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Matthew Gerber

Baylor University, matt_gerber@baylor.edu

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Pragmatism, Pragma-Dialectics, and Methodology: Toward a More Ethical Notion of Argument Criticism

Matthew Gerber

In this essay, I argue that the pragma-dialectical approach to the analysis of argumentative discourse is limited, or could better serve critics, if it provided a more defined method for the evaluation of arguments based upon goals, purposes, and consequences. Specifically, I argue current conceptions and applications of pragma-dialectical methodology potentially run the risk of amorality in that arguments are deemed 'good' as long as they meet the goals of the speaker, regardless of what those goals or purposes might be. In the following segments of this essay, I will more clearly and specifically identify and investigate the aforementioned ethical deficiencies of the pragma-dialectical method, and outline a corrective based on the theories of American pragmatists such as John Dewey, William James, and Richard Rorty, that I believe functions to elevate the *pragma* in this particular approach.

Key Words: Pragma-Dialectics, Pragmatism, Argumentation

Introduction

In the past two decades, significant scholarly attention has centered on the pragma-dialectical approach to argument criticism. Borrowing from previous scholarship in the fields of linguistics, pragmatics, and logic, pragma-dialectics originated in the Netherlands in the early 1980s. Scholars who developed the pragma-dialectical methodology subscribed to a purpose-oriented, problem-solution framework to analyze and criticize argument, rhetoric, and dialectic (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 1992, 2004). Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2000) defined argumentation as a mode of discourse for dispute resolution: "In pragma-dialectics argumentation is viewed as a phenomenon of verbal communication; it is studied as a mode of discourse characterized by the use of language for resolving a dispute" (p. 293). Van Rees (2000) defined pragma-dialectics as both "embedded in existing controversy" and concerned with the "resolution of a difference of opinion" (p. 119). Similarly, Johnson (2000) argued that "informal logic is pragmatic, meaning that it is concerned with the *uses* of argument" (p. 256). While informal logicians may deny the existence of any concrete, formalized rules to evaluate arguments, they advocate for a methodology that judges the impact of arguments by how successful they are at resolving disputes. Thus, the pragma-dialectical approach, at least in theory, provides critics with a methodology to evaluate how well particular arguments fulfill their rhetorical purposes (the *pragma*) and whether or not they comply with the guidelines for fair dialectical processes (the *dialectics*).

Similarly, other scholars who espouse a pragmatic (albeit not a *pragma-dialectic*) approach to argumentation also adhere to a model in which the effectiveness of an argument is measured by its ability to bring about the end of a conflict. In his landmark essay on the fields of argument, Rowland (1982) said

that identifying and analyzing the goal of an argumentative exchange offers critics the best way to evaluate the effectiveness of that argument. By identifying the shared purpose of a group of arguers (who also share specialization in the same field), critics have a foundation to more accurately judge the effectiveness of a given set of arguments. Rowland (1985) posited that a pragmatic theory of argument in which criticism is centered on determining whether an argument is useful in fulfilling its rhetorical goals could function as a corrective to postmodern criticisms of rationality. He claimed that all argument is essentially rational, and its effectiveness can be gauged by its consequences, or whether or not it functions as a useful problem-solving tool (p. 354). Thus, Rowland maintained that “the business of argument is problem-solving” (p. 356).

In this essay, I argue that the pragma-dialectical approach to the analysis of argumentative discourse is limited, or could better serve critics if it provided a more defined method for the evaluation of arguments based upon goals, purposes, and consequences. Specifically, I claim that pragma-dialectical methodology potentially runs the risk of amorality because arguments are deemed ‘good’ as long as they meet the goals of the speaker, regardless of what those goals or purposes might be. In the following segments of this essay, I more clearly and specifically identify and investigate the aforementioned ethical deficiencies of the pragma-dialectical method. In addition, I outline a corrective based on the theories of American pragmatists such as John Dewey, William James, and Richard Rorty that I believe functions to elevate the *pragma* in this particular approach. To be clear, I am not advocating the wholesale abandonment of the pragma-dialectical approach; rather, I argue that a more philosophically robust theoretical foundation (and application) may offer critics a more useful, and indeed more ethical, method for interrogating argument. Finally, I argue that this type of investigation is particularly fitting for an issue dedicated to communication methodology and theory. As Craig (2007) noted, “...many communication scholars have approached pragmatism as an epistemological-methodological stance without noticing that it also contributes a distinct way of theorizing communication” (p. 133).

Problems with Pragma-Dialectics

Within the current framework, the *dialectical* portion of the pragma-dialectical equation functions usefully, borrowing from ‘critical rationalism’, and seeks to apply normative guidelines for what constitutes a reasonable dialogue aimed at problem-solving. The theoretical emphasis on *dialectic* is well-placed and closely resembles Habermasian notions of an ideal speech situation in which critical stasis is reached by all parties in the argumentative process as they moved toward public reconciliation of a dispute (Gilder, 1987, pp. 16-17). While I would argue that these types of ‘ideal’ dialectical exchanges are rare and elusive, the guidelines applied by the pragma-dialectic approach nevertheless help to provide useful benchmarks for criticism. However, the way in which the *pragma* is applied in the current conception of the methodology is problematic, and potentially, it is ethically suspect. I argue that this dilemma primarily stems from a misapplication, or a lack of incorporation of pragmatism. To elucidate a

theoretical corrective to this methodological problem, it is first necessary to specifically identify my points of contention with the Amsterdam school.

First, as Garver (2000) argued, not all discourse is about dispute resolution. Indeed, “discourse often has purposes that have nothing to do with resolving disputes” and “people often speak merely to be heard, to express themselves, and create identity within a community” (p. 307). The way in which the pragma-dialectical method is currently applied offers no means to account for these types of arguments, despite its intended goal of providing a way to analyze and explicate such ‘everyday’ exchanges between people. The adversarial and purpose-driven focus of the methodology obscures consideration of these important communicative utterances because it conflates ‘discourse’ and ‘argument’. One might argue that the purpose in Garver’s example is to create identity within a community. However, identity-creation is distinct from conflict resolution, or problem-solution, and it is also not amenable to ‘field’ analysis. As Rowland (1982) suggests, how would one evaluate these types of arguments based upon field dependence or field invariance? How would a critic even classify these types of arguments that clearly defy easy categorization? One might argue that “identity creation” is a field or argument, but defining the parameters of that very broad field would be an enormous and theoretically impractical task.

The basis for my second set of objections to the pragma-dialectical approach can be traced to the work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). They questioned the usefulness of a pragmatic conception of argumentation on two counts. First, they argued that “pragmatic arguments can only be developed in terms of agreement on the value of consequences” (p. 268). How do people who already possess a different opinion on the substance of an issue come to agreement upon the potential values associated with the consequences of action or inaction? The answer is that they would not come to such an agreement, were the exchange not taking place in an ideal dialectical situation. It is not particularly pragmatic, even in its most ‘practical’ sense, to assume that humans involved in a dispute with a predetermined difference of opinion would be able to ever be able to approach such a rational place of argumentative ‘stasis’ (Hinck and Rist, 1983). The use of this methodology would become even more limited if the argumentative dilemma were highly ideological, such as in contemporary debates over abortion policy. Second, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argued that multiple consequences may stem from a single event, or that unpredictable, nascent, and perhaps invisible consequences may arise from an argument. Critics operating within the current application of pragma-dialectical methodologies would be hard-pressed to account for an argument that was deemed ‘effective’ because it fulfilled the desired purpose, but also created unintended or dangerous consequences.

A third line of exposition, also levied first by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), but distinct from the aforementioned criticisms, is that the evaluation of argument(s) from a pragmatic, or purely consequentialist standpoint, might preclude a moral or ethical evaluation that might be more appropriate from a methodological standpoint. Indeed, Frank (2004) argued that pragma-dialectics originated “with a misreading of the New Rhetoric paradigm to launch

a system of argument with quite different goals than those set forth by Perelman” (p. 267-8). Put simply, the pragma-dialectical approach considers itself to be a universal method that offers a way to analyze all arguments; this is not the case because it rests upon the problematic “presupposition of speech validity claims: that what the speaker says is true, sincere, and normatively appropriate” (Curato, 2008, p. 9). The pragma-dialectic method, as currently conceived, is limited at best because it provides critics with no way to reject or even interrogate arguments made in the service of less-than-noble goals or purposes.

A fourth objection concerns the overwhelmingly rationalist assumptions behind the pragma-dialectical method. In *Manifest Rationality*, Johnson (2000) proclaimed that “argumentation is characterized by manifest rationality” and that argument is “patently and openly rational” (p. 163). I argue that it is both dangerous and fallacious to reduce all human argumentation into the realm of the rational. All discourse and argumentation is not rational, or even necessarily purpose-driven. As Williams (1993) claimed, “the human has become literally disembodied in the discourses of modernism, abstracted into the logics of logic” (p. 86). Indeed, such an overbearing focus on rationalism dooms the pragma-dialectic methodology to the realm of the useless for the analysis of some categories of rhetoric. For example, rhetorical arguments often appear in the form of aesthetics such as music, art, or other visual imagery. The arguments made in these venues are not dialectical in nature; they are not part of an explicit argumentative exchange; they do not fit into the definition of an “ideal speech situation”; and they are not amenable to analysis based on fallacies. While the pragma-dialectic method does not necessarily purport to explain all types of arguments, I do believe that its applicability to the analysis of rhetorical arguments has been overstated.

Finally, a fifth objection to the pragma-dialectical approach is that its notion of fallacies is too limited to be a useful tool for critics. If fallacies are simply defined as violations of the rules, or aberrations in the unattainable world of the ideal speech situation, is there room for any notion of the rhetorical enthymeme? For example, in a pragma-dialectic framework, an enthymematic argument (with a missing premise), would be viewed as a fallacy rather than as an argument in which the audience was intended to supply the missing warrants. Concurrently, within the current applications of the pragma-dialectical framework, any justification or rhetorical strategy is deemed legitimate so long as it fulfills its purpose without violating the rules. As noted by Tindale (1999), “the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation effectively restricts fallacies to the violation of rules for conducting a critical discussion” (p. 49). Herein lies the core of my argument; the pragma-dialectical approach is too heavily weighted toward the *dialectical*. A deeper investigation of the *pragma* side of the formula is warranted. In fact, *failure* to re-investigate (and reinvigorate) this method may call into question its overall usefulness, particularly with regards to the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies. The question remains, how can argument critics evaluate an argument based solely on its purpose or outcome? If the initial purpose or goal is morally and/or ethically bankrupt, can critics still determine that the arguments put forth to justify those goals were ‘good’? I argue that a careful incorporation

of the ideas of the American pragmatists can help to correct these methodological deficiencies while leaving the *dialectical* side of pragma-dialectics intact.

Elevating the PRAGMA in the Pragma-Dialectical Method

When William James argued that pragmatism was “a method only,” he was also implying that pragmatism was concerned with the means and methods by which consequences, or argumentative outcomes, were brought about (1991, p. 23). One can easily extrapolate from James’ position and argue that if the purpose of a rhetorical or dialectical exchange is morally wrong, then at least some of the arguments put forth will also be morally wrong (even if formally or informally ‘valid’ or effective). Rowland (1985) thus misjudged James as being unconcerned with the means by which certain rhetorical goals are achieved. James was not purely a consequentialist, nor was he wholly concerned with political or philosophical expediency, as some have suggested. James was not only concerned with outcomes, but also by the methods by which outcomes are produced.

On the other hand, contemporary pragmatic and pragma-dialectical approaches veer dangerously close to an amoral ethical relativism. Rowland, while arguing in the tradition and spirit of Dewey that “pragmatic theory involves the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action” (1985, p. 360), centered his notion of argument evaluation on the concept of purpose, which seems to privilege an answering of the ‘why’ question to the exclusion of the more important questions of ‘how’, and ‘to what ultimate end’. Dewey and James both argued that pragmatism possesses emancipatory potential. However, contemporary explanations of pragmatic and pragma-dialectic approaches allow for the advocacy of undemocratic goals, so long as that is the stated or implied purpose of the speaker. In this framework, moral and ethical decision-making practices have taken a back seat to the age-old goal of political expediency. Additionally, the pragma-dialectic approach seeks to put an end to conflict, to resolve differences of opinion, to adjourn deliberation, and to create univocality. Herein lies precisely what Frank (2004) argued was fundamentally *un*-pragmatic about the pragma-dialectic movement--it sought to circumscribe rhetorical exchange, rather than to expand it: “pragma-dialectics, which is truly a crude form of conflict resolution, seeks to end difference of opinion through argument” (p. 279). Pragma-dialectics, according to Frank (2004), privileged clarity and precision over interpretation in the investigation of the impact of argument: “Pragma-dialectics is intolerant to interpretation, and certainly to varied interpretation, and seeks clarity in the face of a reality and experience that is irreducibly ambiguous, tragic, or in which there are multiple or incompatible truths” (p. 279).

Rowland’s dismissal of Rorty’s “interpretive pragmatism” was also premature. While Rorty denied any foundational conception of truth, he also attempted to de-link notions of “good” from truth. Rorty was not an ethical relativist; instead, he simply argued that some truths were better than others. For Rorty, it was simply good to believe in some ideas over other competing ideas. Rorty’s pragmatism contained a moral element that was lost in Rowland’s re-telling. Indeed, “the pragmatist disengagement of rules for action from an *a priori*, ra-

tionalist-based truth claim renders *ethical* rather than *epistemological* questions central” (Horne, 2001, p. 150). Rorty espoused that some truths were more useful than others, but not necessarily that those truths spoke to “the nature of things” (1991, p. 24). When Rowland argued that there was a “performative contradiction” at the heart of postmodernism, he mistakenly assumed that Rorty and others used rational argument to support their own metaphysics. To the contrary, Rorty argued that:

The pragmatist does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. Not having *any* epistemology, *a fortiori*, he does not have a relativistic one. (1991, p. 24)

The charge of ethical relativism is one usually reserved for use against pragmatists by modernist or realist critics. In this case, it is the pragmatists (both Rowland and the Amsterdam School) who are guilty of ethical relativism. Both Rorty and Dewey embraced a form of ethnocentrism that viewed truth as contingent, but recognized that some truths are more useful, more enduring, than others. When Rowland appropriated Dewey on this subject, arguing that pragmatism is emancipatory, he sealed the contradiction in his own argument. How can arguments that support a purpose that runs counter to the promotion of freedom and liberation ever be pragmatic? Those arguments may be effective or practical or expedient in achieving that purpose, but certainly not *pragmatic* in the sense that I mean here.

As critics, we should be skeptical regarding arguments put forth in the service of nefarious, undemocratic, or dangerous purposes. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, approaches that short-circuit public deliberation by prematurely resolving differences of opinion run the risk of deconstructing the communicative bridge that links metaphysics and human action (Dewey, 1916, p. 3-4). The scholarship of Kenneth Burke is also instructive here. While pragmatism is certainly oriented toward the measuring of consequences for Burke, he was also concerned with the inclusion of a consideration of the motivation of the speaker. For Burke, “the pragmatist featuring of agency seems well-equipped to retain a personal ingredient in its circumference of motives” (1945, p. 283). Burke’s theoretical privileging of the exploration of the links between purpose and action was necessary to uncover the motivations and the ideologies that inform the ways in which human agents go about formulating and enacting decisions. Incorporation of Burke’s ideas into the application of pragmatic approaches to argument may begin to account for the types of dangerous public rhetoric I am concerned with in this essay.

The goal of this essay is truly pragmatic in nature. It is aimed at providing critics with a way to analyze and investigate argumentation in terms of both its rhetorical and dialectical function. It is also pragmatic, in the American philosophical sense, in that it seeks to yield a means by which scholars can more accurately identify and criticize the types of undemocratic rhetoric that seems to

pervade the contemporary socio-political-linguistic milieu. I have argued here that the dialectical side of pragma-dialectics is useful and meaningful as it has been applied in contemporary argument criticisms. Pragma-dialectic theory is aimed at producing a set of normative guidelines that govern critical discussions between people who are trying to reach a consensus. What has remained unexplained thus far is the function of the connection between the pragmatic and the dialectical. In this framework, the *pragma* provides critics with a better way to investigate the rhetorical implications of argumentation. In the pragma-dialectical framework as currently conceived and applied, it is easy to point to fallacies in which a participant violates one of the normative rules of dialectic, but it is less clear how critics should evaluate the rhetorical or persuasive elements of an argument. Certainly, evaluation based upon purpose, goals, or perceived consequences is both incomplete and potentially dangerous. Perhaps Wenzel (1993) characterized it best when he indicated that “argumentation produces habits of life and living, not formations of words...the art in rhetoric consists in accomplishing persuasion in the best interest of a polity, not in discovering the means of persuasion, as Aristotle claimed” (p. 3). While the pragmatic tradition in communication studies is certainly concerned with discovering the means (*inventio*) by which rhetorical goals are accomplished, it must be more willing to castigate and reject arguments which cannot have positive ramifications for civil society. For example, critics who analyze the rhetoric of those engaged in racist “hate speech” must have an ideological, moral component as part of their methodology in order to identify and investigate the arguments advanced in support of the goals of those rhetors. In the current pragma-dialectical framework, such rhetoric might be criticized on *dialectical* grounds, but the methodological spotlight on purpose and goal-fulfillment leaves critics with slight means to analyze the quality and/or validity of the arguments themselves.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have outlined a corrective to the pragma-dialectical method of evaluating argumentation. I have suggested, at least implicitly, some ways in which some of the tenets of American pragmatist philosophy might be incorporated *post hoc* into the discussion surrounding the most useful ways to engage in argument criticism. To be clear, I have at least suggested some theoretical starting points that might move critics toward potential solutions to the criticisms laid out at the beginning of the essay. Since not all arguments are aimed at dispute resolution, the suggested re-envisioning outlined here can provide scholars with a way to explore arguments based on other goals, such as self-expression or identity creation. Pragmatists believe that some purposes are better or more useful than others, but to exclude arguments would be to engage in incomplete analysis. Similarly, a re-imagining of the pragma-dialectical in the ways I have suggested would also, at least partially, resolve Perelman’s objection to pragmatic argument based upon its presupposed exclusion of moral or ethical determinants. Indeed, a more philosophically informed pragmatic method is the very moral framework that Perelman desired. The corrective I have outlined here also helps to avoid the epistemological pitfalls of an overly rationalist conception of

argumentation. A more pragmatic notion of purpose would not immediately reject arguments or stated goals that were viewed as irrational, but instead would seek to determine if those goals were useful and positive in terms of their implications for civil society. An enriched notion of pragma-dialectics would also offer scholars a more applicable way to analyze non-traditional arguments such as those made in music, film, and visual images.

Finally, a more informed notion of the *pragma* would help to clear up the theoretical confusion surrounding the identification and analysis of fallacies. The pragma-dialectical approach is clear regarding fallacies of argument that occur in the dialectical realm, but it provides critics with limited guidance to evaluate rhetorical fallacies except for reverting back to the fulfillment of purpose. Under the current methodological framework, rhetorical strategies that were coercive in nature would be deemed illegitimate only if: a) they actually failed to result in coercion, or b) they were evaluated in the dialectical frame. While I am not putting forth an entirely new definition of rhetorical fallacy, I am advocating for the rejection of methods that are not ultimately pragmatic or democratic in the philosophical sense. The “repair and refurbishment” (first noted by Frank, 2004) that I have suggested, potentially offers critics an enriched moral and ethical calculus for determining the value (and validity) of rhetorical argumentation. As rhetorical critics we should certainly be concerned with the structures and forms of rhetoric, but not to the exclusion of nuanced investigation of the ethical dimensions of rhetoric. Method should be emancipatory, and there is little value in attempting to *remove* value from our criticism. On the contrary, value-based ethical concerns regarding the uses of argument and the identification and rejection of undemocratic arguments (whether formally valid or effective), should pervade pragmatic and pragma-dialectic methodologies.

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Matthew Gerber (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is the director of the Glenn R. Capp Debate Forum and Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Baylor University.