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Commentary on Douglas Walton's "Objections, Rebuttals and Refutations"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In dialectical approaches to argument, the notion of 'argument' or 'argumentation' is closely connected to the notion of 'criticism' or 'critical reaction.' This is due to the point of departure that 'argumentation' is not a basic, primitive notion, but a notion that admits of a further—dialogical—explication. Even when an argument has a monological form, it can best be understood as a conversational contribution with which an arguer responds to critical reactions expected to arise from the opponents addressed (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, van Rees 2001). That makes the development of a systematic classification of the distinct types of critical reactions a most pressing concern for dialecticians.

Walton's paper can be seen as a contribution to this project.¹ In my commentary I distinguish between five elements that are, to my mind, part of any complete definition of a type of critical reaction. Then, I try to characterize some of Walton's definitions using these parameters.

2. CLASSIFYING CRITICAL REACTIONS

By *critical reaction* I understand any contribution to a discussion in which a critic responds to a standpoint or argument and in which she expresses some kind of dissatisfaction with the arguer's contribution.² I will focus on those situations where an arguer has adopted a standpoint and where the critic merely maintains a critical stance. In such a *non-mixed discussion* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), it is up to the arguer to show that the critic's critical stance is incompatible with the starting points she herself

¹ Other important contributions are: Govier 1999, Johnson 2000, Krabbe 2007, Walton and Godden 2005.

² In addition, a critic can be critical towards a different kind of contribution, such as a request for clarification. Similarly, an arguer can be critical, for example towards the appropriateness of a critical question, towards a request for clarification or towards the critic's critical persistence. However, here I restrict myself to what I consider to be the most acute kinds of criticisms in any argumentative situation: those by a critic that relate to the reasoning put forward by an arguer.

has accepted. He should do so by reasoning from the critic's commitments to his own standpoint. The critic's task is to show that it is possible to have accepted the starting points without having to accept the standpoint. She tries to show that her starting points do not bring a commitment to the standpoint. In other words: only the arguer has a burden of proof while the critic merely has to explain and clarify how her critical position remains consistent in spite of the arguments offered by the arguer.

One main point of my commentary is that critical reactions that are usually interpreted as counterarguments by which the critic incurs a burden of proof, often also admit of an interpretation such that the critic does not incur a burden of proof. In other words, there are ways for a critic to be actively involved in putting forward considerations against the arguer's position in a discussion that is and remains non-mixed all the way.

3. FIVE ELEMENTS OF A CRITICAL REACTION

I hypothesize that each fully developed and articulated critical reaction has a *normative appeal*, has a particular topic or *focus*, takes place at a particular dialogue *level*, is brought forward with a particular illocutionary *force* and tries to steer the discussion in a particular direction by giving presence to particular *counter-considerations*.

First, a critical reaction has a normative appeal. The arguer's contribution is not up to standard. If an arguer presents an argument, he can be seen as conveying a pretence to the argument's being persuasive as well as a pretence to the argument's being reasonable (cf. van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002 on strategic manoeuvring; cf. Krabbe 2001 on the two requirements of dialectical reasonableness). So, a fully developed and articulated critical reaction appeals to the lack of persuasiveness, to be dubbed *effectiveness criticism* ("why would I believe that?"), or to lack of reasonableness, *reasonableness criticism* ("isn't that a *post hoc ergo propter hoc*?").

Second, a critical reaction has a focus. It is either directed towards the arguer's main standpoint, or towards a reason in the arguer's argument, or towards the connection premise of the argument. Whether a proposition is a reason or a connection premise is an empirical matter and a matter of reconstruction. I understand the connection premise to be a premise that remains implicit in the initial argument and that can best be expressed as a conditional statement such that it has the conjunction of the (explicit and implicit) reasons as its antecedent and the conclusion as its consequent. In case the arguer argues "A and normally if A then B therefore B" then I consider "normally if A then B" as a reason, "the current circumstances are normal" as an implicit premise, and "If A and if the circumstances are normal and if normally if A then B, then B" as the connection premise. The proper way to read this connection premise is: "If you are, within the current circumstances, committed to 'A,' to 'circumstances are normal' and to 'normally if A then B,' then you are also committed to 'B.'"³ Suppose, the arguer reasons "A so B" and no reason has been left implicit. Then the connection premise simply reads "If A then B," or, equivalently, "your commitment to A is, here, incompatible with challenging B."⁴

³ I do not regard this as stemming from a commitment to deductivism, but from a commitment to making explicit the elements that are susceptible to criticism.

⁴ Note that I do not defend what Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008) refer to as the *three-ways hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, each attack is aimed at showing the conclusion or the premises to be false, or

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Many arguments can be seen as containing a special kind of (usually implicit) premise that expresses normality assumptions. Suppose, to make a variation on an example from Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008, chapter 7), it is argued that flax oil reduces cholesterol for the reason that Dr. Phil said so. Here, a normality assumption is that the circumstances in which Dr. Phil made his statements are normal. So, the critical reaction “Might Dr. Phil have been under the influence of magic mushrooms?” has a normality premise as its focus.

Third, a criticism is put forward at a certain dialogue level (cf. Krabbe 2003). A critical reaction can be part of the base level dialogue, where the parties exchange positions, arguments and requests for clarification and argumentation. Alternatively, the critic can raise the level by talking *about* the arguer’s contributions. A prototypical base level criticism would be the raising of a critical question. An example of a meta-level criticism would be an utterance such as “Isn’t that argument of yours not a formal fallacy of some kind?”

The consequences of my choice to emphasize the possibility of having a persistently non-mixed discussion with a highly active critic will become clear when dealing with the fourth and fifth elements of critical reactions. The account that follows is influenced by the close connection Walton and Krabbe see between raising an objection and providing information about how the burden of proof is to be met (Walton and Krabbe 1995, p. 179; Krabbe 2007, p. 58) and by Krabbe’s notion of a bound challenge (2007, p. 56).

Fourth, a critical reaction is put forward with a particular illocutionary force. The direct purpose of a critical reaction can be to get the arguer to provide further arguments or to provide further clarification of what has been said already. This is typically done by requests, such as a critical question (also called a *challenge*: “why do you think so?”) or a request for a definition (“what do you mean, exactly?”). I will dub these *critical requests*, and more specifically *requests for argumentation* and *requests for clarification*. A special kind of request for clarification is the request to provide the information with which the antagonist can determine what argumentation scheme the protagonist has put to use. For example, the question “is this person you refer to an expert in the field?” can be used by the critic to find out whether the protagonist is using argumentation ‘from expert knowledge’ or, alternatively, the argumentation scheme ‘from a position to know’ (Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008, pp. 309-310). Of course the question “Why do you think this person is an expert?” is a request for a further argument.⁵

A different purpose of a critical reaction can be to inform the arguer that the critic has evaluated the arguer’s contribution and that she has made up her mind. Typically, this information is conveyed by an assertive in which something that has been asserted by the arguer is denied. Depending upon circumstances, such a *critical denial* admits of two reconstructions.

at showing that the conclusion does not follow. They mention the objection of circular reasoning and the objection that some evidence is insufficient as forcing us to admit a fourth way of attack (p. 223). Still, these objections can be (in part) characterized by the threefold notion of focus. The objection of circular reasoning can be seen as focusing on both conclusion and premises and the objection to the effect that the evidence, though true, is insufficient focuses on the connection premise.

⁵ However, Walton seems to use *critical question* in a more indiscriminating way to refer both to requests for argumentation and to requests for clarification.

A denial, *not P*, can be interpreted in a weak manner, expressing something such as “you will not be able to convince me of P.” Then it conveys the message that there is no chance for the arguer to get proposition *P* accepted by the critic. This in turn implies the strategic advice, directed to the arguer, to start a different line of defence. Suppose, the arguer utters “Why not P?” in return, then the critic might plausibly answer: “I will not argue in favour of P, but if you desire so, I will *explain* to you why I think that you will not be able to derive P from my commitments.”⁶ These might be dubbed *weak denials*. Weak denials do not bring a burden of proof but at most a burden of explanation. The critic’s confidence that the arguer will fail in getting the denied element accepted can be indicated by way of strengthening and weakening devices, such as “of course, not p” and “supposedly, not p.”

Still, there are situations where a denial is best be interpreted as incurring a genuine burden of proof. These might be dubbed *strong denials*.⁷ In addition to critical requests and denials there are other, less easily classifiable evaluations, according to which an argument is shaky; awful, missing the point, irritating, old-fashioned, etc. (cf. Krabbe 2007).

Fifth, a critical reaction has a, possibly empty, set of, what I will call *counter-considerations*. The critic has the option to provide the arguer with some of the considerations that make her think that she can consistently adopt a critical stance towards the standpoint, notwithstanding her commitment to the starting points. An example would be: “why would this policy the best? It is not the cheapest option, you know?.” But also a reasoning that, at first sight, looks like a counterargument might in fact be a weak denial, supplemented with an explanation: “The policy you propose is a bad proposal, for it is too expensive, in my opinion.” Such an explanatory note provides the arguer with the information needed in order to find a route by which he can lead the critic from her starting points to his own standpoint. Counter-considerations function as direction indicators. The message, in the two examples just given is the same, notwithstanding the difference in outlook: if you desire to persuade me of your standpoint, you either should refute the proposal’s expensiveness or show me a consideration that outweighs the costs. Of course, there are also situations where a counter-consideration is best be interpreted as counter-argumentation. I will label the two resulting kinds of criticism as containing *weak counter-considerations* and *counterarguments*.

This fivefold distinction can be used to provide definitions of the various critical reactions in a somewhat systematic manner.

4. SOME NOTES ON WALTON’S DEFINITIONS

Using this fivefold distinction, I will draw two conclusions about the views defended by Walton.

1. Walton’s notion of a rebuttal seems to be understandable as the kind of critical reaction that appeals to the effectiveness pretence, can have any focus, contributes to the

⁶ “Why?” is ambiguous and can be interpreted as a request for a further argument or as a request for a motivation: “Explain me why.”

⁷ The distinction between *request for argumentation* and *strong denial* strongly resembles the distinction between weak and strong refutation (Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008, p. 229).

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base level dialogue, contains a strong denial and a counterargument.⁸ I would like to point out that it is possible to put forward critical reactions that strongly resemble such rebuttals but that are made up from a weak denial supplemented with weak counter-considerations. Consequently, there is room for weak versions of rebuttals such as the rebutter defeater and the undercutter defeater.

2. Pollock's notion of an undercutter defeater can be dialectically reconstructed as a critical reaction that appeals to the effectiveness pretence, contributes to the base level dialogue, contains a strong denial and a counterargument and that has as its focus either 1) a normality premise, or 2) a premise stating a general connection between what has been stated in at least one of the other premises and in the conclusion, or 3) the connection premise. Remember that, at the end of his paper, Walton raises the question whether an undercutter attacks the inferential link or whether it attacks the proposition expressing that this link is justly applied in this argument. As I see things, a critic has a choice whether to focus on the connection premise or, if they are part of the arguer's argument, on a premise stating a general connection or on a normality premise. Let's once more take a look at a version of the Dr. Phil argument: "Flax oil reduces cholesterol because Dr. Phil said so and experts normally are right." So, the critic can choose to criticize the argument by focusing on 1) "the circumstances in which dr. Phil said so have been normal," or 2) "experts are normally right" or 3) "if things are normal and if Dr. Phil said that flax oil reduces cholesterol and if experts are normally right then flax oil reduces cholesterol."⁹ It looks like the notion of an undercutter includes all three kinds of critical reaction. That means that the notion thus defined admits of, at least, three further specifications: there are undercutters that focus on the normality premise, those that focus on the connection premise and those that focus on a general premise.

[Link to paper](#)

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⁸ When Walton states that "[t]o rebut an argument is to try to show that the argument is questionable [...]" (p. 3) he seems to suggest a rebuttal can consist of a mere request for argumentation. However, on the next page he seems to deny this option:

This word [rebut] seems to imply that the rebutting is done by posing another argument, and not merely by asking a question about the original argument, even if it is a critical question that casts doubt on the argument (p. 4).

⁹ Critically responding to a particular reason or connection premise, however, can be ruled out as dialectically unreasonable, for example when the connection premise expresses an agreed upon argumentation scheme or when a premise has been agreed upon as a shared starting point. Not all undercutters are legitimate.

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