

Arguers as Strategists: Are We Really Integrating Rhetorical Insights?

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Abstract: The *extended pragma-dialectical theory* accounts for the social fact that fallacies “populate” our reality by explaining them as dialectically defective attempts (“derailed strategic maneuvers”) at maintaining both an appearance of reasonableness and deciding a difference of opinion in one’s favor. To this end, rhetorical insights are claimed to be integrated into the standard theory. This requires the notion of an *argumentative activity type* (i.e., a – yet to be fully developed – typology of pragmatic contexts) and allows for an analytical distinction that separates permissible from impermissible forms of (i) *topical choice*, (ii) *audience adaptation*, (iii) and *presentational devices*. Systematic differences in (i-iii) serve to explicate *specifications* of the standard theory’s normative content as a function of contexts in which argumentative acts arise. Consequently, the set of critical questions associated with an argument scheme becomes adaptable to contexts. The extended theory thus secures the normative content of the standard theory, while offering an explanation(-sketch) for the ubiquity of unreasonable argumentative moves. This constitutes a gain in *explanatory power* of the pragma dialectical research program. Since its normative content is *not* undermined by this extension, I discuss whether rhetorical insights are *integrated* or rather appropriated. Finally, while the assumption that arguers “play strategies” does serve to explain the occurrence of fallacies, or so I argue, it is rather unclear if this assumption holds true.

[P]ragma-dialecticians (...) are not interested in persuasiveness just like that,
but in rhetorical effectiveness *within the boundaries of reasonableness*.

van Eemeren (2010: 269; *italics added*)

1. Introduction

The extended pragma-dialectical theory accounts for the social fact that fallacies “populate” our reality by explaining them as dialectically defective attempts (“derailed strategic maneuvers”) at maintaining both an appearance of reasonableness and deciding a difference of opinion in one’s favor.

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(ii) audience adaptation, (iii) and presentational devices. Systematic differences in (i-iii) then serve to explicate specifications of the standard theory's normative content as a function of contexts in which argumentative acts arise. Consequently, the set of critical questions associated with an argument scheme becomes adaptable to contexts.

Starting with a very brief overview of the *standard theory* (Section 2), the following offers a motivation for developing the pragma-dialectical research program into the *extended theory* (Section 3) and summarizes the explanation(-sketch) for the occurrence of fallacies (Section 4). Pointing to the primacy of the dialectical over the rhetorical perspective (Section 5), I next present the idea of context dependent specifications of the program's (normative) core against the background of Lakatos' (1978) methodology of scientific research programs (Section 6). Finally, the assumption that arguers execute strategies is briefly, and inconclusively, discussed (Section 7).

2. The Standard Theory

Known as the *standard theory*, the pragma-dialectical model (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) consists of 15 technical (or 10 "popular") norms for a critical discussion. These norms are distributed over four stages: confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding stage. Taken together, the norms are said to *contribute* to the rational resolution of a difference of opinion on the merits in the following sense: A violation of any rule in any stage constitutes a hindrance to a *rational* resolution.

Insofar as the 15 codify norms governing a *critical* discussion (as opposed to, e.g., an *entertaining* discussion), flouting any norm in any stage results in *unreasonable* behavior. Conversely, obeying them will not guarantee, but may make reaching a merit-based resolution more likely than not obeying them. To the extent that their content is plausible as a normative codification of reasonable argumentative behavior, then, the pragma-dialectical model spells out *necessary* conditions of reasonableness.

Here, the requisite sense of 'necessary' is indispensable for fallacy detection. After all, on the understanding that the traditional fallacies are being recovered (from a "monological tradition") in an interactional or language-pragmatic setting, each rule-violation *is* a fallacy. In this sense, the model is *pragmatic*.

Importantly, the model avoids prescribing the content of reasonable argumentative interchange. It exclusively governs interaction in a procedural way, spelling out *impermissible* moves. In some norms, this occurs by conditionalizing on antecedent behavior of interlocutors, e.g., only standpoints forwarded by a party must be supported through argumentation by that party, and only these same standpoints may be attacked by the other party. In this sense, the model is *dialectic*.

Otherwise, what counts as a *successful* defense or attack, or who is to support her position *first*, in case both interlocutors have forwarded standpoints (so-called mixed difference of opinion), is left exclusively to participant agreement. In this sense, the model is *consensualistic*.

A special case is provided by the allocation of the burden of proof in a non-mixed difference of opinion (i.e., when only one party forwards a standpoint while the other merely casts doubt upon that standpoint). In this case, whoever forwards a standpoint must defend it. Hence, there are no basic propositions which could *never* require a defense. In this sense, the model is *egalitarian* (see Rescorla 2009).

Neglecting other important aspects (e.g., the reconstruction of natural language arguments), it is fair to say that the 15 norms provide the *normative gist* of the pragma-dialectical model. In other words, the particular pragma-dialectical conception of *argumentative reasonableness* is contained therein. Consequently, linguistic behavior which does not constitute a norm violation counts as argumentatively not unreasonable.

3. Why Develop an Extended Theory?

Recent endeavors by the Amsterdam school to integrate *rhetorical insights* into the above dialectical conception of argumentative reasonableness have resulted in the so-called *extended pragma-dialectical theory*. Here, ‘rhetorical insights’ denotes, in the widest sense, codified knowledge of the means by which the assent of interlocutors (or audiences) to standpoints can be achieved/effected. Rather than, for example, orient oneself to contemporary empirical social psychological results on the conditions under which assent is effected, historical sources (and those reflecting on that history) are used. To my understanding, this ultimately occurs to get “on eye level” with those who – e.g., for the purposes of *political* discourse – have received “rhetorical training.” I return to this aspect below.

Analytically, three aspects of persuasive speech are distinguished: topical potential, audience adaptation, presentational devices – aspects which, it is stressed, always “go together” in real life. Arguers, or so is the assumption, make choices within these three areas; some choices will be impermissible in some contexts, but not in others. Presently, ‘context’ stands in for the more specific term ‘activity type’. See van Eemeren (2010: 165, n.1; 203-207), making clear that a *typology* of activity types has not been developed yet.

This development of the pragma-dialectical research program deserves some explanation. After all, why not leave it at the above model? Clearly, one problem besetting the pragma-dialectical model is its *being removed from social reality*. In particular, no assumption is made that there ever has been, or there ever will be a single discussion that does not happen to violated one or the other of the above norm. Hence, the model is often called an *ideal model*.

As a glimpse upon argumentative reality confirms, fallacies are ubiquitous (if perhaps inconspicuous). If so, then a theory of argumentation might be required to offer some explanation *why* this is so. After all, it is one thing to theoretically capture fallacies (here: as violations of norms of dialectical reasonableness); it is another to *motivate* their occurrence. In particular, it may require explanation that – *despite* being “surrounded” by unreasonable discussion moves – empirical studies show that non-trained(!) subjects do, when asked, by and large *agree* to the normative content of the pragma-dialectical model (van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels 2009).

To my understanding, the “integration of rhetorical insights” primarily serves to increase the explanatory power of the theory. In fact, the standard version of the pragma-dialectics offered *no explanation* for the occurrence of fallacies.

4. Fallacies as Derailed Strategic Maneuvers

The explanation sketch now devised is roughly as follows: A basic assumption is that arguers maintain at least two goals: (i) appearing reasonable in front of an audience or interlocutor (*dialectical goal*), and (ii) resolving a difference of opinion in one’s favor (*rhetorical goal*). Furthermore, these goals are assumed to be potentially in conflict. Therefore, arguers seek to *balance* these goals. Such balancing acts are understood as instances of *strategic maneuvering*.

Consequently, there are two cases to consider: (i) Pursuing the rhetorical goal (gaining assent) may occur *at the expense of* pursuing the dialectical goal (appearing reasonable). In such cases, interlocutors are said to “derail” into fallacious behavior. This is the case when they violate one or more of the above norms. This remains exactly as laid out in the standard theory.

On the other hand, (ii) interlocutors may pursue the dialectical goal *at the expense of* the rhetorical goal. Here, rather than acting fallaciously, one forgoes opportunities at persuading one’s interlocutors (one’s audience); one fails to execute moves which remain within the bounds set by the dialectical conception of reasonableness. The first case is of immediate interest for generating a principled explanation for the occurrence of fallacies. I return to this in a moment.

First, note that the entire goal-conflict situation collapses, if we imagine an arguer who understands her rhetorical goal to be *nothing but* her dialectical goal. This may appear unrealistic, but seems not to be impossible. In other words, she does not aim at her audience assenting to *anything but* the result of a reasonably conducted discussion. This means that she must be willing to give up any concession she may have incurred in the course of a discussion. Assume further that she accepts the pragma-dialectical rules as necessary conditions of dialectical reasonableness.

Unrealistic or not, this case shows that the challenge of explaining fallacious argumentative moves does not arise, unless we assume that interlocutors enter an argumentative situation with concessions they dis-prefer to retract. Put differently, if I am goal-wise flexible enough to let you “move” me by your reasons (and *vice versa*), we should not expect that any of my (or your) fallacious moves are motivated by wanting to “win.” So, we will not have to explain them as goal-motivated effects, but could try to resort to a theory of cognitive (rather than strategic) error or a theory of emotions.

At any rate, the idea of strategic maneuvering makes sense *only if* we assume that interlocutors are, in a strong sense, *bound* to “having it their way,” rather than “the better way.” Here, ‘better way’ captures no more (and no less) than the idea that some attempts at supporting a standpoint are *substantially* better than others.

5. The Primacy of the Dialectical over the Rhetorical Perspective

As indicated above, the concept of strategic maneuvering is “directed at diminishing the potential tension between *jointly* pursuing the ‘dialectical’ aim of reasonableness

and the ‘rhetorical’ aim of effectiveness” (van Eemeren 2009b: 82; *italics added*). This tension is sought to be diminished in only one of two possible directions.

Provided the above rough outline of strategic maneuvering, it would in principle be possible to diminish the tension by a modification “in the opposite direction.” Rather than leave the normative content as it is explicated in the standard theory – and then seek to *explain* social reality by acknowledging “context-dependent precisizations of the context independent general soundness criteria” (van Eemeren 2010: 204) –, one could *embrace* social reality (with all its argumentative flaws, as these appear *vis à vis* the theory’s normative content).

This embrace, in turn, would open the possibility of understanding the pragma-dialectical conception of reasonableness as just another, and perhaps a culture-bound explication of (procedural, but nevertheless) contextual soundness criteria, namely those criteria which are operative in the context of a critical discussion according to the standards of a critical rationalist philosophy enriched – or, depending on the viewpoint, *degraded* – by consensual elements.

Now, this precisely not what happens. The extended theory aims at integrating rhetorical insights *into* a dialectical conception of reasonableness, rather than *open up* the dialectical to the rhetorical (to see what “monster” results), let alone *subordinate* the dialectical to the rhetorical (to end in what some may fear is similar to relativism).

It therefore seems fair to say that ‘integration of rhetorical insights’ is perhaps a slight misnomer (whatever these insights amount to for the analysis of particular cases; much seems to depend on a case, and perhaps the analysts’ intellectual abilities.) It appears (to me) more appropriate to speak of an *appropriation* of rhetorical insights for a particular purpose, namely to explain the occurrence of fallacies in argumentative discourse. After all, the norms do remain the same.

6. The Role of Normative Content

According to Lakatos’ (1978) philosophy of science, the normative content of the pragma-dialectical norms would be analyzed as the core of the research program. According to Lakatos, research programs receive their identity through a core. Change a core, and you *change* the program (rather than *develop* one program). How can research programs develop to begin with?

Following Lakatos, the core of a program is surrounded by a *protective belt* of auxiliary assumptions. These assumptions can be modified to apply the theory to new phenomena. Something similar currently happens in pragma-dialectics. A crucial difference is that the core consists of *normative* sentences, rather than descriptive ones as, for example, in the case of a physical theory such as Newtonian mechanics.

The core of a research program (containing, e.g., $F = ma$ in Newtonian mechanics) will *not yet* describe the empirical world. Only in combination with assumptions about the empirical world does the theory gain empirical content and, thus, predictive power, i.e., it can *explain* phenomena (within acceptable margins of error.)

On this background, the assumption that arguers may be treated as actors who execute strategies aimed at maintaining two optima (the dialectical and the rhetorical one) appears to be such an auxiliary hypothesis, i.e., an assumption which is part of the protective belt. Note that the strategy-assumption can, in principle be given up without affecting the core. This is the very point of having a protective belt. It deflects what Popper would have called ‘falsification instances’ from the core.

Without such an assumption, the normative core of the pragma-dialectical theory is unable to describe (and therefore unable to explain) actual discourse, just as the core of Newtonian mechanics is unable to describe, say, the solar system, unless one assumes *application specific* force laws, such as Newton’s gravitation law, $F = G Mm / r^2$. So, that the total force of a system (F) is proportional to the gravitational constant (G), the product of two masses (M and m) and the square of their distance (r) is a specification of the general equation $F = ma$ (merely saying that the total force is *some* product of *mass* and *acceleration*).

Application specific force laws may be understood as *specifications* of the theory core in much the same way that pragma-dialecticians seek to give “context-dependent *precizations* of the context independent general soundness criteria” (van Eemeren 2010: 204; italics added). Consider that, in some applications of mechanics, certain forces are negligible. For example, it is a basic assumption that each force is “balanced” by a reciprocal force (*actio reactio* principle, aka. Newton’s second law).

In certain applications, however, e.g. when calculating the trajectory of a bullet, one *need not* calculate the reciprocal force to obtain a result which is accurate

enough, given present standards of measurement. So, for some applications (and for practical purposes), one may “forget about” the reciprocal force. In other applications, one may have to include correction factors, the values of which are determined empirically (through measurement) rather than on theoretical grounds (e.g., when calculating the volume of fluids passing through a system).

On this analogy, it becomes perhaps more understandable why the “implementation of general soundness criteria for strategic maneuvering is, in principle, context dependent” (van Eemeren 2010: 204). As is made clear in the footnote appended to this quote, “[w]ho or what counts as an authority, for instance, will be different in a scientific debate than in a political interview” (*ibid.*). How does this affect the theory?

Descriptively, in both the political and the scientific context, arguments from expert opinion can be observed. Normatively, in both contexts, the pragma-dialectical rules *should* apply to the very same discourse. To achieve this, the critical questions associated with an argument schema are *adapted* to the specific context in which the schema is used. In this sense, the *same* norm applies in different contexts (here: the argument-scheme rule), but does so in various specifications (“precizations”).

Finally, to account for the fact that *explicit* agreement on which specification of some rule applies in a given context can often enough *not* be empirically validated (because there simply is no explicit agreement between discussant), one assumes that “the agreements concerned are not so much made between the parties but are already given when the parties engage in a particular communicative activity type” (van Eemeren 2010: 206). So, contexts are assumed to *govern* permissible strategic moves. Consequently, the occurrence of a fallacy (i.e., an impermissible maneuver) in context C1 may be explained by pointing to context C2 in which a *similar* move is permissible. Hence, each fallacious move may be understood as the “evil cousin” of a permissible move.

7. Arguers as Strategists

The background from Lakatos may help to understand the main idea behind the recent development of the program. Through the above discussed assumptions, the pragma-dialectical theory is developed towards *explaining* the ubiquity of fallacies in argumentative discourse. Without the strategy assumption, the standard pragma-

dialectical theory cannot explain the occurrence of fallacies. It can only identify them.

Now, unless there were an explicit restriction to *institutional* forms of argumentation – which, so far, is not made – one thus frames *both* lay and expert arguers as agents pursuing strategies. In the following, I discuss this assumption. I point out that it seems (to me) to make sense primarily in institutionalized contexts and for, in some sense, *trained* actors.

How plausible is it to assume that arguers, including lay arguers (i.e., those not so trained), implement strategies? Would an interpersonal discussion (personal context), say with my spouse, involve strategic acts? It is not clear to me that this is meaningful without allowing a *very wide sense* of strategy. Moreover, one may ask how one could provide evidence for the claim that strategy is involved? Here, I understand ‘strategy’ in the standard sense of a means employed to achieve a goal.

If fallacies shall be explained as the derailment of strategies aimed at persuading an audience, then is it *permissible* to postulate strategies without providing evidence for the claim that a strategy is at play? Presumably not, for one runs the risk of reconstructing a strategy where no strategy is played. Let’s call this the *construction-risk*.

Could one in principle provide evidence for the claim that a strategy is at play? If so, could this evidence be independent of textual evidence? Presumably yes. Such evidence could consist of the *truthful* claim of an arguer by which she admits to playing a strategy. Yet, in case *this* evidence is available, would there be a point in analyzing the textual material? Presumably not. We could just as well work with the speaker’s truthful claim. And in case no such evidence is available, we face the construction risk.

The dilemma, then, is: Unless independent evidence is available which supports the strategy claim, the extended theory might *falsely* postulate strategic language use. Once independent evidence is available, however, there is little need to explain the occurrence of fallacious language use by means of the pragma-dialectical theory.

Finally, consider that not only lay arguers may *not* be playing strategies, but even institutional arguers might *not* do so. This could be for the simple reason that they lack the requisite training which could allow them to act strategically to begin with.

It seems prudent to treat the strategy claim with great caution. The construction risk may seem bearable compared to the gain of explaining the occurrence of fallacious language use. However, it creates the problem of having to frame lay and expert (or institutional) arguers alike *as something they may not be at all*.

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