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Anticipating Objections as a Way of Coping With Dissensus

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ABSTRACT: One of the traditional ways in which we manage dissensus is by argumentation, which may be construed as the attempt of the proponent to persuade rationally the other party of the truth (or acceptability) of some thesis. To achieve this, the arguer will often anticipate a possible objection. In this paper, I attempt to shed light on the normative aspect of the task of anticipating objections. I deal with such questions as: How is the arguer to anticipate objections? Which of the anticipated objections are to be dealt with? What is required to deal successfully with an objection?

KEYWORDS: objection, standard objections. anticipating objections, dialectical tier, argumentative space, rational space, dialectical environment

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the traditional ways in which we manage dissensus is by argumentation--construed here as the attempt of the arguer to persuade the other (whom we may suppose to be unpersuaded but open at this point) of the truth (or acceptability) of his thesis. This activity of argumentation depends on their being (some) common ground--the parties must agree to (some) premises, must agree to certain modes of argumentation, forms, etc. The proponent may be seen as seeking to enlarge that common ground by getting the other (however conceived, whether it be an interlocutor, or an audience) to come around to accept the conclusion

Dissensus often manifests itself in the form of the raising an objection, which may be seen as the person's stating one kind of impediment to his or her accepting the argument. That being so, it is natural for the arguer to attempt to forestall the objection by anticipating and responding to it. That activity may lead to the construction of what I call *the dialectical tier* (2000), a phenomenon that is widespread in argumentative practice but which has not been much discussed in argumentation theory.¹

¹ In *Manifest Rationality* (2000), I went further and made anticipating and dealing with objections --the dialectical tier--part of the very idea of argument. In that effort, I wanted to accomplish a number of things. First, I wanted to incorporate into the theory (here into the definition) what I found again and again represented in the practice but not reflected in the theory. Second, I wanted to fortify the conception of argument, out of the conviction that it had become flabby, attenuated (1986). Third, I wanted to bring to the fore an aspect of argument that had not hitherto been thematized: that an argument is not just a rational product (which almost everyone readily concedes), but one that is manifestly so, and that is why arguers do and must anticipate objections.

In this paper, I attempt to provide shed some light on this task, particularly its normative aspects. *How* is the arguer to anticipate objections? Which of the anticipated objections is the arguer obliged to be deal with? What is required to deal successfully with the objections thus anticipated? What is dialectical excellence? I shall not here deal directly with the important question “Exactly what is an objection?”, other than to say it represents the articulation a proposition which might pose a problem for the argument’s success.²

II. THE TASK OF ANTICIPATING OBJECTIONS: THE WHY?

Why does an arguer take the trouble to anticipate objections? Various rationales can and have been offered. For the most part these differences can be traced to one’s approach to argumentation theory. In the literature, it has become customary to discuss three basic approaches to argumentation: the logical, the dialectical and the rhetorical.³ Later I will attempt a more careful delineation of these approaches.

One who takes a rhetorical approach might tend to work this issue through in terms of the audience. For the arguer to construct the argument in the first place, he needs to know who he is trying to persuade. Who constitutes his audience? The arguer must have some sense of the expectations of his audience to even begin the construction. Then he should ask: Which objections will they be aware of and want handled? In this vein, Hitchcock has suggested the following condition:⁴

The arguer is expected to deal with all those objections, which it may be reasonably supposed his audience will expect him to deal with. If you want to persuade your audience,⁵ you have to show that you can handle their objections.

Among those who advocate a rhetorical approach are Wenzel (1989) and Tindale (1999). Those who take a *dialectical approach*⁶ will tend to focus on arguing as a

² See Govier, 1999, Johnson 2001, Finocchiaro 2003.

³ In 2004, I raised concerns about this tripartite distinction, both as to how it is drawn and its apparent exclusivity.

⁴ In Hitchcock’s (unpublished) commentary on my 1996 OPS paper, Arguments and Dialectical Obligations.

⁵ The goal as stated here is rational persuasion. In the first instance, it will be framed as the arguer to rationally persuade the Other/the addressee. But traffic on Persuasion Street flows in both directions; the addressee may persuade the arguer that the argument doesn’t work by formulating a criticism, which shows the arguer a weakness in the argument. This *bidirectional orientation* is one reason that argument cannot adequately be described as “an invitation to inference” (Pinto, 2001). (See my 2000, Chapter 8, where I discuss Johnstone Jr.’s views on bilaterality) For if it is an “invitation,” it must be construed as more complex: as an invitation *either* to draw the inference *or* to indicate why you decline the invitation. The logic of an invitation must allow for the possibility of a “No thank you.” Otherwise, it is no invitation but rather a command, in which case we would have left the realm of argumentative space. Also, one can decline an invitation without giving a reason, though it is customary to cite one. And the reason one gives may be other than the reason one has; everyone understands this. Politeness and tact are factors here. These conditions do not seem hold sway in the realm of argument—at least as I conceive it, where the reasons one has to support and the reasons one gives must coincide—for reasons of manifestness. I have other reservations about the idea of argument as an invitation to inference, but they are not pertinent to matters under discussion here.

⁶ The term “dialectical” is freighted with baggage. It is in wide use in argumentation theory: I have already mentioned Wenzel’s use; van Eemeren and Grootendorst adopted as part of the name for their pragma-dialectical approach. I use it in MR to characterize, not an approach to argument, but to characterize a trait

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process/activity that takes place between two parties. In this setting, it is important to be able to anticipate objections that one's interlocutor might raise.⁷ This is a more-well defined task, because one will typically have "a reading" of one's interlocutor. Some approaches come from a *strategic* direction: anticipating objections is just a good move to make.⁸ It helps to achieve the goal of persuasion, or of a critical discussion.⁹ Those who take the *logical approach* focus on the argument as product rather than arguing as process and sees this task as an important one in producing a good argument. More about this approach below. Some approaches are more empirically oriented: such an approach will argue that anticipating objections is what works... or, perhaps, if you do not anticipate objections, your argument will suffer (O'Keefe, 2002, 2006).

The approach that I take may be characterized as at once logical and pragmatic, is based on two considerations. First, my theory of argument is constructed around the goal of rational persuasion.¹⁰ The setting I foresee is what, following Haworth (2000) might be called the ethos of a seminar room. In this setting, which I later will characterize as in argumentative space, if you want to persuade other members of the seminar and you know that one of them is likely to raise a certain objection, then to achieve your goal you must deal with that objection, forestall it, as it were. The biologist, Francis Collins, refers to how well C.S. Lewis anticipated and dealt with his objections to faith: "I realized that all of my own constructs against the plausibility of faith were those of a schoolboy... Lewis seemed to know all of my objections, sometimes before I had quite formulated them. He invariably addressed them within a page or two" (Collins, 2006, 21). Here my justification has a rhetorical dimension.¹¹ But there is a second justification that flows from my conception of argument as *manifest rationality*. An argument is a rational product through and through; it is an exercise in rationality in which the parties are interested in both the substance and the appearance of rationality (2000, 163-64). Not to acknowledge objections is, in most contexts, a failure not just of rationality but to make that rationality manifest. It will appear to be a failure, a lapse of rationality. To whom? To those to whom the argument is addressed. Thus, the task of anticipating and responding

of the practice of argumentation itself. For some further reflections on this, see my (2004, 486ff). Then there is the term "dialogical"—this one perhaps easier to pin down. See Walton (1985) who refers to the work of Lorenz and Lorenzen, Barth and Krabbe. On the relationship between dialectical and dialogical, see Blair (1998), Finocchiaro (2003) and Govier (2006).

⁷ In a sense, this task is otiose for those who take the pragma-dialectical approach. One need not anticipate one's interlocutor's objection, because the presumption is that one's interlocutor will raise the objections he or she finds important. But this fact illustrates the point that there are more than cosmetic differences between approaches (Johnson, 1994).

⁸ When I Googled the phrase "anticipate objections," I found that at least half of the first 20 hits were to WebPages having to do with how to sell a product effectively.

⁹ Strategic aims may dovetail with rhetorical ones, viz., the concept of strategic maneuvering as developed by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002).

¹⁰ I cannot argue it here but I believe this purpose is the fundamental one and others (like justification, inquiry, reinforcement) can be generated from it. My strategy would be to mount an argument that parallels Wittgenstein's argument that first we learn to talk to others, then to ourselves. We justify to others; then to self.

¹¹ The difference is that you cannot ask the Other what his objections are. Govier (1999) calls this Other "the non-interactive audience."

to objections is part of the very rationality of the practice, and as well of making the rationality manifest.¹²

I now move to a discussion of the how and the why.

III. THE TASK OF ANTICIPATING OBJECTIONS: THE HOW

How does one go about the task of anticipating an objection? This undertaking occurs naturally in the course of constructing one's argument. In our text, *Logical Self-Defense*--we advise the arguer to think about the possible objections his or her argument might face (2006, pp. 252-53). Strange to say that while many authors recommend this step--anticipate objections to your argument-- few give much detailed advice about how to do it. We tell our students that they must "read the text carefully"--but this, as Moira Gutteridge once remarked, is no more helpful to the budding analyst than to say "Play the piano beautifully" is to the budding pianist (2006, p. 20). What can be done to help them learn how to read carefully? If we transfer to the current situation, the question is: What can be done to help them develop strategies for anticipating objections?

The simplest strategy, and the one that I suspect most follow, goes like this. Once one has formulated the essence of one's argument [the illative core], one re-reads that argument with critical eye. Certain objections will perhaps "come to mind." They will occur to one in that frame of mind; they will emerge in a voice that says: "But what about...?" One then puts these objections into words and responds to them (the dialectical tier).

Another strategy is to put yourself in your opponent's shoes and ask: what sorts of objections is he or she likely to bring? Sometimes to stock one's imagination, one gives the argument to someone who, one thinks, will give it a close read; then gets their feedback that will include objections. These can then be included and replied to in what I have termed the dialectical tier (Johnson, 2000). One is thus able to "anticipate the objection," because it has already been given voice.

Perhaps even more effective is the step of immersing oneself in the issue and the various positions that have developed. That means becoming familiar with the dialectical environment of the argument--a construct I will offer an analysis of later. The better one knows the dialectical environment (up to point),¹³ the more successful one can be in anticipating various objections. Because one then knows what sorts of objections are around, what sorts of objections others have raised. One will be familiar with the alternative positions and possibly be able to immerse oneself in them in order to see how someone who holds that view might object. One can then make use one's knowledge of similar argumentative situations to extrapolate to the current one.¹⁴

Typically some of this thinking occurs in the construction of the argument---so it is likely the dialectical environment will influence the arguer in the very formation of the argument. In the selection of one's premises, one's lines of argument, one may well have

¹² Only recently have I become aware that my views here echo those of Habermas who thinks of argument in terms of its being patent, transparent (1984). I owe my awareness of this aspect of Habermas's views to Bickenbach and Davies (2001).

¹³ The reason for the qualifier is that knowledge and commitment often produce blinders not shared by some who comes to the issue less laden.

¹⁴ Thanks to Hans V. Hansen for this suggestion.

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in mind what is needed to stave off a certain objection. Possibly there will exist what are called *standard objections*,¹⁵ so those will have to be dealt with in the dialectical tier. In this way the illative core and dialectical tier interface. Someone might object (sic!) to my separation of the two by noting that even in the construction of core of one's argument, one will often be taking into account potential objections, so that what I call the dialectical tier is, as it were, "folded in" to the illative core. Obviously, having just conceded this point, I agree. There is a dynamic interaction between the illative core and dialectical tier; this, however, does not render either superfluous.¹⁶ Indeed for there to be such a relationship, there must be a distinction. There have been attempts to develop more *systematic approaches*, like the one we (Johnson and Blair) developed in *Logical Self-Defense* (first in 2e, 1983). We recommend that one look for objections by focussing on the connection between the premises and the conclusion: Ask this question: Is there a way for the premises to be true and the conclusion false? Is there a counterexample? Another way to locate an objection is looking at the premises and asking if there are ways that they might be false. But there are problems with this approach. First, it is premised on what I call the (P+I) approach to argument analysis (2000, pp.75, 167). That is, it assumes the would-be anticipator has analyzed the argument in question into something like premise and conclusion form and has some sense of the inferential link between the premises and conclusion. I have some reservations about seeing the structure this way. First, it is not always easy to see the link—especially in arguments with a complex structure (sub-arguments). Second, this advice seems to come quite close to the strategy of deductive reconstruction—looking for a counterexample is looking for a possible situation in which the premises can be true and the conclusion false, this is in effect showing that the argument is invalid.¹⁷ But it seems to me unwise to build that standard into the very idea of argument construction. Third, my experience teaches me that most objections interdict the argument *obliquely*. That is, they rarely target a specific premise or a connection; at least as often they focus on some tacit element—an assumption, implication, presupposition or what have you.

In any event, the question of how to go about anticipating objections is crucial to the process of argumentation. It requires both skill and a certain imaginative flair, and it deserves far more attention from argumentation theorists than it has received thus far.

My own sense is that we can get some clarity here by reflecting using argumentative space as a metaphor that will function as a prelude to my introduction of the idea of dialectical environment.

IV. ARGUMENTATIVE SPACE AND THE DIALECTICAL ENVIRONMENT

Introductory Comments

Spatial metaphors occur commonly in the discourse about argument. We hear people speak of "the ground floor" or "the foundation" of the argument. We speak of an

¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, there has never been a serious attempt to analyze this important notion. I will have a few suggestions in this paper, as well as some suggestions about the significance of this *gap*.

¹⁶ Finocchiaro (2003) contains the most thorough dissection/criticism of my ideas regarding the dialectical tier.

¹⁷ Godden (2005) argues that counterexamplifying does not necessarily have to invoke validity.

argument as being able to “withstand” objections that are directed at it—combining the spatial and mobile. Objections themselves can be said to achieve a certain “prominence” or “salience. We ask whether the argument or position can be “rebuilt” so as to get around the criticism. Alternative positions are described as being “very far apart” or “close together.” Arguments jockey with one another for attention in “logical (dialectical) space.” Moreover, when we have to represent the structure of arguments, techniques like tree diagramming and Toulmin diagrams. Horne (1999) and Yoshimi (2005) combine spatial with diachronical modes.

I find the metaphor of argumentative space¹⁸ suggestive, and propose to use it here to see what heuristic value it has. There are several potential advantages to this metaphor. First, we can present argumentative space as a subspace within rational space and thereby differentiate argument from other types of rational products: theory, explanation, inference, etc. Second, the metaphor is flexible; it can be used to represent arguments statically, as I will tend to use it; or dynamically. Argument as event, process, activity or product, outcome can all be successfully explicated using this metaphor. (Also, I have found it a useful way to introduce students to the practice of argumentation.¹⁹) Third, and to the point here, the metaphor can be used to define the notion of the dialectical environment of an argument in which dialectical material accumulates. Among such material will be the objections that have been raised. That leads to the last potential advantage: we can offer an account of the standard objections as those that have achieved salience in the neighborhood of the argument, as I shall discuss later.

Rational Space

Since I regard argument as a manifestation of rationality, I begin with the notion of rational space. By “rational space,” I mean to characterise the area in which occurs the activities and the results of the activities (inquiry or discourse) in which “rationality rules”; i.e., in which some rules (or principles or requirements of rationality) are acknowledged as having determinative (more or less) of the events that transpire in that space and their resolution. It is rational space because reasons and reasons alone have regulative force. It is not thereby denied that exchanges will have other dimensions—rhetorical, emotional—just that these do not play a determinative role in the evaluation/criticism/resolution of these activities and products. (For the moment, I am assuming nothing more than a bare-bones conception of rationality as was discussed in MR, pp. 12-14.)

¹⁸ Herewith a brief history of this notion. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein introduced the notion of logical space to help explain the relationship between language and the world, between propositions and facts. In the informal logic movement, the idea of representing the structure of arguments spatially has a long history stretching back at least as far as Monroe Beardsley (1963) and thence forward to Thomas’s adaptation, Scriven’s tree diagramming methods, etc. Somewhat closer to the sense in which it is used in the present inquiry are Barth’s notion of a *dialectical field* (1993) and Tindale’s notion of a *cognitive environment* (1999). Parallel to my concerns, Govier (1999) makes use of the idea of *space* to define an alternative position as one which competes with another in what she calls “intellectual and social space.”

¹⁹ I tell them: “When you enter argumentative space, there are certain rules that have to be followed: such as: “You must direct your attack to the argument, not the arguer. Attack the strongest plausible version of the argument. You must provide support for your claims.” Etc. Inevitably we will have the discussion about such questions as: Who says these are the rules? Who gets to make the rules?

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For example, problem-solving is an activity/event/process that occurs in rational space. A problem is defined or set, solutions to it are proposed, and the merits of alternative solutions are weighed in terms of their capacity to solve the problem (and, of course, other things such as their implications and consequences). In this activity, those involved typically do not consult (or at least they would say that they do not consult) other factors, such as their personal feelings about the proposer of the solution, nor yet how well written is the prose in which the solution is presented (though in some other endeavour, it might well be crucial to take such factors into account). Even things which ordinarily might be taken into account, such as the motivation behind the proposed solution, do not really matter in rational space. That is, they are understood to have no effect on the outcome. Much of science and mathematics, may be construed as problem-solving activity that occurs in rational space. Theories must gain their acceptance or rejection independent of the personality of the proposers and any associated emotions or feelings they might raise. For example, it was widely known that J. B. Watson was a something of a cad yet this truth about him was simply not a factor in deciding whether or not to accept his proposal regarding the structure of DNA. It may be that Stephen Hawking's health problems have been inspiring to the wider public, but it would be very surprising to learn that feelings of empathy have had any determinative role in the evaluation of his views in the scientific community. Imagine a physicist saying to a colleague: "Poor Hawking: he's in a bad way, so let's give him a lift and accept his theory." No: his scientific work is judged by the very same standards as any other scientist's. He receives no special consideration because of his infirmity (though he might well get such in other circumstances, viz., at the hospital). Most of the disciplines take place in rational space.²⁰ Examples of communications not in rational space would be: the speeches given by political candidates, advertising.

We can also distinguish between rational space and emotional space. To make such a demarcation does not commit me to the view that there is an inherent and unalterable tension between Reason and Emotion, nor yet between these two types of space. It is rather to mark that they are different. In emotional space, the need to vent or share or explore or own one's or others emotional states, reactions, processes is primary.²¹ Therapeutic transactions are typically situated in emotional space where the point is not to think, but to feel. Thus the directive: "Get out of your head." And there are spaces that are mixed. For examples of arguments in mixed spaces, I would point to political speeches where the rational, emotional and rhetorical must be woven together; the "Letters to the Editors" page of the newspaper,²² and as well to what Gilbert ((1997) calls "kisceral" and "visceral argumentation."²³

²⁰ One of the most compelling indications arises from the fact that most journals adopt the policy of blind refereeing precisely to eliminate potential biases arising from knowledge of the identity of the author (ethos).

²¹ To be sure cognition is at work here but the *telos* is an emotional result, not a cognitive one; though many believe that a cognitive one must precede (or accompany).

²² See the advice to letter writers given by Paul Russell who edits *The National Post* "Letters to the Editor" section. The National Post, January 15, 2007, A15. He writes: "Appeal to reader's emotions....Last week, for example, we carried a handful of passionate letters from parents of children with Downs syndrome. Readers sent in notes saying they were moved to tears by these letters, which stimulated both the heart and the mind."

²³ I question whether the focus of Gilbert's theory is best described as argumentation. It seems to me that his focal point is better described as communication, a much broader category. There will be justified expectations and norms that apply to some forms of communication (a conversation) that will not apply to argumentation.

Naturally the question will be asked: what are the rules that govern conduct in rational space? And what are the criteria to be applied to the products that emerge? The general rule would be that reasons (and reasons alone) play the dominant role in rational space. More particular rules will be a function of the particular area of rational space that the particular activity or inquiry occurs within. The rules that one must abide by in solving a mathematical problem are slightly different than those which one must abide by in physics and so on. I have said earlier that the setting I envisage is the seminar room, where issues are discussed, arguments presented. Each discipline, and perhaps each sub-discipline, may be characterised as having such rules, procedures and criteria. It must be acknowledged that some developments within the discipline are not mandated by these rules and methods. The space in which our disciplines operate probably cannot be characterised as completely rational. But in the seminar room it is the force of one's reasons and argumentation--and that alone-- that is judged relevant to the outcome.

These comments form the background for my discussion of argumentative space.

Argumentative Space

One important subspace with rational space is argumentative space. Clearly, rational space is broader than argumentative space as there are all sorts of rational processes, events, products that are not argument. To take the stock example: explanation (see Govier, 1987; Johnson & Blair, 1983). A more controversial example would be inference. Many *conflate argument with inference*, but I have argued that such conflation is a serious (deeply engrained) mistake (2000, 92-94).²⁴ When one is attempting to draw an inference to the best explanation, one is certainly in rational space, for one is considering factors such like simplicity and coherence. But that does not thereby put one into argumentative space. The goal and criteria of evaluation are different for an explanation. Simplicity is a criterion for evaluating an explanation, but not for an argument.

By argumentation, I mean to denote a special area that lies within rational space where rationality is especially important. To understand this area of rational space, it necessary to situate argumentation within its proper context: the practice of argumentation. By "the practice of argumentation," I mean to refer to socio-cultural activity of constructing, presenting, interpreting, analyzing, criticising and revising arguments.²⁵ This activity cannot be understood as the activity of any individual or group of individuals, but rather must be understand within the network of customs, habits and activities of the broader society which gives birth to it, which continues to maintain it and which the practice serves.²⁶ I want to use the metaphor which sees all of this occurring within a subspace of rational space that is argumentative space.

As I mentioned in Section II There are various approaches to/perspectives on the study of argumentation. Many theorists, follow Wenzel (1989) in distinguishing three: the

²⁴ See Finocchiaro (2005: 311-313) for his critique of my views.

²⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the Commentary by Maurice Finocchiaro for drawing my attention to this lapse which has been repaired here in the final version but which did not appear in the version on which he commented.

²⁶ See my (2000: 154-56) for more discussion of this matter.

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rhetorical, dialectical and logical.²⁷ According to Wenzel, the *rhetorical* approach focuses on *procedure*, which in turn brings into the picture the audience. The role of argument in effective communication²⁸ when is an argument *an effective* argument? The *dialectical* approach focuses largely on the *process* and on arguing as an interpersonal activity (dialogue) and seek to develop rules that govern these activities. The *logical* approach has traditionally been focused on the argument as a product that emerges in the process of inquiry and rational persuasion; logic is particularly interested in the normative issues such as: What are the criteria of a good argument? There are other approaches (empirical, linguistic) but these are the three that I am interested in here. My characterization of argumentative space proceeds from the perspective of logic. Those who adopt the rhetorical perspective will likely have a different characterization; and those who take the dialectical approach a still different one. Thus, one of the values of this metaphor is that it offers a convenient vehicle whereby these approaches can be differentiated. That is, a rhetorician will construe argumentative space differently from the logician.²⁹

Let us think, then, of an argument as a position established at a particular *location* in argumentative space. The location will be determined largely by the conclusion of the argument which will indicate *what issue* is being addressed.³⁰ By *the issue*, I mean to characterize in the general terms *the topic or focus*, which can typically be phrased this way: “whether or not *p*”—where *p* is a proposition—typically one that states what is the case or what should be done. By a *position* I mean a reasoned point of view on the issue—typically an argument that provides reasons for the conclusion. Take the issue of whether or not there is a God. Classically there are three positions: theism--which defends the view that there is God; atheism--which defends the view that there is no God; and agnosticism--which defends the view that we cannot know whether there is or is not. Now the arguments that have been developed to support theism are varied. Thus, Anselm defends theism using what is called the ontological argument. Descartes presents his own version of the ontological argument which bears some resemblance to Anselm’s; Aquinas presents five quite different arguments for the existence of God--none of them an ontological one. These can all be mapped as locations in argumentative space.³¹

²⁷I have some problems with the distinction (process, procedure, product) used by Wenzel in his explanation of the distinction. My own view about this tripartite distinction is found in my (2004).

²⁸ In saying this I am aware of the enormous difficulties of giving an account of “the rhetorical point of view” or “perspective. There is no non-controversial way to draw this distinction nor yet to characterize the rhetorical approach

²⁹ In (1997) I attempted to distinguish between the logical and the rhetorical approaches, using the metaphor of argumentative space.

³⁰ See Goodwin (2004) on the importance of this concept and how much in need of thoughtful attention it is. Two additional points. First, whether X is an issue or not can be controversial. Some wish to say that whether or not there was a holocaust is an issue—but that view has not been generally persuasive (Haworth, 1998). Second, how the issue is to be formulated can be problematic, often itself becoming “the issue.”

³¹ I have mentioned the fascinating and important work done by Horn, “Mapping Great Debates: Can Computers Think?” (1998). In another article, “Teaching Philosophy with Argumentation Maps,” *Newsletter of the American Philosophical Association* (November 2000), he writes: “The main structure of our maps is that of a large tree with many branches. (See Fig. 1) The tree begins with Turing's claim, quoted above. The structure is then quite simple. It proceeds by laying out the branches of claim, rebuttal, and counterrebuttal. One of our criteria for mapping the debates was that if there was no debate, the claim did not make it on to the charts. Such agreements are most often found in the sidebars on our maps.” Horn

As an element in the position, the argument will have its own structure and content. The premises may be said to point in the direction of the conclusion, to move us toward the conclusion. I have argued that typically an argument must have a dialectical tier in which the arguer confronts dialectical material, such as objections or criticisms directed at the argument, as well as observations, questions. This material can be represented graphically as being in the neighborhood of the argument and directed at it. Shortly I will present a proposal regarding the classification of this material.

An argument that concludes that gun control laws should be strengthened is in the same general area of argumentative space as one that concludes that gun control laws should not be strengthened. Among the neighbors will be other arguments bearing on the same issue that defend a different conclusion. These will be *alternative positions*. The space around the gun control issue will perhaps abut that about violence, but be located in a very different region than arguments about whether there should be a tax cut, and all of these in a very different region than arguments about whether the external world exists.

The Dialectical Environment

By “the dialectical environment” of an argument, I mean to refer to the dialectical material (objections, criticisms, alternative positions, etc) that congregates around an *issue*. It is a sub-partitioning of argumentative space. Take, for example, the issue of whether or not same sex marriage should be legal in Canada. A mapping of the dialectical environment surrounding this issue would require us to lay out the various positions, the objections and criticisms of those positions, the responses to them. Obviously the map will be complex and constantly changing, and no individual has anything other than a more or less accurate up-to-date map at any given moment. The map will change over time, as some objections loom larger, gain advocacy and presence, while others lose some. As arguers continue to weigh in, new positions will be introduced into the environment, and perhaps some older ones will recede or disappear. In all this, some objections achieve *salience*—a property that needs to be better understood that I discuss later.

A pivotal notion in understanding the dialectical environment is that of *the issue*. Every argument addresses some issue (I). The issue can usually be put in the form of a “whether or not ...” formulation: whether or not there is a God; whether or not we should have invaded Iraq. The arguer will put forth an argument in which he outlines his position. Likely the arguer will be aware of at least some alternative positions (so these may be pictured as part of the dialectical environment) and as closer or further removed from the argument.

has chosen to focus on mapping debates—a close analog to what I am engaged in here. His use of the

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Issue (Whether or not there is a God)

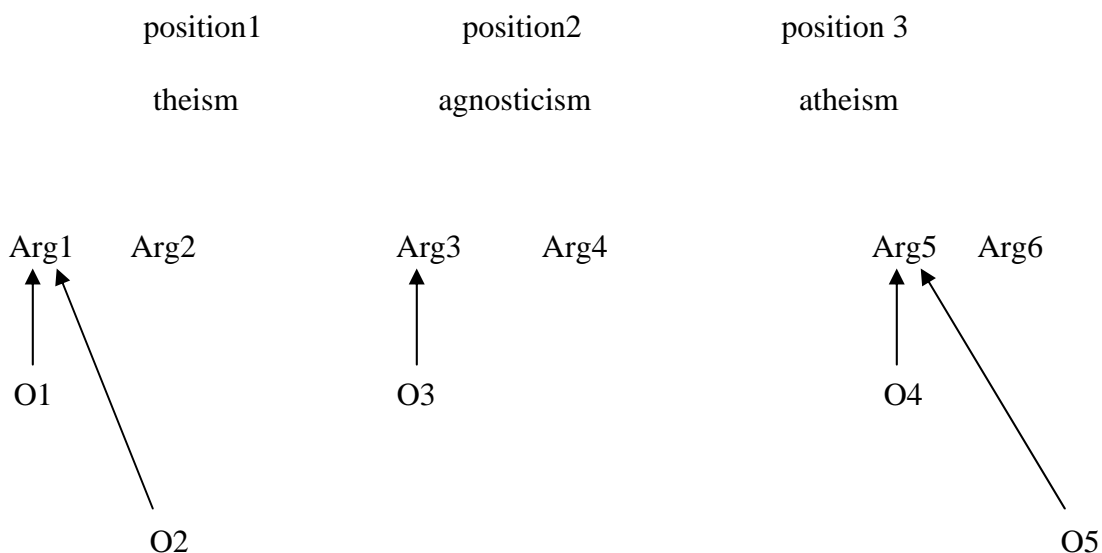


FIGURE 1

The arguer may also be aware of certain objections that may be raised against his position --some of which will come from those who have adopted an alternative position.

Once the argument has been sent into argumentative space (a public sphere), it may well attract attention and occasion objections and/or criticisms.³² So the dialectical environment surrounding an issue and surrounding a specific location may well consist of various kinds of dialectical material: objections that have been raised, alternative positions on the issue (in which that arguer may make reference to the argument), and criticisms, among others. In some cases, the dialectical environment is empty. In such a case, the arguer's dialectical obligations are nil. It remains an important task to have a useful inventory of the types of dialectical material.³³

With these considerations in mind, we can now turn to the normative issues.

V. ANTICIPATING OBJECTIONS: THE NORMATIVE ISSUES

There are two normative issues that the arguer faces in anticipating an objection. First, what are the arguer's obligations in this matter? What objection(s) may he or she be reasonably expected to have anticipated? Second, what is required to discharge that obligation? Maybe it is better to think less in terms of dialectical adequacy and more in terms of dialectical excellence at this level. What does dialectical excellence look like? What would an argument that did a really good job of anticipating and responding to objections look like? Strange to say that we have no important types of argument paradigms of this. Certainly the old war-horse: "All men are mortal, Socrates is a man;

Toulmin scheme is somewhat limiting for those of us who have problems with its fundamental architecture.

³² In my (2002) I distinguish between an objection and a criticism

³³ I made such an attempt in my (2001).

therefore Socrates is mortal” whatever its other merits are — when viewed from the perspective of manifesting how the arguer deals with his dialectical obligations — is useless.

One theorist who has given attention to these matters is Trudy Govier who has urged a position that she calls “pragmatic minimalism.” Let’s start with that.

Govier’s Pragmatic Minimalism

Govier says:

In the meantime, we might adopt a pragmatic minimalist version of Johnson’s account, to good pedagogical and personal effect. Minimally, we might stipulate that when a person puts forward an argument for a claim C, he or she should, in addition to checking the argument for cogency, discover or construct one alternative position to C, one objection to C, and one objection to the argument for C; think these through these objections and that alternative fairly and carefully; and seek to respond to them as thoroughly and carefully as possible. (238)

What Govier has provided is a kind of template for achieving dialectical adequacy. Yet I have some difficulties with her position, for three reasons.

First, her position is developed in terms of her theory of objections with which I have some disagreement. For one thing, I suspect that responding to an objection to a conclusion will turn out to be not substantially different from responding to an alternate position. In which case, this requirement is possibly redundant. *Second*, her pragmatic minimalism makes no provision for differing types or strength of the objection, for the quite real possibility of that there will be priority relations among them; i.e., some objections are “stronger” than others and thus, it seems to me, have a stronger claim on the arguer’s attention. What about so-called standard objections? It is reasonable to expect the arguer to be aware of them and to respond to them—but her account makes no provisions for this. Also: If there should be a well-known objection (even if it is not one of the standard objections), the arguer has an obligation to deal with it. *Third*, her stipulation seems somewhat arbitrary (a charge she has made against my position): why one rather than two objections?

Let me, then, propose an alternative account of dialectical strength that involves providing answers to what I take to be the two central questions.

Q1: What are the arguer’s obligations?

In the matter of determining the arguer’s obligations, a number of issues are involved. What is the basis of this obligation? What kind of obligation is it: epistemic? deontological? prudential? There is also the objection that goes this way: It is not possible to have a policy or principle here that will cover all situations. For the most important factor is context. Some might say: “It all depends....” on context. Leff has made just such an objection (1999), and many others have echoed it. But I don’t think it *all* depends on context, that these matters are all so situationally specific as to prohibit the possibility of general standards, which is what I am attempting to provide here.

Suppose for a moment we invoke the now out-of-fashion military terminology, thinking of an objection as an attempted strike against the position. The need to anticipate and defend against depends on how much force the volley has, which is partly a function

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of where it is launched from (the further the less likely to cause harm) and its own inherent strength (its capacity to destroy). Both *proximity* and *strength* are factors to be considered in determining one's dialectical obligations. If the volley comes from very far away, I may safely ignore it, since it is unlikely to strike the target. If the volley is weak, then even if it hits it will not do serious damage so again I may safely and reasonably ignore it. An important feature that combines both strength and proximity is *salience*: "how large" the objection looms in the dialectical environment.

Thus my rough analysis suggests the following as factors in determining one's dialectical obligations: (i) strength: the stronger the objection is, the stronger its claim on the arguer; (ii) proximity—the closer it is to the arguer's position, the stronger its claim on the arguer; (iii) salience—the more salient the objection in the dialectical environment, the stronger its claim on the arguer to respond. These claims depend upon my being able to "translate out" from the metaphor—a task for the future.

There is an undeniably epistemic dimension to this issue. In anticipating objections, the arguer cannot reasonably be expected to anticipate and deal with every possible objection. The arguer is certainly going to be limited by his or her knowledge of the dialectical environment. No one can be aware of all the arguments that might be pertinent. Still it is always possible that the arguer is unaware of an objection that, we want to say, he or she should have been aware of.

It is possible that the argument has raised a new issue, so that there are no standard objections and no well-known ones. Then that part of the dialectical environment will be unoccupied.

Q2: What is required for the successful dispatch of one's dialectical obligations? What is dialectical excellence?

To answer this question, it is helpful to reflect on an example. In *The World We Want*, Mark Kingwell is discussing The Universal Declaration of Human Rights—a document of produced by the United Nation in 1988. It included the provision that "the will of the people will be the basis of all legitimate government...and that will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections" (48-49). He writes: "Perhaps anticipating objections that would soon be leveled against this so-called rights discourse by various anti-liberal critics, the Declaration also articulates the responsibilities and duties of humans living in society" (49). Here Kingwell is imagining that critics of the Declaration might raise the following objection: "You speak of rights, but you nowhere speak of the duties and responsibilities of human living in society."

In the background here, there have been numerous exchanges between the various points of view on this matter in which advocates of human rights have been challenged with this line of objection. Hence the objection--you ignore duties—apparently has achieved a certain prominence. Once this has happened we expect anyone who argues about this issue to address this sort of objection. In doing so, the arguers are engaged in constructing a dialectical tier for their argument. That dialectical tier consists has two elements. For each objection that is given voice, the arguer must first state that objection. Then the arguer must respond satisfactorily, or well, to that objection, provided he wishes to maintain his position over against the objection. What does this entail?

I maintain then that excellence requires the satisfaction of three requirements (Johnson, 2003, 2006). First, the arguer must accurately and faithfully state the objection—the danger here being the fallacy of straw person. It can be extremely hard to get right the objection which you think doesn't hit the mark. Second, the arguer must make an *adequate* response; i.e., must argue that the objection is not on target, does not really damage the argument. (There are other alternatives, to be sure. See my (2006) for fuller treatment of this point.) Because this response will itself be an argument, its adequacy can be judged by the criteria one uses for argument evaluation. There is a difficult issue here. Let me quote Finocchiaro's way of putting it. He says that: "... to be really good, an argument should also have the resources to answer or refute subsequent objections" (2005, 320). Now the question that is vexing me could be put this way: *What, precisely, are the resources that an argument has with which it must answer or refute objections?* Clearly, the arguer cannot just repeat, or shuffle and deal again, the premises of the argument in question, under pain of begging the question. So the arguer will have to use some additional material, but what sort of material is he entitled to use? What restrictions are there on this additional material? Let's characterize this additional resource material as $R_1R_2R_3...R_n$. It's clear that no R_i may contradict any of the arguer's stated or implicit premises. And it must be the case that the additional R_i do not, when invoked, make or require any essential change to the argument as originally presented. For the whole idea of rejecting the objection is that one can show it to be invalid. Thus the argument stands as is. But one cannot achieve that if one makes any *substantial* change to the original argument. So those two conditions strike me as clear constraints on the use of additional material. I am sure there is more to be said.

There is, however, a third component: the objection(s) anticipated must be appropriate. By that I mean that if the arguer deals with several objections but fails to give voice to a well-known and important objection (one that is salient/looms large in the dialectical environment)—then the arguer's response, even if it satisfies the accuracy and adequacy requirements, is not rationally satisfying because the arguer has omitted/failed to deal with an objection which, it can reasonably be claimed, he ought to have dealt with.

Thus I arrive at the following criteria for dialectical adequacy. The arguer, in his response to those objections s/he is obliged to deal with, must satisfy the three requirements of accuracy, adequacy³⁴ and appropriateness (2003). One might think these matters of degree, in which case dialectical excellence would mean that the argument does an excellent job of satisfying all three requirements, or is dialectically strong when it is strong on each criterion.

My final point is to ask the question: why has it taken so long for these issues to emerge? And why did it take informal logicians to raise them? I leave these questions for another occasion.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, a number of questions and issues requiring attention have emerged: The primary ones are these:

³⁴ I think this unhappy terminology here, using "adequacy" to refer to the criterion and also a dimension of it. Which is one reason to favour excellence as the generic title.

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How is the arguer to anticipate objections?

Why should the arguer undertake this task?

What constitutes dialectical adequacy/excellence?

In their wake a number of ancillary questions also have arisen:

What is an objection?

What kinds of objections are there?

How are we to understand the standard objections?

How does an objection become a standard?

I have introduced the ideas of argumentative space and dialectical environment to help answer these questions; and more recently, the idea that objections have proximity, strength and salience—all of which notions are at this point more metaphor than developed doctrine. Can these metaphors factors be successfully translated out/cashed in?

It is obvious that this paper has been more an exploration of these issues than an attempt at their resolution; serious reflection on these matters being still largely in its infancy. While there have been thorough and ongoing inquiries into e.g., the nature of argument, into what makes for a good argument, whether there is a type of inference other than deductive and inductive (the hunt for “a third way”), matters having to do with dialectical adequacy have gone largely unattended. Questions such as what is an objection, what makes for a good objection, a strong objection, and what for a good response—which are dealt with on a regular basis in part of argumentative practice have not been adequately theorized. At the very least my hope is that this paper will cause others to take these matters in hand.

[link to commentary](#)

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