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Commentary on: Jacky Visser's "A formal account of complex argumentation in a critical discussion"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Visser's "A formal account of complex argumentation in a critical discussion" offers a valuable first step towards a much-awaited endeavour, namely, the development of a computational interpretation of Pragma-dialectics. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this project: Pragma-dialectics is one of the most powerful theories within Argumentation Studies and the possibility of dealing with the model of critical discussion in computational terms opens the possibility of important developments in computer-based learning tools, in decision support systems and, in general, in all those fields in which the meeting between computer science and argumentation theory is already being fruitful. As Visser himself points out, it is surprising that this project has been hanging for almost three decades! (To be true, in principle, such a project will have to wait a bit longer, as it constitutes Visser's ongoing doctoral dissertation. What we have here is only one part of it, and a valuable glance of his overall proposal.)

Visser's approach is dialogue games, which is not meant to be original: actually, the idea of modelling dialogue exchanges as computational games in this way goes back to, at least, Prakken's formal systems for persuasion dialogues (2001). But as Visser explains, Pragma-dialectics is particularly valuable to this end because of its concern with speech-act theory: in principle, the standards for analyzing actual dialogues are closer to their interpretation than in any other approach. This is a great advantage in its own, as it enables a more direct formalization of actual communicative processes; but, in addition, it may make easier the development of communication protocols for artificial agents. Moreover, as it is well known, Pragma-dialectics' concern with the pragmatic intricacies of actual argumentative exchanges has been enriched in the last times with a rhetorical

perspective that, as Visser envisages, might be integrated within a computational model in terms of a game theoretic layer of persuasive strategy. A final gain of this project, Visser points out, is to enable an integration of a ‘product’ and ‘process’ perspective on computational models of argumentation, because Pragma-dialectics integrates a ‘product’ account of argumentation in terms of the argumentation structure that underlies an argumentative exchange with a ‘process’ account of argumentation in terms of the rules that apply in such exchanges. As Visser contends, such integration could bring us closer to realistic computational models of human argumentative practice that, at the same time, enable practicable software applications.

All this would show that Visser’s project should have a very positive impact within the flourishing field of Argumentation and Computation. In turn, Pragma-dialectics, and Argumentation Theory in general, could benefit from this project in as much as the recursive treatment of any theory might reveal some of its weaknesses and needs of improvement. It is this latter question that we would like to consider at some length in these comments.

2. VISSER’S FORMAL ACCOUNT OF PRAGMA-DIALECTICS’ ARGUMENTATION STAGE

Visser’s target in this paper is only one stage of the critical discussion, namely, the *argumentation stage*. His strategy is to characterize a dialogue game according to the pragma-dialectical rules that apply to the argumentation stage. His goal is to show “how sequences of moves in the dialogue game relate to complex argumentation structures” (Visser, 2013, p. 1).

To this end, he proposes a directed-graph consisting of all those moves that the two players of a game are allowed or required to make at this stage if they are to count as having a critical discussion, which is what determines the adequacy of their exchange.

Now, let us focus in Visser’s reconstruction of a *single argumentation* case, as this is the pattern that all complex argumentation structures are supposed to consist of. Single argumentation is the case in which the proponent puts forward an argument (understood as a simple, first order constative speech-act) in defence of a standpoint. Visser points out that, in his graph, this occurs when, during a game, the protagonist’s move “Arg A, A justifies Stp S” is made exactly once because either the antagonist accepted the argument outright, or did so as a result of successfully going through *intersubjective procedures*. Pragma-dialectics considers four types of intersubjective procedures -namely, identification, inference, explicitization or testing (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004)- but in this part of his project, Visser only takes into account identification and testing.

At any rate, it should be noted that the development of intersubjective procedures is supposed to proceed through further argumentation. For this reason, the way in which single argumentation can be seen as constituting the basis that recursively gives rise to any other type of complex argumentation structures is just (in Visser’s account):

- 1 S
- 1.1 A
- 1.1' A justifies S

But what does it mean to put forward 1.1' as a premise? What does it mean to say that A justifies S? In principle, justification is the output of good argumentation, so that the premise that A justifies S amounts to the premise that there is good argumentation from A to S. But in that case, are we not saying that single argumentation -that is, the basic argumentative unit within a critical discussion- makes an inextricable appeal to its own goodness? Moreover, following Pragma-dialectics' own standards, this means that, in order to have a winner strategy for a single argumentation, such a self-referential premise has to be in the list of shared premises. But in that case, why should we engage in a critical discussion for justifying S?

Notice that this problem does not appear just because of the way Visser has reconstructed single argumentation in his model: if, instead of 1.1', he had introduced something like

(1.1'') "if A, then S",

he would still have to show how the new set of shared premises plus standpoint could constitute single sound argumentation at all -for example, it might be the case that the corresponding inference is defeasible, so that having 1.1 and 1.1'' as shared premises does not constitute a sound defence of S.

If this observation is correct, the critical discussion model cannot constitute a model of justification, but a model of something else -like, for example, the way to dialectically proceed once we have a sub-theory of justification. If we deem justification as the output of good argumentation, as we think we should, this means that Pragma-dialectics, by itself, is not a normative theory of argumentation.

3. CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, this attempt to present Pragma-dialectics as a computational normative model of argumentation would end up showing that Pragma-dialectics is not such a model. Certainly, it might be discussed whether Visser's use of the Argument Interchange Format for the analytic overview is adequate for the requirements of Pragma-dialectics, including its account of speech-acts. As Visser himself acknowledges:

While the original ideal model of a critical discussion is pragmatic besides dialectical, I currently only take an abstracted view of a discussion progressing like a game without going into the details of how these discussion moves are manifested in terms of illocutionary acts. (Visser, 2013, p. 5)

But, as we have tried to show, this is not a problem of the way in which Visser has modelled the critical discussion procedure, but of the way in which Pragma-

dialectics makes an inextricable appeal to justification both as part of the critical discussion procedure and as the alleged output of playing by the rules.

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