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# Commentary on Zenker

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# Commentary on Frank Zenker: “Pragma-Dialectic’s Necessary Conditions for a Critical Discussion”

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Frank Zenker has written a technically sophisticated and compelling critique of the claim that the Pragma-dialectical rules are necessary for the resolution of differences of opinion.

Zenker’s critique is compelling; he has shown that that the PD-rules are indeed unnecessary for dispute resolution. In this brief commentary, I will note a possible flaw in one piece of Zenker’s sophisticated ‘reduction’ of the rules. Then I will raise two questions about the overall strategy of Zenker’s paper. These small points are not meant to impugn Zenker’s conclusion, which I think Zenker has successfully established.

## 2. A FLAW IN THE REDUCTION?

Zenker’s case for the non-necessity of the PD-rules for the resolution of differences of opinion in critical discussions depends upon his ‘reduction’ of the original 15 rules to a reduced set of 6 – but there is I think a problem with the proposed reduction..

Zenker’s technical argument aimed at the ‘tightening’ or reduction of the 15 PD rules relies on the “*duty/right conversion-principle (DR)*”: “If no discussant has an obligation to forward or call into question standpoints, then each discussant is free (alternatively: has a right) to forward or call into question standpoints.” (pp. 7-8) This principle is I think fundamentally flawed.

The basic problem with DR is straightforward: “No discussant has an obligation to forward or call into question standpoints” is consistent both with “All discussants have an obligation not to call into question standpoints” and with “No discussant has a right to call into question standpoints.” If this is right, the implication in DR fails.

Consider a parallel example: “Neither Kate nor Harry have an obligation to torture little children for the fun of it” manifestly does not imply “Kate and Harry are free to torture little children for the fun of it.” In general, not having an obligation to A does not entail having the right to A. If this is right, DR fails. If it does, Zenker’s reduction of several of the original PD rules to his R0 fails as well.

### 3. IS THE TECHNICAL REDUCTION NECESSARY?

I wonder whether the technical virtuosity of Zenker's paper, impressive as it is, is necessary for Zenker to establish his main claim.

The main conclusion of Zenker's paper is that we should doubt that the PD-rules are necessary for the resolution of difference of opinion. The main argument for this is that the rules are not clearly necessary for fallacy detection. It takes Zenker 8 single-spaced, closely argued pages to establish the latter. But when he gets to p. 11, it is easy for him to justify the former, larger conclusion on the basis of the very different reason that the higher-order conditions for dispute-resolution are both open-ended and often not met in fact. This establishes the larger conclusion independently of the long technical discussion of fallacy-detection. So I wonder whether the undeniable technical virtuosity of Zenker's discussion is in fact necessary for the establishment of his main thesis.

Indeed, Zenker's main conclusion seems to me to be obvious, independently of the technical details of the argument, because whether or not disputes are in fact resolved depends on a myriad of factors, many of which have nothing to do with argumentation or discussion moves. I might agree to retract my objection to your standpoint, thus resolving the difference of opinion, because I see the strength of your reasons for it and the legitimacy of your discussion moves. But I might equally do so because I'm hungry, or my blood sugar is plummeting, or I'm bored, or distracted, or have another engagement that causes me simply to lose interest. Similar remarks apply in the other direction: I might maintain my objection, despite the force of your reasons and the legitimacy of your moves, because I'm stubborn, or stupid, etc. So of course no rules will be either necessary or sufficient for resolution.

### 4. MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES?

A larger question looms in the wake of Zenker's discussion: given the problems with PD that Zenker's critique exposes, why should we take seriously the PD approach, according to which we understand argumentation, and fallacies, in terms of dispute resolution?

While Zenker's discussion occasionally appears to be on the verge of raising this question, it does not explicitly do so. This is a shame, I think, since a much more fundamental critique of PD can be motivated by that discussion. If I may be permitted an unsavoury and politically incorrect metaphor, I think Zenker stopped the hunt just when he put himself in position to move in for the kill.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Zenker's paper is a technical *tour de force*, which convincingly establishes his main claim.

My brief questions, above, are meant not as criticism, but as encouragement to Zenker to utilize his obvious technical talents in service of larger philosophical issues.

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