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Commentary on Frans H. van Eemeren and Bart Garssen, “Argumentative Patterns in Plenary Debates in the European Parliament”

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It is quite an honor to be asked to comment on this paper by Drs. van Eemeren and Garssen. Pragma-dialectical theory has a rich heritage (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004; Houtlosser & van Rees 2006); strategic maneuvering is a development that moves this theory in a new and useful direction (van Eemeren 2010). Pragma-dialectical theory can be viewed as a normative theory, concerned with evaluating the quality of argumentation. The concept of strategic maneuvering adds rhetorical concerns because argumentation – just like rhetoric generally – concerns advocates who are attempting to persuade particular audiences. Accordingly, two ways to evaluate an argument can be identified: (1) We can evaluate the quality of the argumentation from a critic’s standpoint and/or (2) we can evaluate how well the advocate tailored argumentation for the particular audience so as to achieve a persuasive goal.

Deliberative bodies, such as the European Parliament, consider the pros and cons of proposed governmental policy. Disagreements over public policy often have the potential to affect many citizens. The authors discuss a very interesting instance of policy argument using argument by example from Carl Schlyter in 2011 related to a proposed policy on deceptive food labeling. They identify two key elements of this argument: an existential claim (ingredients on many food labels are misleading) and a normative component (misleading food labels are fraudulent; see van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Henkemans 2002, p. xiii). There is no reason for a deliberative body to take action unless (1) some state of affairs exists (existential claim) and (2) that situation is undesirable (normative claim). These two elements are very important in public deliberation and I applaud their approach to this instance of public argument.

The systematic way these authors outline arguments is both interesting and useful. I would like to see their analysis of additional examples of deliberative argument patterns.

I want to second the authors’ call for quantitative research on the frequency of argumentative patterns based on argument by example. I assume they would also endorse quantitative research on the frequency of other forms of argument in addition to example. They suggest that argument by analogy often characterizes legal argument and I agree. It seems reasonable to think that argument by example is a common pattern in deliberative argument; however, I do not know that deliberative argument is limited to argument by example (nor do the authors make that claim). Descriptive work on the patterns of argument actually employed in deliberations would add greatly to the richness of our understanding of public argumentation.

The authors are also correct when they suggest that the literature would benefit from an analysis of why argument by example seems so well-suited to deliberative argument. I suspect it is at least partially related to the adage that “seeing is believing,” providing an example of a problem increases the likelihood that the audience will accept the problem as real. But that is just a thought. There is no question that additional work in this area would benefit the field.

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