

Book Review

CONSIDERING PRAGMA-DIALECTICS: A FESTSCHRIFT FOR FRANS H. VAN EEMERON ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY

BY PETER HOUTLOSSER AND AGNÈS VAN REES (EDS.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. 332pp. ISBN: 0-8058-6026-6. Price: US\$34.50

This well-deserved *Festschrift* for Frans van Eemeren was presented to him, as a big surprise, at the ISSA Conference in Amsterdam in June 2006. Not much happens in argumentation scholarship that he does not see coming, certainly not in Amsterdam, but this did. Twenty-six contributions make it a varied and heterogeneous assemblage, in subject, approach, and merit.

One group of papers has the commendable goal of making us wiser on topics related to pragma-dialectics, rather than engage in application, debate or critique.

Erik Krabbe, whose *From Axiom to Dialogue* (with Else Barth, 1982) was an important inspiration for pragma-dialectics, instructively traces the notion of the “logical dialogue game” from Aristotle’s *Topics* to the Erlangen school. This background helps understand a fascination that may have caused van Eemeren and Grootendorst to cast their seminal ideas in the form of an axiomatic system.

Daniel O’Keefe commends pragma-dialectics for its contribution to an understanding of argument quality, grounded not in empirical effect but in reasoned theory. Such an understanding makes it possible to look for correlations between theoretical quality and persuasive effects. Looking at three features derivable from the pragma-dialectical rules, O’Keefe, using meta-statistical analysis, does find positive correlations.

Hans V. Hansen identifies important similarities between pragma-dialectical theory and Stuart Mill’s thinking on argumentation. They concern those aspects of the theory that many would probably agree are the most valuable theoretically as well as socially: freedom of discussion, critical testing as the essence of reasonableness, the utility of normative rules.

The contribution from Eddo Rigotti *et al.* analyzes a large text sample of authentic texts drawn from the British National Corpus to investigate the semantics of the word *reasonable*, so crucial to modern argumentation theory; interesting submeanings emerge.

Manfred Kienpointner stays in the descriptive mode in his analysis of a sample of the notorious “Nigerian spam letters.”

László Komlósi calls for more integration of linguistic pragmatics and argumentation theory, which would be good idea. His piece mentions almost every important concept in both fields, gives no examples of anything, specifies no relationship with pragma-dialectics and remains almost completely opaque.

Several papers try to engage in actual application of pragma-dialectical theory, but much of this alleged application remains a token tipping of hats. Thomas Goodnight instructively exposes the complexities of “informed consent” in the doctor-patient relationship, seen as a deliberative process, but his attempt to relate

that process to the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion (with the “opening stage” tacitly left out) is purely nominal, adding no substance to the analysis.

The same goes for a contribution by Dale Brashers *et al.* on a related subject: patient self-advocacy vis-à-vis doctors. The writers document their expertise, but the claim that pragma-dialectics “provides a starting point” for a normative judging of moves in patient self-advocacy remains an empty gesture.

James Freeman argues that a model of argumentation and argument evaluation representing the tenets of Informal Logic can be integrated in the pragma-dialectical framework, whose approach to argumentation as a regulated dialectical procedure he deems profitable. While he may be right in seeing the strongest side of pragma-dialectics here, his blanket defense of it against criticisms is bland. Against the objection by Biro and Siegel that pragma-dialectics lacks explicit epistemic criteria for dispute resolution he replies merely that this is no problem because a given set of epistemic criteria would be compatible with it and might be introduced to fill in the blanks. But that sidesteps the criticism that the blanks *are* a shortcoming and should have been filled in by pragma-dialectics itself.

Trudy Govier makes a good case for a constructed interlocutor in the production of argument, but will hardly convince many that the four-stage model of pragma-dialectics is helpful in this, let alone necessary, any more than, e.g., the Toulmin model might have been. For example, she derives the idea of addressing a single envisaged critic from the “opening stage.” But looking there for that idea is as unnecessary and speculative as the whole “opening stage” itself; already the barrister Antonius in Cicero’s *De oratore* (2.102) describes how he helps his client develop his argumentation by impersonating the opponent.

Tatyana Tretyakova presents an overview of the field of “political discourse,” its phenomena and genres. Closer scrutiny of this field by linguists and argumentation scholars is certainly overdue. However, her claim that pragma-dialectics can contribute materially to the apparatus for a consistent analysis of this field, while not implausible, gets little substantive support.

Brigitte Mral discusses how women in the past and present have manoeuvred rhetorically in order to establish *ethos* and make themselves heard in male-dominated public spheres, focusing on the Swedish politician Anna Lindh (Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1998 until her assassination in 2003). Instructive as this analysis is, it has no need for its initial obeisance to pragma-dialectics, since it uses no pragma-dialectical concepts except “strategic manoeuvring” (a synonym for rhetoric). Mral could have said all she has to say about the subject without pragma-dialectical terminology, and has.

In a similar deferential spirit, some contributors declare to have adopted the pragma-dialectical system as such, whereas what they have in fact done is take inspiration from certain ideas in it.

Celso López and Ana María Vicuña, two Chilean scholars, tell a moving tale of their work to teach reasonable democratic discussion to children in a country scarred by political violence. Here the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion have been an inspiration to them, representative as they are of underlying principles of “respect, honesty, consistency, and rationality.” While it is heartening to see the rules put to such use, it is also relevant to ask whether a theory that equates reasonableness with the dialectical resolution of differences of opinion can provide

the basis for sound norms of democratic discussion. I suggest that a theory informing such norms, rather than prescribing resolution, should explain how citizens, while following every rule of reasonableness, may legitimately continue to differ.

David Zarefsky, himself one of the shrewdest critics of political argumentation, seems awestruck by the alleged ability of the pragma-dialectical rules to diagnose the offences that vitiate political debate. True, the pragma-dialecticians' substitution of procedural correctness for deductive validity represents, as a principle, a bold and salutary shift of perspective, and Zarefsky's piece reflects how rhetorical critics, long disenchanted with "validity," have yearned for tools to pinpoint the manipulative manoeuvres currently turning political debate into a sham. This may explain why he seems to believe that pragma-dialectics has given such critics just what they need. But the examples he cites in support of this tall claim are thin: A typical instance of a self-sealing argument for US foreign policies is diagnosed as being "defended by means other than argumentation, thereby violating the relevance rule." How the "relevance rule" may subsume and diagnose self-sealing arguments or add anything to the criteria of falsifiability or defeasibility formulated decades ago by Popper and others, remains unclear. In another analysis, an example of loaded language like calling the US estate tax "death tax" is described as "falsely presenting a controversial position as if it were an accepted starting point," thereby violating the "starting-point rule." The description implied in this rule does demarcate certain important and insidious practices in public debate, but pragma-dialectical theory offers no additional insight into the specific linguistic mechanisms involved here (such as presupposition failure, implicature, and framing in the sense explored by, in particular, George Lakoff). Finally, Zarefsky explains the receding borderline between admissible and inadmissible arguments in the US after 9/11 by stating that the pragma-dialectical freedom rule, burden-of-proof rule, and argument scheme rule now "operate with reduced force." This is a pseudo-analysis which merely renames facts that are obvious to anyone (and to Zarefsky more than most): that Bush sceptics have routinely been denied the right to speak, while Bush supporters have apparently felt they could get away with inferior arguments, or none.

So, Zarefsky's article is symptomatic of a tendency in the book (and in much contemporary argumentation theory) to suggest not only that Pragma-dialectics has offered a much-needed new perspective and many insights, which is true, but also that it has provided a complete framework, mapping out everything worth knowing about argumentation, on the condition we buy the whole package. Writers who have been inspired by valuable ideas in the work of van Eemeren and his associates often recite a pledge of allegiance to the entire system as if it the unquestioned totality of it was necessary to provide the impulse and inspiration they have clearly found. Douglas Walton, writing with David Godden, and himself arguably the most prolific and creative of all living argumentation theorists, waxes almost evangelical in trumpeting that the research of the Amsterdam school has spread across the discipline "like a new day." Their article does demonstrate how pragma-dialectics and Artificial Intelligence have much to say to each other; but to students of natural argumentation, like Walton himself, this ought perhaps to ring a note of caution.

To Scott Jacobs and Sally Jackson pragma-dialectics has been an inspiration mainly by emphasizing normative considerations, modifying the "aggressively empirical" stance they began with. (That a normative stance is in order has possibly

been more of a revelation to American scholars than to Europeans.) Their work in designing formats to regulate disagreement reflects this inspiration, but it is refreshing to note two constructive deviations from the canonical “critical discussion” model: an emphasis on practical “work-arounds” in the absence of ideal conditions, and a view of fallacies as joint responsibilities rather than one interlocutor’s fault. This paper, as I see it, instantiates a fruitful, non-doctrinal way of putting pragma-dialectical ideas to use.

Part-singing sounds better than unison chants. A number of articles discuss aspects of argumentation theory and pragma-dialectics in ways that look like polite understatements of more substantive criticism.

David Hitchcock dissects pragma-dialectical analyses of *ad hominem* and shows that they tend to overstate the implicit premises attributed to the *ad hominem* arguer. Widening the perspective in Hitchcock’s alternative analysis, one might speculate whether many of the fallacies which pragma-dialectics likes to interpret as active sins of commission, and hence as unconditional rule violations, are not rather sins of omission; for example, the fallacy that we do find in certain *ad hominem*s is not the personal attack as such but a concomitant failure to respond in required fashion to what the opponent says—a failure for which the attack is meant to act as a smokescreen.

Marianne Doury studies examples of arguments involving comparisons to see what norms participants themselves apply to them. Drawing her material from debating blogs (a first-rate source of everyday argumentation that is both authentic and easily available), she demonstrates that argument schemes with comparison and analogy represent a broad spectrum, and that discussants constantly evaluate individual instances differently, but also that the discussants often make plausible cases both for and against the relevance and strength of a given scheme. This in my view exposes the unrealistic nature of the pragma-dialectical axioms that discussants must first (in the “opening stage”) agree which argument schemes may or may not be used, and that this decision is binary (may/may not). Doury diplomatically concludes that observations such as hers may help “check the distance between academic argumentative norms and spontaneous ones.”

Christian Plantin studies authentic examples of discussants arguing for their refusal to enter into a debate, or doing so initially and then entering. He concludes that people may well argue about the legitimacy of a whole debate and its underlying rules, rather than agree on the rules and then argue about individual moves in the debate. Like Doury’s, this contribution might be seen as levelling an implicit critique, again with the “opening stage” of pragma-dialectics as its unidentified target: argumentation is not a game where we agree on the rules first.

Maurice Finocchiaro reflects on the “hyper dialectical” definition of argumentation, which says that what makes a claim a piece of argumentation is the presence of defence against objections. Pragma-dialectics is a hyper dialectical theory. At the other end of the spectrum are “illative” theories, which say that the presence of constructive reasons for a claim is the necessary and sufficient condition for it to be argumentation. Interestingly, he finds that “the hyper dialectical definition is itself conceptually indistinguishable from the purely illative definition,” and that Pragma-dialectics has hardly tried to show why a hyper dialectical conception is preferable; instead, this view seems all along to have been just a matter of principle. Finocchiaro, “while waiting for a possible reply from the pragma-dialectical school,”

comes to the rescue by pointing to great practitioners of argumentation like Galileo and Mill, in whom we actually find a strong preponderance of critical (objection-refuting) argumentation. This would support the conception of critical arguments as “prior” to constructive ones, and thus to defining argumentation hyperdialectically. However, I ask, since argumentation is about changing people’s views, is it not simpler to posit a law of inertia saying that the default situation, as in Newtonian physics, is resistance to change – rather than to postulate a dialectical component to *all* argumentation which, in the individual instance, may or may not be there?¹

Another group of writers, all North Americans, attempt explicit but largely polite criticisms of the system. John Biro and Harvey Siegel insist, as before, that the resolution of a difference of opinion occurring in an ideal critical discussion should fulfil epistemic criteria; it should not be up to the discussants to determine the “rules” of the game at will. Yet many formulations of the system seem to prescribe just that; cf., “it is necessary that the protagonist and the antagonist have first jointly determined which argument schemes may and may not be used. In principle the discussants are free to decide on this” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2003, 378). It is strange, one might add, that pragma-dialecticians repeatedly censure Perelman for his emphasis on audience dependency in argumentation, since pragma-dialectics makes the protagonist just as dependent on his antagonist’s agreement on what a good argument is; why is audience-dependency vicious, when antagonist-dependency is dandy? (Regrettably, Biro and Siegel descend to stereotyping like “the collapse into mere rhetoric”; like pragma-dialectics, they help perpetuate the ahistorical definition of rhetoric as the mere drive to win, whereas the tradition from Aristotle defines it as the domain of argumentation which is centered around civic issues.)

Fred Kauffeld offers a carefully argued criticism of the pragma-dialectical account of how performers of speech acts incur commitments, repeating a distinction he has made before between commitments incurred out of procedural necessity and commitments undertaken actively by speakers to generate certain presumptions. One wonders whether a reply to this critique is forthcoming, or perhaps a tacit adjustment of the theory.

Michael Leff, probing into rival views of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric, finds that van Eemeren & Houtlosser and Christopher Tindale have presented rather similar normative analyses of the same text, although the former theoretically subordinate rhetoric to dialectic and the latter has it the other way around. Pragma-dialectics, by bringing in rhetoric, gains realism, while Tindale adds a restraining mechanism (the universal audience) to his rhetorical theory, which may explain why the twain meet after all. But Leff boldly makes a case for the legitimacy of the unrestrained rhetoric of “advocacy,” as demonstrated by Cicero in his speech for Murena. As I see it, Leff’s analysis highlights an inadequacy both in pragma-dialectics and in theories like Tindale’s. Cicero argues that Murena should be allowed to take office for reasons of political necessity, while his opponents will have him impeached for legal reasons (bribery). The point is that all-out advocacy for either of these standpoints is legitimate, and that also goes for continued adherence to either, even if all rules of reasonableness are obeyed. So, contrary to pragma-dialectical dogma, reasonable debate in the civic sphere does *not* equal resolution of the difference of opinion.

Ralph Johnson critically analyzes pragma-dialecticians' "tacit allegiance to formal logic." He sees this, first, with regard to "validity," where an initial dependence on deductive validity is followed in subsequent versions by waffling formulations about validity "in a broader sense"; only recently, in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), is the validity rule clarified so as to apply only to arguments that are "presented as logically valid." (This is one of many subtle revisions which suggest that Frans van Eemeren does listen to critical objections, though he still seems disinclined to acknowledge them.) Second, Johnson shows the notion of a "conclusive defense" to be either indistinguishable from "successful defense" and hence misleading, or else to contradict the spirit of Popperian critical rationalism. Johnson concludes that pragma-dialecticians need to purge their approach to argument appraisal of what they themselves have called "logico-centrism."

J. Anthony Blair sets up a useful distinction: There is *Pragma-Dialectics* (capitalized), the canonical theory we know from the impressive output of Frans van Eemeren and his collaborators and students. Laying out its constitutive tenets, Blair succinctly reviews nine areas where substantive criticisms have been raised, many of which he supports. But there is also *pragma-dialectics* (no capitals), which designates any theory that salvages what he sees as the truly valuable contributions of the school: (1) its emphasis on an interactional and functional view of argumentation; (2) its dialectical view of argumentation as a critical pro-con exchange; (3) its insistence on normativity. Blair shows why there is ample reason to applaud Frans van Eemeren's enterprise while also regretting its tendency to offer other scholars the "Hobson's choice ... of either accepting the theory in its entirety or giving it up in its entirety."

John Woods, in another comprehensive appraisal of the school, pulls no punches. Mischievously needling Blair for some grandiose promotional remarks of his in the blurb on van Eemeren and Grootendorst's 2004 book, Woods bluntly dismisses the theory as far too abstract, schematic and driven by "Goody Two-Shoes" ethic to be plausibly applicable to most types of argumentation "on the hoof" (the suggestion being that hooves need horseshoes?). However, he sees some value precisely in its being a schematic framework rather than a real theory, as it claims. Its concepts and rules, such as its nebulous notion of validity, are mere "placeholders" for the much more varied and specific concepts and rules that would be needed to account for all the different types of authentic argumentation. And students of argumentation can and do in fact use it by bits and parts, not as an all-or-nothing recipe.

It reflects the professed spirit of pragma-dialectics itself to say that the most interesting pieces in the volume are those that voice open criticism and doubt. By its own code, the school needs critical antagonists to bring out its true worth, not sycophantic tippers of hats.

In particular, its avowal to be an all-or-nothing "systematic theory" is a stance one might have liked to see more fully scrutinized in this volume. The overall *ethos* of the Pragma-Dialectical enterprise (capitals again) is that of an axiomatic system, where not only the object of study (argumentation) is seen as a strictly rule-governed game, but where the study itself, too, is by fiat subject to a finite set of *a priori* rules and principles. Pragma-Dialectics *begins* with these rules and principles, such as its definition of argumentation itself, its four methodological dogmas, its ideal model of the critical discussion, its four "stages," etc. These notions are not, as in most

other enterprises in humanistic scholarship, introduced one by one and developed gradually and tentatively, based on specific observations, hypotheses, or research questions. They are all there from day one, explicitly pretending to constitute a theory of argumentation that is global and, above all, systematic.

Why has no contributor attempted to see this enterprise, driven forth with such energy and consistency, as a phenomenon in the history or sociology of scholarship? There have been many trends in the humanistic subjects which have taken a comparable stance: Wittgenstein's early language theory, logical positivism in the manner of Carnap and Schlick, behaviorist psychology with its axiomatic refusal to accept inner mental states, Hjelmslevian "glossematics," Chomskyite grammar (whose adepts are still fond of referring to it as "the standard theory"), strictly truth-conditional semantics, and now Pragma-Dialectics—these are just a few examples of systematic, axiomatic enterprises, holding that an entire domain could (and in stronger versions: should) be explained in accordance with one, or a few, universal, *a priori* assertions. Most of these trends have already been reduced to rather modest sidebars in the history of scholarship. It remains an interesting question (despite all proscriptions of intentionalist interpretations) what drives the originators of such endeavors, all without exception thinkers of impressive stature. Also the sociological questions of how initiatives of this kind impact the academic sphere, and how they fare in it (and why), would have been interesting points to address.

Last but not least, perhaps, one may regret the absence in the volume of a personal take on Frans van Eemeren. The editors' two pages primarily eulogize the sheer size and comprehensiveness of his achievement. Readers of this book will continue to wrestle with the seminal ideas that everyone agrees to applaud along with those that many contest, but the many argumentation scholars who will take it up and who are not his collaborators or students still need a fuller understanding of this unusual man, his dedication and astounding efficiency, his generosity, as well as his penchant for axiomatic system-building. The school he has established seems to consolidate and defend its citadel in ways that sometimes jar with the spirit of critical rationalism he professes. And that, too, is something for scholars to ponder.

Note

¹ Finocchiaro mentions Newton's law of inertia as a counterpart in physics to the pragma-dialectical principle of "dialectification," in that both of these are necessary parts of larger theoretical frameworks, and for neither is any separate empirical evidence given. However, he forgets that in the case of Newton's law of inertia, massive empirical evidence could be given at any time.

References

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