dyads. However, even if their discussion follows some dialectical rules, it does not exhaust the political disagreement space – there is at least one more prominent position on the issue:

- 3) Sabahy: Progressives! (secular anti-regime)  
“I am not supporting the reproduction of the Mubarak regime nor am I supporting the continuation of the domination of the Islamic current.”

Sabahy’s position thus “de-dichotomizes” the debate by “showing that the opposition between the poles can be constructed as less logically binding than a contradiction, thus allowing for intermediate alternatives” and by “actually developing or exemplifying such alternatives” (Dascal, 2008, p. 35). So what is the problem here? Well, in the language of fallacies, Morsi and Shafiq seem to be ensnared in a *false dilemma*: an unjustified (false) division of an issue into but two propositions (*δί-λημμα*). In the following, I argue that the fallacy can best be understood as a polylogical fallacy of confrontation. That puts me in an awkward

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<sup>12</sup> The examples – when in quotation marks – are actual fragments of political discourse translated from Arabic by D. Mohammed, and used in Lewiński & Mohammed, 2012. When not in quotation marks (see below section 4.2), they are loose paraphrases of actual discussions.

position – after all, there is already a logical and a dialectical treatment of a false dilemma. But is there really?

#### 4.1.2 False dilemma in logic

Let us start with Tomić's (forth.) "systematic exposition" of a false dilemma on logical grounds. She analyzes four basic variants of the fallacy in terms of two different types of failure in applying the logically valid forms of constructive and destructive dilemmas. To cut the long story short, the first failure occurs when "the actually provided argument is deductively valid but has a false disjunctive premise and is therefore not sound" (p. 5). Importantly, the disjunctive premise is false, because it is "incomplete" (pp. 6-7); e.g.  $A \vee B$  should in fact be  $A \vee B \vee C$ . The other failure is due to "neglecting other relevant information" in the premises of the argument, namely, "the possible positive consequences of the given disjuncts" (p. 12) for the constructive type and, conversely, the possible negative consequences for the destructive type. In the former type (incomplete disjunction), an argument is fallacious, for even if deductively valid, it is unsound. In the latter type (incomplete consequence), an argument is deductively valid, even sound!, but it is still fallacious, since some additional information regarding the consequences of the premises can defeat it. I refrain from discussing the logical details of Tomić's account – but while her logical analysis tells us where the problem lies, it also tells us it does not lie within logic. It lies in the content of the premises, and I doubt if logic is interested in inviting such problems home. Copi and Cohen are quite blunt about it: since it is a valid form of inference, "[f]rom the strictly logical point of view, the dilemma is not of special interest or importance" (1990, p. 245); it is instead a practical problem of rhetorical controversies. As I will argue, it is so because it precludes the expansion of a debate that can expand by involving extra positions (extra disjuncts or consequences).

#### 4.1.3 False dilemma in dialectic

For dialecticians, such as van Eemeren and Grootendorst, a false dilemma occurs when "a contrary opposition is presented as a contradiction":

It is then suggested that there are only two options and if one of them cannot be proved to be the case, it is concluded that this is *not* the case (the "ordinary" *argumentum ad ignorantiam*) and hence that the other option *is* the case. All other possibilities are then glossed over. (1992, p. 190)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I do not take them to refer here specifically to the *fallacy of illicit contrary* as formally described in Aristotle's term logic, committed when a contrary relation between propositions is taken to be contradictory. For instance: one resorts to the principle of contradiction to infer from the negation of a universal affirmative proposition (It's not true that "all dogs are black") the truth of a universal negative proposition ("No dogs are black"), while these two universals are merely contrary: they cannot both be true, but they can both be false (It's neither true that "all dogs are black" nor that "no dogs are black"). A correct contradictory inference is, of course, a particular negative ("Some dogs are not black").

Similarly to above, I will not discuss all the details of their treatment of the fallacy. But it is important to stress that van Eemeren and Grootendorst discuss these problems among “fallacies in concluding the discussion”: false dilemma in combination with *ad ignorantiam* amounts to a fallacy of “making an absolute of the failure of the defense” (*op. cit.*, 1992, p. 187ff.). However, when they speak of “options” and “possibilities,” they clearly mean *standpoints*: it is the status of defended and challenged standpoints that is being decided at the concluding stage. So the false dilemma seems to be in fact a fallacy of “glossing over all other” *standpoints* that pertain to the issue. This is significant, since the standpoints to be discussed are determined at the very first stage of a critical discussion – *confrontation* – rather than the last, *concluding* stage. So let us look there.

The very first rule of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion is: *Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 190). By quickly examining the plurality here (“discussants” = *the protagonist + the antagonist*; “standpoints” = *+/p* or *-/p*), we realize it actually amounts to no more than duality. To understand why it is so, we need to begin even before the pragma-dialectical beginning, formulated as follows: “A dispute arises when someone advances a standpoint and someone else casts doubt upon it” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 107). However, a standpoint itself can be seen as a response to a more or less explicitly stated issue that instigates position-taking, such as a problem that calls for a solution. Now, the issue can be expressed through one of the two grammatically available types of questions: 1) a *yes/no question*, which allows for two relevant responses (either yes or no), and thus for two *contradictory sides* (*+/p* or *-/p*) as standpoints; 2) an *open Wh-question*, which allows for a number of relevant responses, and thus possibly an open set of *contrary positions* (*p, q, r, ...*) as standpoints. Traditionally, the building blocks of dialectic are yes/no questions:

[...] not every universal seems to be a dialectical premise, e.g. “What is man?”, or “In how many ways is the good said?”. For a dialectical premise is that in response to which it is possible to answer yes or no; but this is not possible in response to these questions. (Aristotle, *Topics*, 158a14-18)

Problematic questions concern alternatives “Is two-footed land animal the definition of human, or is it not?” (101b26-37) “Are perception and knowledge the same or different?” (102a7) “Is every pleasure a good?” (108b35). Problems thus require the dialectical respondent to adopt one or the other side of an alternative [...]. (Lennox, 1994, p. 55; see also Krabbe, 2006, p. 186, and Spranzi, 2011, Ch. 1)

As dialectical disputations start from “a problem [that] is a two-sided question” (Smith, 1989, p. 148) or a “contradictory alternative” (Lennox, 1994, p. 60), they cannot but be clashes of two contradictory sides of the problem observing the law of excluded middle ( $p \vee \neg p$ ). As a result, the Aristotelian tradition of dialectic is, so to speak, an utterly dilemmatic business: dialectical procedures unfold through a series of dilemmas (“Is it the case, or not?”). What does not fit the contradictory form – basically, open issues formulated as Wh-questions: “What is man?”, “Who to

elect?”, etc. – is not suitable for dialectical treatment. Instead, it belongs to sciences or rhetoric. If this is so, there is no room *within* dialectics for a *false* dilemma which “involves the confusion of a contrary and a contradictory opposition” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 182) – there is simply no contrariness that would cause confusion. Similarly to logic, false dilemmas are alien intruders.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.1.4 False dilemma in a polylogue

As proposed above, in contrast to dialectic, a discussion over multiple contrary positions on an open issue instigated by Wh-questions is a defining feature of polylogues. In a context where one can discuss many propositions (poly-lemma), a di-lemma is false, because it focuses exclusively on two positions, thus preventing other positions (standpoints) from being considered. (Note that I define parties as bearers of positions; an individual reasoner considering various “options” is engaged in an inner polylogue.) In this sense, I fully agree with van Eemeren and Grootendorst that a false dilemma consists in an unjustified reduction of contrary options to but two, taken to be contradictory. The difference is that I would call a system that allows for a clash of multiple contrary positions a polylogue, while they will reconstruct it as a critical discussion. (I argued elsewhere in much detail that a reconstruction of a polylogue in terms of multiple dyadic discussions is suspicious as a move from locally isolated dyads to the polylogical whole.) Moreover, the false dilemma seems to be best grasped as a fallacy of polylogical argumentation by virtue of violating a basic rule of *confrontation*: *Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints* that reads here: ‘all parties to a polylogue should be free to advance their, possibly contrary, positions’ (and further discuss them). Anyone who tries to reduce this open set of contraries to a closed dichotomy based on contradiction and proceed with an elegant dyadic discussion, may be guilty of a the dichotomization of the disagreement space – the false dilemma.

I will conclude by acknowledging my debt to the Hamblinian “logic” here: as he argued, while *petitio principii* and many questions are considered *logical* fallacies, they cannot be properly accounted for in classical logical terms (logicians deny that; see note 9 above) – something akin to the status of long-term illegal immigrants: they reside, but without proper papers. They can get these papers in formal dialectic. I am arguing something similar for the false dilemma – while it *is* a fallacy fully recognized both in logic and dialectic, the explanations of its fallaciousness lie *outside* of logic and dialectic. Only in a polylogue can the fallacy receive a (fairly simple, no doubt) consistent and immanent treatment.

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<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, pragma-dialectics is not Aristotelian dialectic. It allows for discussions over contrary standpoints in the form of a “qualitatively multiple dispute” arising when the second speaker “takes up an alternative standpoint [...] [that], viewed dialectically, implies a standpoint that is opposite to” the first speaker’s standpoint (van Eemeren et al., 2007, pp. 26-27). The opposite standpoints can be contraries (*op. cit.*, pp. 57-62). However, if a dispute proceeds between only two arguers discussing only two contraries out of “multiple” possibilities, it is nothing short of a false dilemma. If it involves multiple parties with multiple contrary positions, it is a polylogue. (I hope it’s not a false dilemma.)

#### 4.2 Collateral straw man

The dialectal fallacy of the straw man denotes a misrepresentation of someone's position attempted in order to easily refute that position. An argumentative move that involves a straw man can be characterized by two constitutive elements (Lewiński, 2011): the function of refuting an opponent's position and the form consisting in various methods of misrepresentation of the original position (misquotation, selective quotation, taking out of context, attacking a fictitious opponent, etc.). A simple example of the straw man may be:

Student: My work is progressing well, because *many* of the chapters of the thesis are completed.  
 Supervisor: Well, if *everything* is done, then why not submit tomorrow?  
 Student: I never said *everything*, just *many* of them.

Despite claims that the straw man is “a common, familiar, and thoroughly theorized fallacy” (Talissee & Aikin, 2006, p. 349), there seems to be a rather inconspicuous polylogical variant of the straw man. Consider the following (constructed) exchange:

Shafiq: Our chief goal should be stability and peaceful continuation of Egypt's progress.  
 Morsi: No! We should progress by removing all the remnants of Mubarak's regime and installing a new Islamic order that the people of Egypt want.  
 Shafiq: Mubarak's people should remain in power. If we continue the revolution, we'll soon have a second Iran here.  
 Sabahy: It's not true. Everything depends on how we lead the revolution – Islamic republic is neither a necessary nor welcome outcome of removing Mubarak!  
 Shafiq: How bizarre – you were just saying that the people of Egypt crave for a new Islamic order!  
 Sabahy: It wasn't me, it was this jerk Morsi.

What we note here is some form of conflating opposing positions. Shafiq tries to pinpoint an inconsistency in Sabahy's position by using Morsi's statements – as if Morsi and Sabahy held an identical position with the same set of commitments. They clearly do not, and so we are dealing with an attack on a position that Sabahy does not actually endorse. Sounds like a good scenario for the straw man fallacy. But again, dialectic would not tell us everything about it.

In pragma-dialectics, a straw man is a violation of rule 3 for critical discussion: *Attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 191). How does this rule apply to our example? Shafiq's attack is not a misrepresentation of his only opponent's (“the other party”) position (straw man *sensu stricte*), an attack on selected weak elements in a position (‘weak man’), or on an entirely fictitious position (‘hollow man’) (see Aikin & Casey, 2011). Instead, it is a faithful attack on a central argument of a real opponent – but just not precisely the right one. The kind of the straw man committed – let us call it a *collateral* straw man –

occurs due to responding to “another other,” a category that dialectical rules may find hard to grasp.<sup>15</sup> Shafiq attacks Sabahy-opponent by attributing to him, quite faithfully, the commitments of Morsi-opponent. Of course, in a strict dualistic reconstruction isolating the discussion between Shafiq and Sabahy, Shafiq obviously attacks a fictitious opponent, since Morsi does not belong to this very dyadic exchange. Yet in such a reconstruction something is missing, a crucial strategic aspect: someone “*has* actually put forward a (sub-)standpoint” that “the people of Egypt want an Islamic rule”; and not a random someone, but a distinct opponent (another other) from the same side of the revolutionary barricade. So we have here a new sub-species of the straw man fallacy, distinguishable on polylogical grounds.

To recap, in our example Sabahy becomes a victim of collateral damage due to Shafiq’s insensitivity to distinguishing opponents in a polylogue. His straw man consists not in the known forms of misrepresentation, but rather in attributing some actual commitment to an insufficiently differentiated opponent. This fallacy can be properly analyzed only in a polylogue. While it can be easily recognized on dialectical grounds, some basic insight into how it happens and why it may be successful would be missing in a dyadic account.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The argument in this paper may seem to be guilty of indulging in a playful game of Russian dolls. In this game, dialecticians seem to be enclosing the no doubt pretty logical doll with their own – bigger and equally pretty one. And here come others such as myself who try to argue there is another, yet bigger polylogical doll. So why not play till the end and start considering the argumentative rationality of a million- or billion-logue? Surely, Occam’s razor, and a sharp one, should be used in this case: such considerations should be taken seriously only as long as relevant argumentative phenomena – prominently, fallacies – are discovered and better described. I hope to have fulfilled this basic criterion of relevance by theoretically justifying the polylogical stance and presenting a polylogical account of two fallacies: false dilemma and collateral straw man. While they are probably not as prominent as the much discussed *ad hominem* attacks or even *petitio principii*, they are argumentative phenomena which deserve treatment.

Further normative work on polylogical argumentation can be developed in two directions: one of them is the issue of polylogical fallacies, arguments that are either considered completely fine or are considered fallacious without a solid ground in logical and dialectical theories, but are clearly unreasonable contributions to a polylogue. The other one is the converse problem of arguments that are well-defined fallacies on logical or dialectical grounds, but perhaps are fine in a polylogue. One may think of certain forms of irrelevance here – when an argument seems out of place in a one-on-one encounter, but then “regains” relevance when the

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<sup>15</sup> Hamblin is quite clear about it: “Since we are concerned mainly with two-person dialogues we can dispense with the phenomenon of discriminatory direction of locutions to one person rather than another, and assume that all locutions are directed to the other participant.” (1970, p. 257).

broader polylogue is considered. To consistently pursue either of these ways, some kind of an (incipient, at least) model of an argumentative polylogue would have to be offered. While quite obviously I have offered no such model here, I hope to have raised some relevant concerns. Importantly, any such model – similarly to Hamblin’s dialectical systems – should not amount to a substitution of extant models (such as pragma-dialectical critical discussion) but rather a friendly extension that acknowledges their validity while adding some extra insights, both descriptive and normative, to the functioning of argumentation in a multi-party context.

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