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Beth Innocenti

University of Kansas Main Campus

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Halting Retreats to Metadialogues

BETH INNOCENTI

Department of Communication Studies

University of Kansas

1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS, 66047

USA

bimanole@ku.edu

Abstract: How can social actors halt retreats to metadialogues that involve nit-picking or unwarranted charges, and why can they expect the strategies to work? Krabbe (2003) has proposed a dialectical regulation designed to forestall or halt retreats from ground-level discussions to metadialogues: paying the costs of the metadialogue. I argue that this dialectical regulation deserves to be taken seriously because it is realistic and encompasses a range of strategies that ordinary social actors take as reasonable.

Keywords: Dialectical theory, fallacies, generalizations, metadialogue, normative pragmatics, #NotAllMen, systemic sexism

1. Introduction

For years people have been designing messages to try to get other people to acknowledge and address systemic sexism in health care, criminal justice, and other areas. Systemic sexism creates worlds of hurt for many including Black and Indigenous women who experience disproportionately high rates of violence and death (e.g., Baker, 2019; finoh & Sankofa, 2019; Lorde, 2007; Martin, 2020; Tasker, 2019). Questions about how to address systemic problems are ripe for public discussion—for making arguments in the course of proposing, reporting, advising, advocating, exhorting, and more. But contributors to online and face-to-face communication about everyday, widespread experiences of sexism identify an ongoing problem in these discussions: interrupting or derailing discussions by qualifying that “not all men” act in ways that harm women (e.g., Hemmings, 2017; Lee, 2017; McKinney, 2014; Ryan, 2014; Shavisi, 2019; Wambui, 2014; Woolley, 2014). Using the qualifiers initiates a retreat to metadialogue—i.e., dialogue about dialogue—about whether to take “not all men” as a derailment and interruption of the ground-level discussion or as a legitimate correction of overgeneralizations or harmful stereotypes about men. These clashes provide an opportunity to see what strategies social actors use to halt retreats to metadialogue and why they can expect the strategies to work.

Questions about how to analyze and evaluate metadialogues in argumentation have been approached dialectically. One approach involves analyzing the metadialogue in terms of “strategic maneuvering”—topic potential, audience adaptation, and presentational devices—and evaluating it according to the rules for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009). By the measure of a critical discussion, the moves that can be made legitimately in a metadialogue are quite limited. Are the only reasonable options for getting addressees to halt retreats to metadialogue “suggesting” or “insisting” on readjustments or repairs, provided the suggesting and insisting do not violate dialectical rules for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009, pp. 204, 205)? On face, no. For example, although directives such as demanding that an interactant stop nit-picking or making unwarranted charges are “taboo in a critical discussion” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 64), social actors can and do coherently discuss whether demands are reasonable. Are there dialectical alternatives to folding metadialogues into a critical discussion frame?

Yes: Krabbe (2003) has suggested formulating separate rules for metadialogues. He has attempted to address the problem of how to regulate “retreats into metadialogue” in cases where “one is confronted with nit-picking or completely unwarranted charges” (Krabbe, 2003, p. 83). He has described it as an “equity problem,” or a problem of trying to “strike a balance” between “a right to contest the correctness of any ground level move” and having a “means of defense” against what on face appear to be unreasonable retreats into metadialogue (Krabbe, 2003, p. 83). He has formulated a rule for addressing the problem: the interactant “is to pay the costs of the metadialogue” or, put differently, be “punished with a fine” (Krabbe, 2003, p. 89) for committing a fallacy. I argue that this notion of paying a cost or fine deserves to be taken seriously (cf. van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009, p. 203) because it aligns with ordinary social actors’ communication theories or reflections on how strategies are designed to work, and is flexible enough to encompass a range of normative materials social actors bring to bear in interactions.

2. Methods

To support that claim I analyze an extended online post designed to halt retreats to metadialogues about using the qualifier “not all men.” Brenda Wambui (2014) titles her post “The problem with ‘not all men’ and why you should stop saying this.” Wambui is a self-described writer, podcaster, adventurer, and entrepreneur. She published her post on Medium, an online publishing platform, in 2014 when clash over how to take “not all men” “really began exploding” in the U.S. (Ryan, 2014). I selected this essay for analysis because it is exemplary among the many extended online objections to “not all men” for reasoning, comprehensiveness, and outrage. Wambui (2014) explicitly frames the discussion as a numbered list of “reasons” why people should stop saying “not all men”; discusses a range of reasons why saying “not all men” is a problem; and expresses outrage throughout and in concluding that people inclined to interrupt and derail a discussion of systemic sexism by saying “not all men” should “have a seat and pour yourself a nice, big cup of SHUT THE FUCK UP.” Neither “suggesting” nor “insisting” adequately captures what Wambui (2014) is doing. I submit that the message is designed to make it increasingly costly for addressees to continue derailing discussions of systemic sexism and to create reasons for addressees to hedge their bets and stop saying “not all men.”

I use the term “design” to focus critical attention on the actual strategies used in the message, and to see whether and to what extent the notion of paying a cost for derailing discussion explains how social actors can reasonably halt retreats to metadialogue. A design perspective holds that inherent to using communication strategies are lay understandings or hypotheses about how strategies work, and these understandings and hypotheses are theories (Aakhus, 2007; Craig, 1996; Jackson & Aakhus, 2014). By looking at communication strategies social actors use and their reflections on why they expect the strategies to work, we can see whether and to what extent their communication theories align with Krabbe’s (2003) notion that ground-level discussions can be regulated by interactants paying costs for nit-picking or unwarranted charges. The analysis proceeds by describing the “natural normativity” (Jackson, 2019) or responsibilities or obligations inherent to using strategies (e.g., Kauffeld, 1998; Kauffeld, 2001).

3. Analysis

In what follows I show that Wambui’s (2014) post is openly, deliberately designed to get addressees to stop saying “not all men” during online discussions of women subjected to “assault,

harassment and systemic oppression.” She uses strategies that make it increasingly costly for them to do so and that increase her own risk of paying a cost. As a result she creates reasons for addressees to hedge their bets and halt retreats to metadialogue.

Openly, deliberately intending to halt retreats to metadialogue by demanding

Wambui (2014) uses strategies designed to leave herself and addressees no room to plausibly deny her intent to get them to stop saying “not all men.” She titles the post “The problem with ‘not all men’ and why you should stop saying this” and closes it by writing, “have a seat and pour yourself a nice, big cup of SHUT THE FUCK UP.” What strategies does she use to get addressees to stop saying “not all men” and why does she expect them to work? Although she frames her post as a numbered list of “reasons” why she wants “2014 to be the year we kill this ridiculous statement,” and although she structures the post like a classical judicial oration (introduction, narration, proposition, proof, refutation, peroration), it reads less like a speech of accusation than a demand. Inherent to accusing is an intent to get the accused to respond to a charge (Kauffeld, 1998), but nothing in Wambui’s (2014) post indicates amenability to further discussion of any issue of fact, definition, or quality, or to ongoing metadialogue about “not all men.”

To make explicit the normativity inherent to demanding, consider reasons for acceding created just by uttering, “I demand that you stop saying ‘not all men,’” or, put differently, why somebody who demands that addressees stop saying “not all men” can reasonably expect just saying that to get them to stop. Inherent to demanding are claims to occupy the substantive and procedural high ground relative to addressees (Innocenti & Kathol, 2018). Other things being equal, demanding lacks persuasive force if addressees can with impunity dismiss the demand as substantively wrong—e.g., demanding addressees to act contrary to a moral code—or procedurally wrong—e.g., demanding instead of suggesting, insisting, requesting, proposing, and the like. The more vividly and conspicuously demanders can show that they occupy the substantive and procedural high ground relative to addressees—e.g., by using strategies such as blocking traffic on major streets or taking over campus buildings in order to get people with institutional power to engage in ground-level discussions of how cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women are investigated or lack of women’s health care services—the more they risk paying a cost for stepping out of bounds procedurally and substantively. So addressees can reason that demanders would not risk paying a cost unless they (demanders) could count on audiences seeing that they occupy the substantive and procedural high ground. Addressees now have a reason to hedge their bets and accede to the demand. At the same time demanding puts addressees at risk of paying a cost for continuing to enact what may now be seen as morally, ethically, procedurally questionable positions—e.g., for failing to discuss or stalling discussions of indifference in investigating cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women or lack of women’s health care services. So addressees can reason that to avoid paying the cost, they can accede to the demand. In short, demanding creates reasons for addressees to accede.

Wambui (2014) designs her post to make it increasingly costly for addressees to continue saying “not all men” and to forestall easy dismissal of her demand that they stop saying it. By doing so she creates reasons for addressees to hedge their bets and halt retreats to metadialogues about “not all men.” Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive analysis of Wambui’s (2014) post, I discuss two examples of a twofold strategy: enacting her understanding of how to reason about statistics and sketching experiences that bring into sharp relief that sexism is systemic.

Making it increasingly costly to continue retreating to metadialogue

The first reason Wambui (2014) presents for “why you should stop saying this” enacts her ability to reason about statistics and charges a penalty of resentment for addressees who continue to insult women’s intelligence by suggesting they do not understand the nature of generalizations: “Women are not stupid, of course we know that ‘not all men are rapists/sexual harassers’ or whatever. The statistics say so.” She then sketches widespread patterns of experiences of situations ripe for harassment and assault that show sexism is systemic:

How are we supposed to know who is saying hi in a friendly manner, or who actually needs directions, as opposed to just wanting to harass us? Most women end up assuming the worst because MOST times they have assumed the best, they have endured painful consequences. That stranger you once decided to stop and give directions ended up following you to your destination because he mistook your kindness for interest. That man you casually chatted with at the bar when you thought you were being nice ended up forcing himself on you, kissing you against your wishes. It is safer for us to learn that you are a “good man” when we are suspicious than to learn, rather painfully, that you are a bad man because we gave you the benefit of doubt.

Wambui’s (2014) strategies create a context where addressees risk paying a cost—resentment—if they continue to retreat to metadialogues by saying “not all men,” because saying so would be a fallible sign that they are ignoring or willfully blinding themselves to her enactment of reasoning about generalizations and to her sketching of widespread patterns of experiences. She makes that cost conspicuous by expressing sarcasm and outrage: “Yes, make a discussion that is about the plight of MILLIONS of women about poor little old you. I mean, millions of women are being assaulted and oppressed, but you’ve never done it, so why are we making you uncomfortable with these discussions.” In short, she displays a serious claim to occupy the substantive and procedural high ground relative to addressees who derail discussions of systemic sexism by qualifying “not all men” so creates a reason—avoiding further resentment—for halting retreats to metadialogues.

A second example of her twofold strategy is the fifth reason she presents. She enacts understanding of how to reason about statistics and uses contrast and repetition to bring systemic sexism into sharp focus:

Most women AND men are raped by men. The rape statistics in Kenya are shocking. The fact that you have never hit a woman does not negate the fact that most violence against women is gender based, and is perpetrated by men. The fact that you have never raped a woman (or man) does not negate the fact that most rapists are male. The fact that you know women who are educated does not erase the fact that more women than men are uneducated by design. The fact that you know women who earn more than you does not negate the fact that women still earn less than men for the same work. This is the reality. THIS IS NOT ABOUT YOU.

Again, Wambui (2014) creates a context where addressees increasingly risk paying a cost of resentment if they continue to say “not all men.” She makes the cost clear by shouting in all-caps that the discussion is not about individuals. Both examples indicate Wambui’s (2014)

communication design theory, or why she reasonably expects her strategies to work. The strategies create a reason for addressees to stop saying “not all men”: avoiding paying a cost for the metadialogue, namely resentment for insulting women’s intelligence and for promulgating a narrow, self-centered perspective in the face of systemic problems.

Creating reasons to hedge a bet against retreats to metadialogue

Other things being equal, risks to addressees of paying a cost disappear if Wambui (2014) fails to make good on claims to occupy the substantive and procedural high ground—if, for example, she errs in how she reasons about statistics or crosses a line in how she expresses outrage. Wambui (2014) steps outside the bounds of conventional, conversational norms including using politeness and face-saving strategies. In addition to using all-caps and cussing, Wambui (2014) expresses contempt—e.g., “We are talking about structural issues: patriarchal society, institutions and systems. You are the one who takes it upon yourself to make this personal with your ‘not all men’ slogan.” She uses biting sarcasm—e.g., “When you INTERRUPT a discussion on misogyny/rape culture/sexism to let us know that you are not like these men, you SILENCE the women and men having these discussions, and DERAIL the conversation from its initial purpose to illuminate the plight of women, to dealing with you and your supersedingly important feelings.” She expresses outrage—e.g., “Is it that you want us to acknowledge (and quite possibly commend) the fact that you have never assaulted a woman? As my friend @NonieMG once asked, do you want us to give you a cookie for being ‘a good man’? Pause for a second and think about how MESSED UP that is.” She describes saying “not all men” as “a douche move.”

The more Wambui (2014) uses these strategies to display resentment, outrage, contempt, and more, the more she risks a paying a cost of resentment for crossing a line. That vivid, conspicuous willingness to risk resentment creates a reason for addressees inclined to continue saying “not all men” to stop saying it. Addressees can reason that Wambui (2014) would not risk paying a cost of resentment unless she were confident that her claim to occupy the moral and procedural high ground would hold up under public scrutiny. This is a reason for addressees to hedge their bets and refrain from saying “not all men.”

4. Conclusion

Wambui’s (2014) post did not end the derailments. Indeed, metadialogue about saying “not all men” is ongoing on Twitter and internationally (e.g., Bateman, 2018; Hemmings, 2017; Shavisi, 2019). An episode of “The Twilight Zone” even addressed it (Robinson, 2019). Still, Wambui’s (2014) post and others like it are designed to create a context for discussing systemic sexism without retreats to metadialogue. Of course having reasons to do something or not does not guarantee addressees will act. But Wambui (2014) creates a context where addressees incur some costs of retreating to metadialogues by saying “not all men”: if Wambui’s (2014) position withstands public scrutiny, she and others can curse and shout at addressees who continue to use the qualifier “not all men” with impunity.

The analysis shows that Krabbe’s (2003) notion of paying the costs of a metadialogue deserves to be taken seriously. The notion of paying a cost in order to regulate interaction aligns with ordinary social actors’ communication theories. Consequently, the analysis belies the assertion that the notion of a paying a cost does not solve the problem of unreasonably holding up ground-level discussion “in any theoretically motivated way” (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009,

p. 203). The notion of paying costs is theoretical because it is based on lay theories about how strategies work. The theorizing is not deductive, or based on an ideal model, and as a result avoids problems of analyzing and evaluating argumentation and public deliberation against an ideal model; these problems have been rehearsed by both argumentation and public deliberation theorists (e.g., Jacobs, 2000; Mansbridge et al., 2006).

Nonetheless, philosophical theorizing supporting the notion of paying a cost is at hand. Grice's (1957, 1969) account of what it means to seriously say and mean something in terms of reflexive speaker intentions and Stampe's (1967) account of Grice's *i*₄—why openly, deliberately getting addressees to recognize the speaker's intention to get them to respond in particular way, to get them to recognize that intention, and to get them to recognize the intention to recognize the intention provides some reason for addressees to respond as the speaker intends—undergird Kauffeld's (e.g., 1998, 2001) work in argumentation and have been shown to align with lay theorizing about strategies including appealing to dignity authority (Goodwin, 2001) and exhorting (Kauffeld & Innocenti, 2018). This theorizing has been described as “normative pragmatics” because it accounts for the persuasiveness of strategies in normative terms: strategies are effective because they are ethical (Goodwin, 2018; Manolescu, 2005).

Krabbe's (2003) notion of paying a cost provides a way for argumentation theorists to talk about questionable tactics in a way that avoids what Boudry et al. (2015) have described as the “fallacy fork,” or the difficulty of finding textbook fallacies in real life and the diminishing heuristic value of “fallacy” if definitions of fallacies are sufficiently watered down so they can be found in real life. As Boudry et al. (2015) note, pinning down flaws is complicated when “much is left to interpretation and multiple exit strategies remain open to the offender” (p. 450). Instead of continuing to aspire to a coherent theory of fallacy, researchers can attend to how actual social actors regulate their interactions. Boudry et al.'s (2015) position is compatible with Jacobs and Jackson's (2006) view that the use of any tactic must be understood in a broader context because what may seem like a textbook fallacy may in fact be reasonable. For example, although at first glance making a threat is contrary to norms of argumentation, threat of a penalty discourages perjury so creates conditions for better discussion as interactants will tell the truth as best they can (Jacobs & Jackson, 2006). As the analysis of Wambui's (2014) post indicates, demanding and expressing outrage and resentment can be reasonable moves designed to halt retreats to metadialogue.

Krabbe (2003) does not claim to have addressed all problems associated with metadialogues. Indeed, in this case an equity problem remains. Even if Wambui (2014) and others finally “win” the metadialogue and get people to stop saying “not all men,” they still pay some portion of the metadialogue cost because the ground-level discussion is nonetheless stalled. Further, Wambui (2014) incurs risks of paying costs and, as discussions are ongoing, may be made to pay costs. But the equity problem is not solvable with dialectical theorizing. After all, where are the rules, procedures, or practices that have solved the equity problem once and for all? A benefit of Krabbe's (2003) notion of paying a cost is that it encompasses a broad range of strategies that social actors can use to try to regulate their interactions and manage disagreement. In this case the analysis has focused on regulating discussion by penalizing bad moves—by using “sticks”—but it is also possible for social actors to regulate by rewarding good moves—by using “carrots” that create affordances for displaying open-mindedness, kindness, empathy, or other qualities of “good citizenship” in the circumstances (Goodwin, 2002, p. 93; Innocenti & Miller, 2016, p. 379). Investigating how actual social actors bring to bear dialectical ideals to regulate interaction can show ways of locally achieving a measure of equity.

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