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Commentary on: Olena Yaskorska’s “Speech acts, fallacies and dialogue systems”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In “Speech acts, fallacies and dialogue systems”, Olena Yaskorska presents the guidelines of a model of dialogical logic aimed at grappling with both formal and informal fallacies. This model results from the integration of two traditions within formal approaches to dialogue models: on the one hand, Lorenzen's dialogical logic, and on the other, Prakken’s formal systems for persuasion dialogue. The aim of Yaskorska’s project is to provide a formal framework for analyzing real moves within argumentative dialogues, which is something that, in her view, Prakken’s model is able to do, while preserving participant’s ability to assess the justificatory force of their arguments, which is something that, in her view Lorenzen’s model is able to do.

My main worry about Yaskorska’s project is precisely the latter claim, namely, that Lorenzen’s model is adequate to determine the justificatory force of arguments. I will present two qualms: a general one having to do, mainly, with Lorenzen’s achievements, and a particular one concerning Yaskorska’s actual proposal.

2. A GENERAL CONCERN

Yaskorska agrees with van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) that an adequate model of argumentative dialogue must be able to deal with the way in which, in actual exchanges, the antagonist may challenge not only the premises that the protagonist has used, but also their justificatory force. Indeed, Pragma-dialectics’s rule 6b, says that the antagonist may always attack a point of view by questioning either the propositional content or the justificatory force of the protagonist’s argument.

As Yaskorska observes, by itself, this rule does not say anything about the way in which such a challenge is to be handled. In her words:

The pragma-dialectical system requires that the protagonist uses rules of some logic to defend his reasoning, but it does not provide a formal account of dialogues (Yaskorska, 2013: nn)
However, as a criticism against Pragma-dialectics, this observation results a bit hasty and paradoxical at the same time: as it is well-known, Pragma-dialectics adopted precisely Lorenzen’s dialogical logic – and in particular, its development by Barth & Krabbe (1982) – as a framework for determining the logical validity of the arguments employed by any of the parties.

For my part, I have doubts on whether Lorenzen’s model is a good instrument for testing the validity of everyday arguments, that is, arguments in which ordinary connectives have the usual truth-functional interpretation that allows monological assessments, instead of the constructivist interpretation that Lorenzen proposes. I will not get into this issue here, but just point out that, if this is a problem for Pragma-dialectics, it is also a problem for Yaskorska’s overall project.

On the other hand, checking validity as conceived by classical logic is not the same as checking justificatory force. Actually, it is not the same as checking inferential goodness. For the truth is that non-deductive and non-formal inferences, which, at first sight, seem to be predominant in everyday argumentation, get very poor assessments within classical models. And in this respect, Pragma-dialectics would be better equipped to assess the justificatory force of the reasons adduced by any of the parties in an argumentative dialogue. After all, Pragma-dialectics states both a validity rule and an argument scheme rule prescribing that:

1) Validity rule
A party may only use arguments in its argumentation that are logically valid or capable of being made logically valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises.

2) Argument scheme rule
A party may not regard a standpoint as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).

That is, regarding the assessment of the justificatory force of reasons constituting different types of defeasible inferences, Lorenzen’s logic has nothing on offer, apart from the trivial strategy of turning the corresponding arguments into enthymemes. Contrastingly, Pragma-dialectics has the resource of considering whether or not an adequate argument schema has been correctly applied. Thus, it seems that Pragma-dialectics would have already achieved that which seems to be the main goal of Yaskorska’s project, namely, to provide a model for the assessment of everyday argumentative exchanges, able to integrate the conception of logical validity that underlies Lorenzen’s proposal – i.e., a conception according to which classical logical calculus (or something close to it) results from the rules that determine the type of moves that a proponent and an opponent in a dialogue may make, while dealing with other types of justificatory force that premises are able to confer to standpoints, namely, the justificatory force that results from the correct utilization of adequate argument schemas. And Pragma-dialectics would do this in the framework of a speech-act conception of argumentation. So, where would the gain in Yaskorska’s project respecting Pragma-dialectics?
I guess that a response could be: Yaskorska’s model is fully formal, something tractable in a highly systematic way. On the contrary, there is no computable model for Pragma-dialectics. But, is this a real gain? After all, we cannot deal in a purely recursive way with actual speech-acts. Interpreting and analyzing actual speech-acts and argumentative moves in terms of the elements of a particular formal model does not seem straightforward or systematic either. For even if we think of argumentative speech-acts in terms of the conditions and consequences of making certain moves in a dialogue, which is Prakken’s conception of argumentative speech-acts and also Yaskorska’s, the question of determining whether a particular move is answerable to this or that norm –that is, the question of determining which type of speech-act has taken place- is a matter of heuristics and interpretation. (Not to mention the question of dealing with non-literal and indirect speech-acts and all its rhetorical implications for the adjudication of a persuasive dialogue).

But this is too broad a criticism for my part; so broad indeed as to suspect that there is some talking past each other going on here. So let me consider now a very, very particular worry.

3. YASKORSKA’S ACTUAL PROPOSAL

Of course, Yaskorska’s presentation here is only a sketch of her overall project, and many details of her actual proposal remain to be explained. For example, we may wonder how is relevance and consistency of particular moves to be assessed: is it at the level of the rules for dialogues themselves –so that, for example, it is not permitted to claim the opposite of something which is already in your own commitment store or something that is not already in one of the parties’ commitment store- or at the level of parties themselves –so that, for example, there is a resolve move that prescribes, for each party, solving its own inconsistencies or withdrawing irrelevancies. Also, we may wonder whether the rules are sensible to presumptions and burden of proofs, and which are the norms determining how turns must switch.

These are details that remain to be clarified, but I see no reason why they couldn’t. Yet, a main problem remains in this presentation. Because Lorenzen interprets disjunction, that is, “alternative” AvB as a move to be attacked by questioning whether AvB and to be defended by putting forward A or by putting forward B, Yaskorska constructs the speech act of argumentation for a disjunction in Prakken’s model this way:

(L3) Argumentation φ since ψ is performed when a player defends AvB, then φ is a formula AvB and ψ is a set which includes the formula A or the formula B.
(Yaskorska, 2013: p. 5)

Thus, in her account, defending a disjunction from an attack “why φ”, where φ is a sentence AvB is modelled by argumentative act “φ since ψ”, where φ is a disjunction and ψ is a sentence A or sentence B.

However, this way of modelling the defence of a disjunctive formula does seem too demanding: it might be the case that the proponent is not in a position to
defend any of the disjuncts but only the disjunction as a whole. Think for example of cases in which the disjunction is a tautology: we may be unable to defend that it will rain or to defend that it will not rain, but we may be able to defend that it will either rain or not rain.

4. CONCLUSION

Yaskorska’s paper is the presentation of an ambitious and innovative project. Due to obvious limitations of space, this presentation can only be a sketch, so that many questions remain to be clarified. Nevertheless, her presentation enables us to understand the sort of concerns that she aims to address. In this comments, I have just tried to suggest that Lorenzen’s model might not be a good basis for this endeavour.

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