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Commentary on Plug

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Commentary on H. José Plug's "Telling Examples. Strategic manoeuvring in plenary debates in the European Parliament"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the Pragma-dialectical model for a critical discussion and with particular respect to plenary debates of the European parliament on the necessity of new legislation, José H. Plug discusses the *argument from example* under the aspect of strategic manoeuvring. She does a very fine job—or so this commentator finds—at "fleshing out" the notion of strategic manoeuvring by providing clear-cut examples from the political sphere, and identifies manoeuvring techniques applicable to this particular argument schema.

Below, I summarize (what I take to be) the main theoretical point about strategic manoeuvring and, in section 3, outline how the concept of strategic manoeuvring may become useful beyond argument reconstruction as a dimension in argument *evaluation*.

2. RECONCILING A DIALECTICAL AND A RHETORICAL OPTIMUM

As pointed out by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2005), "arguers in argumentative discourse [may be expected to] make an effort to balance rhetorical effectiveness and dialectical standards of reasonableness" (Plug, p. 2). Here, 'rhetorical effectiveness' pertains, roughly, to an arguer's success in gaining the assent of her audience, while 'dialectical standards of reasonableness' pertains, equally roughly, to the norms within which a particular argumentative act may be said to occur without committing a fallacy (in the widest sense of being an argumentative error).

Thus, when arguing from example (but also otherwise), metaphorically, arguers may be said to walk the thin line between, *on the one side*, derailing into a fallacy—here: hasty generalization (*secundum quid*)—, as will be the case if it can be objected that, according to dialectical standards of reasonableness, the example is non-representative or otherwise insufficient and, *on the other*, forgoing the desired effect of reaching the assent of the audience because, according to standards of rhetorical effectiveness, one is making less than optimal use of the example's potential to persuade (which will vary with each particular audience).

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Insofar as this tension between appearing reasonable to an audience and having the audience assent to one's argument is accepted as a basic challenge to every act of arguing, it becomes a matter of both theoretical and practical interest to identify, in sufficient detail, how arguers strategically manoeuvre in order to reconcile both optima.

After briefly laying out her framework as well as providing background on the EU parliament, Plug provides such detail in section 5 of her essay and presents highly instructive examples of strategic manoeuvring. These are classified under the headings *topical potential*, *audience demand* and *presentational devices*. For each, Plug provides clear evidence of successful cases of strategic manoeuvring. Thus—or so this commentator understands the point of her contribution—she is able to support the thesis that strategic manoeuvring allows for the identification of distinct forms and techniques which are therefore relevant for argument reconstruction.

In the following, I attempt to extend the idea of strategic manoeuvring by envisaging the consequence of a future state of research on strategic manoeuvring within the Pragma-dialectical framework with respect to argument evaluation.

3. STRATEGIC MANEUVERING IN ARGUMENT EVALUATION?

Given time and man-power, in the not too distant future we will likely be informed about a variety of "manoeuvring techniques," and perhaps be provided with a systematization thereof with respect to the Pragma-dialectical argument scheme tri-partition (*symptomatic*, *causal*, *analogical*). Each argumentation schema would, so to speak, be equipped with descriptions of *permissible* techniques; perhaps broken down by activity type, institutional constraints and types of audience (the latter appears to be the hardest part).

One would thus have collected techniques arising from social reality and, based on these, might also develop new ones. Moreover, one could work out instructional programs so that strategic manoeuvring becomes not only reconstructable, but teachable. Based on our present insight into what we regard as fallacious argumentation, we would, it seems, be justified in the expectation that arguers so taught will be dialectically *and* rhetorically comparatively more effective *vis à vis* the present base line. (Assume, for the moment, that such measurement is unproblematic.)

Presently, in the evaluation of real life argumentation, we (as analysts) criticize arguers for derailing into fallacious argument use on occasion of trying to make the most out of the rhetorical potential an argument has for a particular audience and under the constraints of a particular activity type (cf. van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2006). Once the requisite techniques will have been systematized by means of which arguers are enabled to, as it were, "push" an argument's potential to the optimal level of rhetorical effectiveness *without* derailing into a fallacy, will not our standards of assessing that very same argument also change? That is to say, when we have reached agreement on admissible techniques for strategic manoeuvring, will we not criticize an arguer for *not* having pushed to the limit? In other words, through research on strategic manoeuvring, will we not create new grounds for criticizing arguers—this time not for derailing into a fallacious argument use, but for *not almost* derailing?

It seems to me that, if one follows this line of thought to the end, then the answer is: Yes, as we reconstruct techniques for fallacy avoidance while being maximally

effective, we will inevitably find features in argumentative discourse that we did not see *as such* before. And since our evaluation of said features will, of course, be guided by our assumptions about strategic manoeuvring, we shall consequently be led to the conclusion that discernable features of strategic manoeuvring forthcoming in this or that argumentation are evidence of strategy (*intentional* action), likewise when such features are absent.

Therefore, as analysts, and although mitigated by first having to identify the requisite activity type and the kind of audience to which the argument is directed, we shall no longer get around interpreting our object of study *as strategic action*. To put it bluntly, when we're done discerning strategies for manoeuvring, then my argument will either (i) constitute a fallacy, because it went *beyond* the fine line (see section 2, above) *or* (ii) it will constitute an act of successful strategic manoeuvring, because it managed to stay *just below* the line *or* (iii) it will constitute an instance of poor strategic action, because it stayed *too far below* the line.

Thus, we will have gained a *new* ground for criticizing an argument which does not derail into a fallacy, namely option (iii), above. Hence, it will foreseeably become reasonable to evaluate negatively an argumentative act which leaves its rhetorical potential unused (or uses it in a suboptimal manner). If one accepts that the best strategy reconciles the rhetorical and the dialectical optimum, then derailing into fallacious argumentation is the *hypo*critical act (most of us, I think, have accepted this interpretation all along), while being *hyper*critical now consists in forgoing the rhetorical potential (which is be an interpretation that many of us might not be comfortable with, yet)

4. CONCLUSION

Admittedly on a speculative basis, I have tried to outline the consequence of allowing the theoretical concept of strategic manoeuvring to feature not only in argument reconstruction, but also in argument evaluation, particularly in the evaluation of argumentative moves that do *not* derail into fallacies. I have argued that the concept provides the analyst with a rhetorical dimension of argument evaluation. This dimension appears new to argument evaluation, insofar as the quality of an argument can now be assessed not only by the critical questions associated with every argument scheme. Rather, evaluation reaches further, insofar as making less than optimal use of an argument's rhetorical potential is something an arguer can be criticized for.

Link to paper

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