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# THEORETIC BONDAGE: ARGUMENTATION ANALYSIS AND HIGHER-ORDER GOALS

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## 1. Introduction

The emergent field of cultural studies uses various critical-emancipatory frameworks to evaluate theory and practice in philosophy and other disciplines. As part of a larger project incorporating feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, and black African critical philosophies, this essay selectively highlights certain aspects of argumentation analysis which share characteristics with dominating modes of thought. Pragma-dialectic theory is focused upon, chosen due to its progressive methodology within the context of argumentation study, and its explicit commitment and sensitivity to higher-order goals such as equality between arguers. Specifically, the Pragma-dialectic method of reconstruction termed "addition" and the notion of the "ideal arguer" are analyzed, showing areas where higher-order conditions may be compromised at the same time as they are assumed by the Pragma-dialectic model of ideal argument. A brief consideration of Coalescent argumentation as an alternative theory less bound by dominating tendencies, is presented in conclusion.

## 2. Argumentation Study and Specialized Thought

The term "specialized thought" refers to thought generated by a particular social group, and which consequently reflects the interests, standpoint, and needs of that group. "Tracing the origin and diffusion of any body of specialized thought reveals its affinity to the power of the group that created it" (Collins 1990: 201). Black feminist thought, for example, is a product of the experiences and interests of black women as a subordinated people. Black feminists overtly acknowledge their commitment, not necessarily exclusive, to emancipatory issues relevant to their social group (Collins 1990). Mainstream philosophy as represented by the major Western philosophical schools and thinkers has in contrast tended to take a universal perspective, one that ostensibly transcends the particularity of any social group. A central assumption common to various critical-emancipatory views employed by cultural theorists, however, is that mainstream thought such as traditional philosophy is in fact *specialized* thought.

The caretakers and developers of Western philosophy have for hundreds of years been male, white, and usually privileged both economically and socially. This elite group is numerically small relative to the human population as a whole, yet is the group within which power is concentrated in Western and colonized non-Western cultures. Mainstream philosophy may be understood as a product of the experiences and interests of this small, select, and dominant group—and to embody the world-view of this group. Critiquing mainstream philosophies using the perspectives of non-dominant groups can result in the identification of certain group biases and dominating practices constituting mainstream thought (See for example Mills 1997; Code 1995; Collins 1990; and Said 1979).

Michael Gilbert utilizes several feminist perspectives to critique contemporary argumentation theories which adhere to a Critical-Logical (hereafter C-L) model of argument (1994). Gilbert describes C-L style reasoning as a mainstream, dominant mode. He argues that the C-L model is inherently masculine-biased, upholding dominant, male forms of reasoning and masculine values, and excluding the reasoning and values of women. These excluded elements, notably emotions, attachment, and contextual particularity, are not considered a significant part of argument under the abstract and rule-oriented C-L model. Gilbert makes specific connection between the C-L modes and the Pragma-dialectic school (1997 and 1995), and for the purposes of this essay Pragma-dialectic theory will be treated as an example of thought based upon this dominant form of reasoning.

Gilbert acknowledges the difficulties associated with labeling some forms of reasoning as "male" and some as "female" (1994). The simplest objection is that such an approach tends to stereotype all women as a group, and all men. Certainly not all men are C-L reasoners, any more than all women are unable to reason in a C-L manner. In trying to more clearly articulate the sort of bias which might be constitutive of a C-L model, this essay simultaneously considers three axes of domination: class, race, and gender. This multi-level analysis results in identifying the C-L mode with a much narrower social group: the class which is male, white and economically advantaged, linked with the creation of mainstream philosophy above. One might think of this group as representative of the intersection of several axes of privilege, and the thought generated by this dominant group as having an affinity to the standpoint and interests of that group.

Pragma-dialectic theory, insofar as it is based on dominant forms of reasoning and arises from mainstream philosophical thought, can serve as an example of specialized thought based on dominant group assumptions. An examination of some aspects of the Pragma-dialectic practice of argument reconstruction leads to questions about the ways in which these assumptions apparently shape argumentation analysis, and answers that may draw attention to the privileged specificity of the Pragma-dialectic view.

### 3. Pragma-dialectic Goals and Practice

In *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* (1993, hereafter RAD), Van Eemeren *et al* provide a blueprint for argumentation analysis. "Pragma-dialectic" (hereafter P-D) is used herein to denote the model of ideal argument specific to RAD. P-D theory is sensitive to issues of dominance and oppression, indicating that "social structures can constrain argumentative practice for good or ill" (25), and that the "goal of resolution of differences is incompatible with situations in which one standpoint or another may enjoy a privileged position by virtue of representing the status quo or being associated with a particular person or group" (33). In addition to second-order conditions, which refer primarily to the capacities and attitudes of arguers, P-D theorists hold to higher, "third order" goals of equality in the status of arguers, non-violence, freedom of speech, and intellectual pluralism, as being among the conditions necessary for the proper resolution of differences (33). The related objectives of P-D theorists are stated as the improvement of argumentative practice, empowerment of ordinary discussants, and elevation of individual competence (24).

The insights and explicit aims of the P-D school are commendable, and complement emancipatory intentions. The relationship between P-D practice and its stated aims may become problematic, however, in the application of P-D analysis, and in several of the assumptions which undergird this method. By way of grounding my position on P-D practice for this essay, I present an example of the P-D procedure of *addition*, and discuss the example in terms of the roles of *ideal arguer* and the P-D analyst. The balance of my essay consists mainly of questions and speculations raised by the example, in what I hope is a constructive mode of addressing the difficulties—from an emancipatory perspective—that I see as inherent in P-D argumentation analysis.

In brief, the P-D normative model of argument categorizes argument as a *critical discussion*, a "procedure ideally suited to the resolution of difference of opinion" (30). *Resolution* for the P-D system means that the standpoint put forth by the protagonist is either accepted by both parties, or rejected by both as not defensible. As alluded to above, certain social factors can interfere with achieving resolution of a dispute "on the merits," that is, on the weight of evidence alone. "The system presumes ideal participants and ideal conditions" (30). The ideal model requires that parties come to agreement in a presupposed environment where higher order conditions hold.

P-D analysts work from the written texts of arguments that take place between actual human arguers. Such argument is often fractured, jumbled, and obscure, missing key elements, and/or cluttered with material extraneous to the argument itself. According to RAD, such a text requires analysis and reconstruction in order to make the best sense of the argument as it has occurred. The argument is assumed to have occurred as a critical discussion. "The critical discussion model is a theory of how discourse would be structured if it were purely resolution oriented" (26). This ideal directs the analyst to read the argument text generously, as if the parties were directing their dialogue at resolution.

Four *dialectical transformations* may be applied to the argument text, with the goal of providing the "strongest possible reading" of the argument, and the "best fit" with the P-D normative model, representing the discourse in "maximally reasonable terms" (48). *Substitution* replaces differing formulations of the same standpoint or premise, with a uniform and singular notation. Thus, a standpoint that is restated in an argument text in several different ways, will appear in the analysis only once. *Permutation* reorders the argument text. *Deletion* omits parts of the argument text that are not considered by the P-D analyst to be relevant to the goal of resolution.

*Addition* occurs when the analyst makes sense of the discourse by filling in, or supplementing, the actual argument text with elements deemed relevant to the dispute but which have not been expressed by the actual arguers. The analyst "fills in the propositional content as would be most reasonable in making an argument" (48), in other words, propositional content directed purely at resolution. Important to note is that the analyst is the one who decides what form the "missing" material will take, from the points which will be made to the way in those points will be expressed. The P-D method does not solicit the input of the actual arguers, by asking the participants for confirmation of unexpressed premises for instance. The written argument text and the analyst's intellectual resources and capacity for interpretation are the main ingredients which give rise to the reconstruction.

P-D analysts see themselves as "recovering" argumentative content from actual argumentation, and view a central

problem to reconstruction and recovery to be "reconstructing without distorting the nature of the phenomenon to be analyzed" (24). To that end, the actual argumentation must be extensively interpreted and transformed, "doing so without constructing a self-confirming artifact"(24). It is not clear, though, how the analyst is to determine if he or she has constructed such an artifact, or if interpretation has led to distortion of the phenomenon. Indeed, the exact nature of the connection between the result which finally is produced by a P-D analysis, and the actual dispute which originally took place between two human arguers, may be difficult to discern.

#### 4. Reconstruction: The Case of Fred

In RAD, examples of actual arguments are presented and analyzed. One extensive example and detailed analysis is that of a court-ordered mediation session (60-90). The speakers are Fred, Genie, and a mediator. Fred and Genie are a divorcing couple involved in a child custody dispute. Each wants custody of their son, Jonathan, who is five. Genie also has a son Gregg, aged twelve, from a previous marriage. One point at issue is the apparent allegation by Fred, that Genie allows Gregg to "beat" Jonathan. P-D analysis proceeds on the hypothesis that Fred's case is based upon a moral claim against Genie. Thus, the "best reconstruction" consistent with "the full sense of what Fred has said" (68) is provided in figure 4.2 (70). In the argument text under analysis, however, regarding the issue of Gregg beating Jonathan, Fred himself has said nothing at all. We hear of Fred's case second-hand, through two statements made by Genie:

Now my husband has filed a custody suit that my twelve year old son from a previous marriage beats the five year old, and that I stand by and don't do anything about it. (63)

...then he turns around, and says to his lawyer that my twelve year old son is beating the five year old....(66)

From these two statements, and the *permutation* of "Genie's report of Fred's assertion of a standpoint into Fred's assertion of a standpoint" (71) a reconstruction is derived that consists of sixteen serial propositions (70, Fig. 4.2). We know that the propositions inserted through addition do not come from Fred himself. The reconstruction is the analyst's view of how Fred would put his argument if Fred were oriented toward resolution of his dispute with Genie, and, as will be developed further, if Fred were an "ideal arguer" making his case before a "rational judge." The analyst thus is speaking for Fred, making Fred's "best case" for him.

**Figure 1:** *Fred's Argument* (as I have developed it from RAD: 70) portrays Fred reasoning in complex detail from four universal moral principles (indicated in red, numbered 1-4 below). I have selected four associated sub-arguments for discussion (elements are indicated in blue), grouping the elements together as follows:

1. It is the moral duty of a parent to act to protect the health and welfare of his or her child.
  - 1a. Jonathan is Genie's child.
  - 1b. Therefore, it is a moral duty of Genie to act to protect the health and welfare of Jonathan.
2. When someone has the opportunity and ability to act, that person could act.
  - 2a. Genie has the opportunity and ability to stop Gregg from beating Jonathan.
  - 2b. Therefore, Genie could act to stop Gregg from beating Jonathan.
3. When someone does not act when they could act, that person willfully abstains from acting.
  - 3a. Genie does not act to stop Gregg from beating Jonathan.
  - 3b. Therefore, Genie willfully abstains from acting to stop Gregg from beating Jonathan.
4. A parent should not have custody of his or her child if the parent willfully abstains from acting on the moral duty to protect the health and welfare of the child.
  - 4a. Genie willfully abstains from acting on her moral duty to protect the health and welfare of Jonathan.
  - 4b. Therefore, Genie should not have custody of Jonathan.

If we look at the basic form of argument that Fred is given, his supporting premises are universal propositions, with "Genie" and "Jonathan" (and Gregg) plugged into their appropriate spaces. Genie and Jonathan could stand for any parent and child. The reasoning attributed to Fred's case is not reasoning particular to Fred necessarily, but reasoning

parent and child. The reasoning attributed to Fred's case is not reasoning particular to Fred necessarily, but reasoning assumed to be attributable to *any* arguer faced with the situation of a custody dispute, as that situation is assessed by the analyst from the written argument text. And, we should add, the reasoning is that of an arguer making a case to a "rational judge," as the case is put into its "best" light by the argument analyst.

Besides the fact that very few people habitually express themselves in propositional form, the appeal to abstract universal principles may not be the way actual arguers reason, and it may not be the "best" way to reason. "This kind of moral thought is vaunted in influential literatures of moral psychology and philosophy as maturely objective or impartial" (Walker 1998: 53). Walker further suggests that such generalized moral thought embodies a highly selective view appropriate to interactions in certain public, competitive, or institutional venues. These venues are "traditionally contexts of male participation and authority, symbolically associated with the masculinity of men privileged by class and race as well as gender" (53).

An example of styles of expression that differ from an ideal of decontextualized, abstract expression, is June Jordan's work on Black English which, she explains, "devolves from a culture that abhors abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person speaking or listening" (1985: 129). By

excluding particularized discourse from argument reconstruction, P-D analysts may be excluding the expressions of non-dominant groups and, however unintentionally, favoring an elite discourse at the expense of all others.

Just as the choosing of universal premises may reflect a group bias, so too may the specific premises chosen by the P-D analyst. The central premise upon which Fred's argument rests is: "It is the moral duty of a parent to act to protect the health and welfare of his or her child." The group-particularity of this proposition is disguised, because the proposition will not seem out of place or controversial to most people—university-educated argumentation theorists—in a position to be reading it. Its claim to unambiguous universality appears innocuous. Yet it, and the reasoning which follows from it, are historically and culturally contingent propositions, relatively recent innovations in ethical sensibilities. Children have often occupied the place of chattel in Western cultural history, with duties to parents rather than *visa versa*. As well, the "beating" of children had, until of late, long been seen as not harmful, and as integral to proper child-rearing (Miller 1990).

"Health and welfare" are not straightforward notions either. The same central premise noted above could be used to argue against women holding paying jobs, for instance, if coupled with another not so unfamiliar "universalized" premise: "Mothers who work outside the home jeopardize the health and welfare of their children." Just which "merits" would the rational judge view as better or worse? Now or a hundred years ago? Whose values, principles, and world-views are being presented as "reasonable," and "resolution oriented" in constructing Fred's unspoken argument?

Claims that a moral argument can be decided "on the merits" by the rational weighing of evidence presented, when the evidence itself can be a product of cultural contingency, are questionable. Presuming that, given evidence A, a rational judge exercising some universalized form of reasoning could invariably come up with conclusion B, would seem to assume necessarily a homogeneity among arguers, in shared values, principles, and world-views, not merely in a shared capacity to reason.

Fred himself might have chosen other means to argue for custody of his son. His universal principle, if he chose one, might be "sons belong with their fathers." Or, his base premise might be "I love my son and cannot bear the thought of him being beaten by Gregg," leading to his conclusion that he should have custody of Jonathan. A parent's concern and affection for his or her child is not out of place in deliberating a child custody case. It is not unconceivable that such an emotional, personal premise might form part of some "best" argument by Fred for custody of his son.

It is not clear how the P-D analysis of Fred's case contained in RAD is related to the argument of Fred himself, nor is the status of the reconstruction beyond that of "self-confirming artifact" entirely certain. From what we know of Fred as he appears in the argument text, he is not very articulate, and allusions are made in the text to a possible history of chronic lying, unemployment, and alcoholism. The interpretation of Fred as moral reasoner by the P-D analyst seems incongruous with Fred as he comes across to the reader. This incongruity does not seem to be relevant to the analysis, though, for the P-D overview of the analytic process allows that the actual participants have likely not put forth their best cases as were determined by the P-D analyst. In addition, "while what Genie and Fred say does not really contradict the reconstruction presented here, it does not strongly support it either" (87).

Given the tiny amount of material present in the argument text from which the P-D analysis generates the sixteen propositions of Fred's case regarding Jonathan's being beaten, it would seem that the P-D ideal model of argument must exert vast precedence over empirical evidence in such an example. With so little to work from in the actual text, the onus of interpretation falls heavily on the analyst who proceeds with the model as guide, adopting the maximally reasonable standpoint of the "ideal arguer." The analysis takes place "against the background of the analyst's ... own cultural

knowledge and intuitive competence as a native speaker" (44). This seems to presume either a high degree of cultural homogeneity among arguers, or a universal applicability of the analyst's own cultural knowledge and intuition. This is not to say that P-D analysts deny that various human differences exist, but rather that difference is presumed to be able to be sufficiently understood from the perspective of the analyst, and adequately, even "best" expressed by the voice of the "ideal arguer." In the case at hand, without Fred's voice to guide the analyst, the voice of the "ideal arguer" may take over.

### 5. *The Ideal Arguer*

The P-D ideal model of argumentation requires an ideal arguer to present or rebut the standpoint under dispute. This special arguer "acts reasonably," which means that the ideal arguer engages in a critical discussion purely directed at resolution, and possesses certain basic capacities for reasoning. Ideal arguers are sincerely motivated to engage in critical discussion, evidenced by a willingness to express and listen to opinions, and to give up their own opinions which fail to survive critical scrutiny. Thus, ideal participants are "disinterested in the outcome of the discussion." They are open to giving up their position if it is shown to be indefensible, or if a competing position is seen to be more defensible. Having no stake in the outcome of the dispute, "considerations of gain and loss, winning and losing, are irrelevant" for ideal arguers devoted to the objective of resolution. (RAD: 32-33)

The ideal arguer is a creation out of abstraction, and is not supposed to be representative of any actual human being. But just as the normative ideal of critical discussion "serves as a kind of template against which experience can be compared and a kind of standard against which it can be judged" (RAD: 34), the notion of the ideal arguer as normative implies some level of judgement being passed upon actual human arguers, in accordance to how they may measure up to ideal standards. Examining the qualities and assumptions constituting the ideal arguer suggests a possible connection between these normative standards and the elite social group which created them.

First, the ideal arguer must be willing on principle to give up his or her position. This criterion assumes that all positions are dispensable, ultimately, since ideally arguers must always be open to the possibility of a "more defensible" position being presented. This standard seems quite suited to an academic setting, and to such arguments as those concerning the correct interpretation of Plato or Kant, for instance. Is this a standard that is appropriate, or desirable for all argumentation? Arguments in which positions are equally expendable, in which the parties have no stake in the outcome, are conversely, those in which the parties have nothing to lose. Should a person faced with losing custody of his or her child be expected to be disinterested? Should a person arguing against the sexual harassment which he or she is experiencing be willing to give up his or her standpoint? The P-D model assumes that the disinterested arguer is the better arguer, but it is not immediately apparent why this should be so in actual practice across all argumentation venues. A disinterested arguer in some settings might be viewed as a less than ideal human being.

The P-D model and the disinterested arguer may be entirely appropriate for specified areas of argumentation, such as some legal and academic settings, and in professional exchanges between equals, as examples. Outside of these select realms, disinterested arguers may simply be people with the leisure to argue about things that do not really matter to them. Persons who can best afford to give up their positions, and whose loss of argument is least likely to affect their social or economic status, are people who are already secure in their circumstances—members of dominant, privileged social groups. For marginalized and oppressed peoples, being unattached to standpoints which may support their advancement, against dominant positions which justify oppressive practices, may not be a luxury easily afforded. Thus, the P-D model and the ideal arguer may be considered as somewhat specialized creations, representative of the interests and needs of an elite group of arguers.

The P-D system presumes ideal participants and ideal conditions, assuming that higher order conditions would have to hold in order for the system to lead to resolution (RAD: 30). This might spare the system from being criticized on grounds that refer to non-ideal argument situations, except that the actual argument texts which P-D analysts reconstruct and evaluate are occurring under non-ideal conditions, and advanced by non-ideal participants. By assuming ideal conditions when implementing the P-D model, to judge arguments that are not taking place in an idealized world, an unfair judgement of actual argument may be taking place. Positions that challenge both the status quo and dominant moral assumptions, may be seen as less defensible on analysis because they cannot be defended on grounds that the analyst can recognize, dependent as the analyst is on his or her own intellectual resources and cultural perspective.

An arguer's attachment to such alternative positions, despite these positions possibly being viewed as less defensible by dominant standards, would be classified as an exhibition of "defective" motivation (RAD: 32) according to the P-D ideal model. Yet, this persistence may be what enables emancipatory movements, such as women's suffrage and the abolishment of slavery, to succeed despite initial mainstream resistance. A "defect," under the P-D model that presumes higher-order conditions, may in fact be crucial in bringing higher-order conditions closer to actuality in the lived world of real arguers. Perhaps a more socially-relevant model of argumentation would be one that assumes inequalities and

differing background assumptions, and presents a tentative and evolving set of normative procedures to resolve disputes under these real-life circumstances.

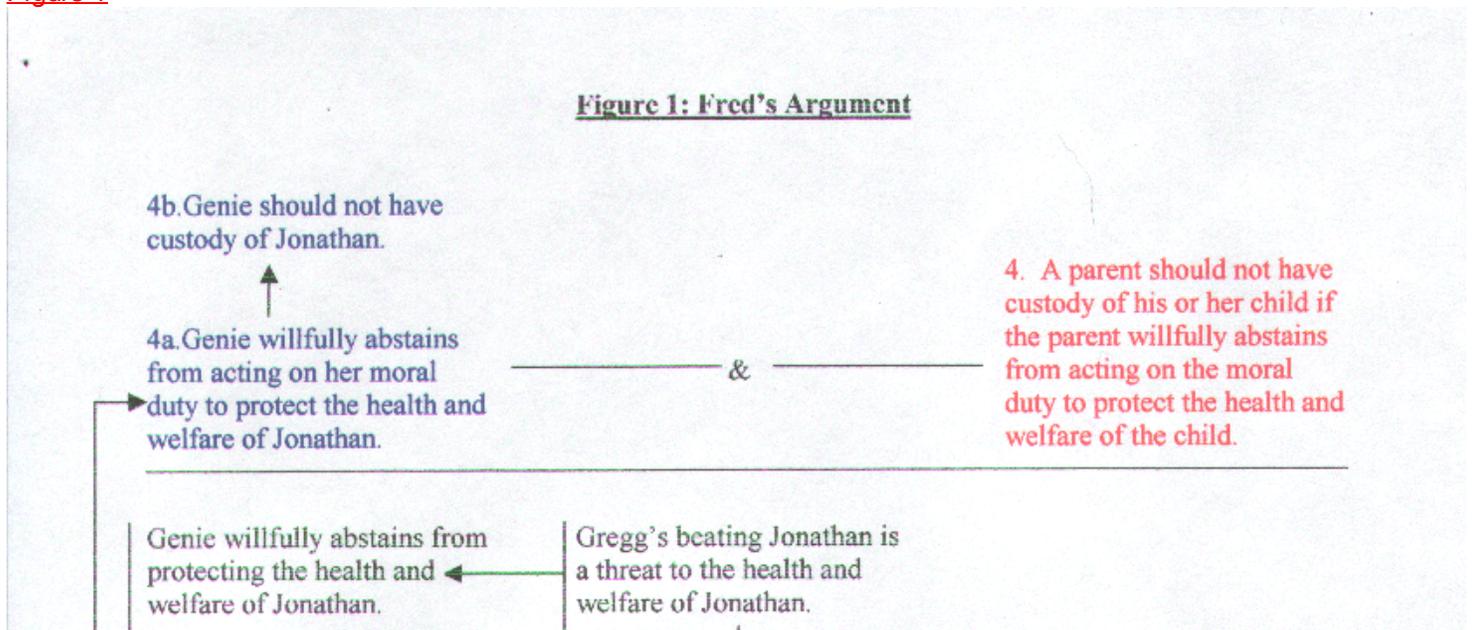
## 6. Conclusion

The P-D ideal of argument and the method of reconstruction which arises from this ideal invites questions regarding the underlying assumptions of the model. The P-D model has been considered herein as the product of specialized thought, embodying the perspective of the same historically dominant social group—male, white, and privileged—which has been the primary generator of Western philosophy for centuries. By incorporating unreflectively this select perspective when formulating a normative model, assumptions which implicitly exclude and devalue non-dominant perspectives may become part of the P-D model unintentionally.

An alternative model of argumentation is found in Gilbert's *Coalescent Argumentation* (1997), one which shows promise in terms of critical-emancipatory concerns. I only address Coalescence briefly here, and do so by pointing to certain aspects which appear conducive to emancipatory possibilities. Coalescent argumentation allows for different modes of "reasoning," such as emotional and intuitive modes, and promotes an eclecticism of argumentative communication strategies (Gilbert 1997 and 1994). Gilbert does not prioritize propositions nor the universalized premises in the analysis of argumentation, and emphasizes the particularity and contextualization of actual argument and participants. Such a wide-ranging view of legitimacy in argument practice, and the attention paid to the specificity of actual arguers, may constrain the effect of any single dominant normative view upon argument as a whole.

Gilbert's argumentation goal of "coalescence" itself may be especially promising. As developed above, the P-D goal of resolution requires that a standpoint is either accepted by both parties to a dispute, or rejected, and assumes a capitulation by one of the parties—either the protagonist must give up the standpoint he or she is advancing, or the antagonist must give up his or her objections and position against the standpoint advanced by the protagonist. Coalescence does not demand that either of the parties to a dispute give up their positions. Rather, the parties are to endeavor to understand each others' positions as fully as possible, and are encouraged to come up with a solution to the argument that incorporates common elements of both positions. Coalescent argumentation does not assume that positions are inherently expendable, but inherently valuable. Under a Coalescent view of argument, the emphasis on exploring and valuing different positions, instead of defending and defeating positions, may facilitate the advancement of understanding and equality between disparate arguers. The examination of Coalescent argumentation from a critical-emancipatory perspective, and the further analysis of the Pragma-dialectic model of argument, are subjects for future development.

Figure 1





*Logic*, XVI: 2: 95-113.

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