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# Reply to my Commentator - Lewinski

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# Reply to my Commentator

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Following William James' advice, in my short reply I will try to be "mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction." Therefore, I will address Plumer's comments by distinguishing between different meanings of the term "conclusion" and, by extension, "rational results" in argumentation theory.

The primary distinction is between the way arguers *actually conclude* their daily disputes and the way argumentation scholars think disputes *should be concluded*, according to certain standards of rationality. The latter, i.e., normative approach is preoccupied with the question: "what counts as a rational conclusion of argumentation?" From a variety of proposed answers, I mention but two pertinent to this discussion.

Firstly, rational conclusion may be defined as an outcome of sound argumentation, that is, of application of valid forms of inference to true premises. This is the rational ideal of Aristotelian demonstration and mathematical (logical) proofs. Such requirements, taken to natural sciences by logical positivists, mean that conclusions of science are rational only if verifiable and thus certain—they are built of elementary facts described in observational terms and approved methods of reasoning (whether they are deductively valid or, at least, inductively solid). Conclusions which cannot be based on verifiable facts and valid methodologies belong to the domain of poetry rather than reasoning and thus constitute "pseudoproblems in philosophy," as Carnap famously declared.

However, as we know from works of Popper, Quine, Kuhn or Feyerabend, such standards for rational conclusions proved to be set too high, even for hard sciences. In his solution to this problem, Popper posits that science, rather than being a domain of facts and proofs, consists of "conjectures and refutations." Hence, rational conclusion is one that endures attempts at falsification: after being submitted to critical testing, it still holds. This is the sense of a rational conclusion adopted by pragma-dialectics.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, descriptively oriented researchers seek to find out "how people actually conclude their argumentation?" Depending on the level of institutionalisation of the type

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<sup>1</sup> Krabbe (2007b) provides a particularly illuminating account of the notion of conclusion in pragma-dialectics.

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of activity in which argumentation takes place in real life, (political) disputes can be terminated by anything from “I hereby announce the passage by the Senate of the following bill” to “maybe you’re right, but I gotta run now to catch a train.”

My study sets out to make claims on the two latter levels—it employs a critical normative theory to account for phenomenon of inconclusiveness actually experienced in online discussions. That is the reason why, as Plumer rightly supposes, criticisms of relevance are prominent, even if logically speaking they may be “irrelevant.” That is also the reason why I do not find my analyses as confusing rationality with certitude. Without looking for hard, full-proof grounds a pragmatic dialectician can still claim that irrespective of the subject matter discussions may be concluded (and even concluded rationally): *political* discussions in parliaments and city councils *are* terminated, and usually in an ordered fashion. Further, the possible trade-off between ever open critical testing and concluding of disputes is inscribed into critical, dialectical approaches; that is why, as I stress in the paper, the endpoint should always be seen as “a tentative conclusion, given the circumstances of a particular discussion.” Finally, what I am concerned with are “rational results” in terms of a functional, pragmatic theory of argumentation: various other benefits for arguers, such as honing their argumentation skills, are beyond my analyses just as much as is someone’s intellectual satisfaction from reading these discussions.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, focused on so specified dialectical account of the rationality of online discussions I still find them highly critical and useful venues for argumentation: “even if endless, such discussions are not completely fruitless.” This is in sharp contrast to Plumer who, in a Platonic gesture, seems to be willing to exclude online discussants from the Republic of “informed and skilful arguers.” Such exclusion is, again, against the spirit of the critical principle, according to which argumentation is worthwhile as soon (and as long) as critical testing, that is the back-and-forth of conjectures and refutations, is exercised. And this, as I tried to show in my analyses, is the case with online political discussions.

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