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978-0-521-88617-8 - Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach, Second Edition

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Argument as reasoned dialogue

The goal of this book is to help the reader use critical methods to impartially and reasonably evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of arguments. The many examples of arguments studied in this text are familiar, yet controversial specimens from such sources as political debates, legal arguments, international disputes on foreign policy, scientific controversies, consumer decision-making questions, ethical problems, and health issues. Any argument, including contexts of lively debate, conflict of opinion, reasoned persuasion, questioning, criticism or cross-examination, can be usefully analyzed by the methods that follow.

It is to be emphasized that the methods of this undertaking are essentially practical. They come as much or more under the topic of what is properly called logical pragmatics, as opposed to (semantical) logical theory. Logical theory traditionally has tended to emphasize semantic relationships, that is, relationships between sets of true or false propositions (the subject-matter of chapter 5 in this text). Logical pragmatics has to do with the use of these propositions by an arguer to carry out a goal of dialogue in reasoning with a second participant in the dialogue. One common and important type of goal is to successfully convince or persuade another arguer with whom the first arguer is engaged in reasoned dialogue. In logical theory, an argument is a set of propositions, nothing more or less. And all that matters is the truth or falsehood of these propositions. The wider context of dialogue is not taken into account. In logical pragmatics, an argument is a claim which, according to appropriate procedures of reasonable dialogue, should be relevant to proving or establishing the arguer's conclusion at issue.

Logical semantics then, is centrally concerned with the propositions that make up an argument. Logical pragmatics is concerned with the reasoned use of those propositions in dialogue to carry out a goal, for example, to build or refute a case to support one's side of a contentious issue in a context of dialogue. It is concerned with what is done with those propositions in a context of dialogue, what use is made of them, to convince another arguer. Logical pragmatics is a practical discipline, an applied art.

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The distinction between semantics and pragmatics can be picturesquely illustrated by considering the following dialogue (Levinson 1983, p. 292):

Example 1.0

A: I have a fourteen-year-old son.

B: Well that's all right.

A: I also have a dog.

B: Oh I'm sorry.

Looked at in isolation from a context, this conversation seems bizarre, but looked at in the context of a conversation about apartment rental, we can see that it is comprehensible immediately. Once we know that B is the supervisor of an apartment complex and that A is looking for an apartment to rent, the dialogue seems natural and no longer bizarre. We know that while children are typically allowed in apartments, allowing a tenant to keep a dog in the apartment may be a problem. From the pragmatic point of view, made evident by filling in the wider context of the dialogue, we can see that B's last move in the dialogue was perfectly appropriate. The participants in the conversation know that they are apartment supervisor and potential tenant, so of course the dialogue makes sense to them.

A typical problem of logical pragmatics is that in a given argument, various important factors of the context of dialogue can be unclear, vague, ambiguous, and generally problematic to pin down. Or they may simply not be known, as in the case of the dialogue above. It may not be clear what the real issue is supposed to be. It may not even be clear what the argument is. Before an argument, or what looks like an argument, can be evaluated as strong or weak, good or bad, it may be a non-trivial job to pin down just what the argument is, or may be taken to be. Much of the work of logical pragmatics is in this preliminary phase of clearing up or clarifying exactly what the argument may reasonably be taken to be.

Of course, it is well known that applying any theory to real, complex objects as they occur in ordinary experience and issues is a project that has certain problems unique to this type of practical endeavor. And so it is with practical logic. Each raw, given argument must be approached with care, and the best use made of the evidence that is given, if it is to be reasonably evaluated. From the pragmatic point of view, any particular argument should be seen as being advanced in the context of a particular dialogue setting. Sensitivity to the special features of different contexts of dialogue is a requirement for the reasoned analysis of an argument.

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1.1 TYPES OF ARGUMENTATIVE DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a sequence of exchanges of messages or speech acts between two (or more) participants. Typically however, dialogue is an exchange of questions and replies between two parties. Every dialogue has a goal, and requires co-operation between the participants to fulfill the goal. This means that each participant has an obligation to work towards fulfilling his own goal in the dialogue, and also an obligation to co-operate with the other participant's fulfillment of his goal. The basic reason why any argument can be criticized as a bad argument always comes down to a failure to meet one of these basic obligations.

One context of dialogue is the *personal quarrel*, characterized by aggressive personal attack, heightened appeal to emotions, and the desire to win the argument at all costs. The quarrel is characterized by bitter recriminations, a loss of balanced perspective, and afterwards, most often regret for excessive personal attacks that were not meant or deserved. The quarrel is no friend of logic, and frequently represents argument at its worst. The goal of the quarrel is for each arguer to attack or "hit" one's opponent at all costs, using any means, whether reasonable, fair, or not. Thus the quarrel is characterized by the fallacious *ad hominem* attack (attack against the person, rather than the argument), and by emotional arguments that would not be judged relevant by more reasonable standards of argument. The quarrel is classified as an eristic type of dialogue (from the Greek word *eris*, meaning a fight or adversarial confrontation), in which each party tries to attack and defeat the other.

The quarrel represents the lowest level of argument. Reasonable standards of good argument should be designed to prevent argument from deteriorating into the personal quarrel. Most of the logical lessons to be drawn from the quarrel turn out to be pathological. The quarrel too often represents the bad argument, the heated argument, the medium of fallacies, vicious attacks and one-sided criticisms that should be avoided or discouraged by reasonable dialogue. When an argument descends to the level of the quarrel, it is usually in deep trouble.

Another context of dialogue is the (*forensic*) *debate*. The forensic debate is more regulated than the quarrel. In a debate there are judges or referees who determine, perhaps by voting, which side had the better argument. The debate is regulated by rules of procedure that determine when each arguer may speak, and how long each may speak. In some cases, a debate may be judged by an audience who may take a vote at the conclusion of the debate, the majority of voters determining who won the debate.

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The forensic debate is more congenial to logical reasoning than the personal quarrel is, because the outcome is decided by a third party who is not subject to the personal attacks that may be contained in the arguments. Also, some debates are controlled by rules that disallow the more severe forms of personal attack and other aggressive or fallacious tactics. The rules of the forensic debate are often very permissive, however, and may allow all kinds of fallacious arguments. Sometimes very damaging personal allegations are allowed in questions, and the answerer may be hard-pressed to respond to extremely aggressive questions while trying to answer. Such fallacious moves may not only be tolerated, but even praised as good tactics of debating.

Clearly, the debate is a step above the personal quarrel, from the point of view of logic.¹ However, the basic purpose of the forensic debate is to win a verbal victory against your opponent, by impressing the audience (or referee) of the debate. This means that fallacious arguments and personal attacks are a good idea, if they help you to win the argument. In other words, a successful argument, in the context of a debate, is not necessarily a reasonable argument from the standpoint of logic. It may be good strategy to *appear* to have a reasonable argument, but really having a reasonable argument is not the main thing. The main thing is to win the debate. Consequently, the standards of good forensic debate do not necessarily or reliably represent good standards of reasonable argument.

A third context of argument is that of *persuasion dialogue*,² also sometimes called *critical discussion*. In this type of dialogue, there are two participants, each of whom has a thesis (conclusion) to prove. The main method of persuasion dialogue is for each participant to prove his own thesis by the rules of inference from the concessions of the other participant.³ If you and I are engaged in persuasion dialogue, my goal is to persuade you of my thesis. And hence my obligation should be to prove that thesis from premises that you accept or are committed to. Your obligation is to prove your thesis from premises that I accept or am committed to (figure 1.1).⁴

The goal of persuasion dialogue (critical discussion) is to persuade the other party of your thesis (conclusion, point of view), and the method

1 For more on the quarrel and debate as models of argument, see Walton (1998a).

2 See Walton (1984), Walton and Krabbe (1995) and Prakken (2006). The notion of reasonable dialogue as a regulated structure of logical reasoning was systematically analyzed by Lorenzen (1986) and Hamblin (1970).

3 Theoretical models of this type of dialogue in reasoned argument are outlined in Hintikka (1981) and Barth and Krabbe (1982).

4 See Krabbe (1985).

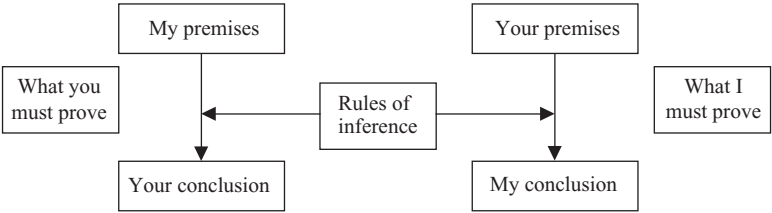


Figure 1.1. Obligations of persuasion dialogue (critical discussion).

is to prove your thesis.⁵ However, two kinds of proof may be involved. *Internal proof* by a participant means proof by inferring a proposition from the other participant's concessions in the dialogue. This is the primary method of persuasion dialogue. Persuasion dialogue can also be facilitated by the bringing in of external scientific evidence. *External proof* entails the introduction of "new facts" into the argument by appealing to scientific evidence or expert opinion of a third party or group of expert sources.⁶ Guidelines for the use of external proof in persuasion dialogue are studied in chapters 7 and 8. Once a proposition is advanced by one participant on the basis of external proof, and accepted by the other participant, it can then be appealed to as a premise suitable for an internal proof.

Although the primary obligation of a participant in persuasion dialogue is to prove his thesis from the other participant's concessions, a secondary obligation to co-operate with the other participant's attempts to prove his thesis also exists. This obligation requires giving helpful and honest replies to the other participant's questions, in order to allow him to extract commitments from you in dialogue that can then be used as premises in his arguments.⁷ Argument in persuasion dialogue is based on the concessions of the other party, and a participant is free to concede any proposition he cares to.

In another type of dialogue, called the *inquiry*, premises can only be propositions that are known to be true, that have been established as reliable knowledge to the satisfaction of all parties to the inquiry. An example of an inquiry would be the kind of official investigation conducted in the

5 The concept of a critical discussion is outlined in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984).
6 Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, p. 167) refer to an intersubjective testing procedure in dialogue as a method whereby the participants agree on how they will determine what is acceptable as evidence in an argument.
7 This idea was modeled precisely in the formal structure of persuasion dialogue presented in Prakken (2006).

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case of an air crash disaster. The Warren Commission Report on the death of John F. Kennedy, which attempted to determine the known facts relevant to the assassination, and thereby produce a proof of an established conclusion, was an inquiry that many have been skeptical about. However, the intent of an inquiry is to remove such doubt by conclusively proving some designated proposition.

By contrast, a persuasion dialogue might typically be on an issue like “Is socialism the best form of government?” where the goal is not conclusive proof of one side or the other of the issue, but an evaluation of the persuasiveness of the arguments on both sides.⁸ Such arguments can reveal important convictions and reasons for personal commitments on an issue, even if the goal is not to establish conclusive proof based on premises known to be true.

The basic goal of the inquiry is increment of knowledge, and therefore the inquiry is an essentially *cumulative* type of dialogue, meaning that retraction of commitment is not anticipated. The inquiry too is based on an initial position, but the position here is a certain degree of lack of knowledge which needs to be overcome. Thus the inquiry seeks out *proof*, or the establishment of as much certainty as can be obtained by the given evidence. Evidential priority is the key feature of the inquiry, for the inquiry is strongly directed towards deriving conclusions from premises that can be well established on solid evidence. This contrasts with persuasion dialogue, where the best one can hope for is plausible commitment to an opinion based on reasoned (but not conclusive) evidence.

In the inquiry, the participants are supposed to be neutral investigators of an objective truth, to the extent that is possible. The inquiry is a co-operative rather than an adversarial context of dialogue.⁹ Logical proof is important in the inquiry, but the method may vary with the subject-matter or area of the inquiry. Inquiry most often purports to be “scientific” and “factual” in its methods and standards.

In *negotiation dialogue*, the primary goal is self-interest, and the method is to bargain. Bargaining makes no pretensions to be an objective inquiry into the truth of a matter. Indeed, negotiation, in contrast to persuasion dialogue, need not involve commitment to the truth of propositions, or

⁸ This function of dialogue that reveals concealed commitments is brought out in the analysis of Walton (1984, ch. 5).

⁹ Reasonable evaluation of any argument always involves the given data of a text of discourse to be analyzed. Common but unstated presumptions of the arguer and the evaluator also play a role in the evaluation.

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conviction that ideals are based on strong arguments. In negotiation, opinions about what is true, or convictions about what is believable, are not centrally at stake, and may even be contravened by a good negotiator. The concessions in bargaining are not commitments in the same sense as in persuasion dialogue, but trade-offs that can be sacrificed for gains elsewhere. The position now becomes a bargaining position. Logical proof is not important in negotiation dialogue, for this type of dialogue is completely adversarial.¹⁰ This type of dialogue is frankly based on personal gain, and makes no pretense of being neutral or objective, or of being an inquiry into truth. Coalitions may be made with partners, but the objective is always self-interest in “making a good deal.”

The negotiation type of dialogue is called the *interest-based conflict* by Moore (1986, p. 74) who describes it as “competitive cooperation” where “the disputants are collaborating to compete for the same set of goods or benefits” in conditions of “perceived or actual scarcity.” In this situation, gains for one participant may mean losses for another. The dialogue is a kind of trading of concessions to the satisfaction of both participants.

Some cases of argumentative discourse combine two or more of these different types of dialogue. For example, a divorce dispute may begin as a competition to see which party is to obtain custody of the children. However, if the dialogue turns to a consideration of the issue of which party is best suited to look after the children, the dialogue may cease to be an interest-based bargaining dialogue, and become a persuasion dialogue. This particular shift in the context of dialogue could be highly constructive and beneficial. It may betoken a shift from the individual interests of the husband and wife to a wider consideration of what is best for everyone, including the children. Often a shift from the negotiation model to the persuasion model is a good step.

Although the persuasion, inquiry, and negotiation types of dialogue are among the most basic types for the purpose of studying the fundamental kinds of reasoned criticism in argumentation, there are three other basic types of dialogue that need to be taken into account. One is the *information-seeking* type of dialogue, where one party has the goal of finding information that the other party is believed to possess. Another is the *action-seeking* type of dialogue recognized by Mann (1988) where the goal of one party is to bring it about that the other party carries out a specific

¹⁰ The exception occurs in the kind of case where there is a shift from negotiation to persuasion dialogue. In this case giving reasons to convincingly support a claim can help the negotiation dialogue move forward.

Table 1.1 *Types of dialogue*

Type of dialogue	Initial situation	Participant's goal	Goal of dialogue
Persuasion	Conflict of opinions	Persuade other party	Resolve or clarify issue
Inquiry	Need to have proof	Find and verify evidence	Prove (disprove) hypothesis
Negotiation	Conflict of interests	Get what you most want	Reasonable settlement both can live with
Information-seeking	Need information	Acquire or give information	Exchange information
Deliberation	Dilemma or practical choice	Co-ordinate goals and actions	Decide best available course of action
Eristic	Personal conflict	Verbally hit out at opponent	Reveal deeper basis of conflict

course of action. Yet another type is the *educational* dialogue where one party (the teacher) has the goal of imparting knowledge to the other party (the student). Each of these models of dialogue has a different initial situation, and different rules of procedure for arriving at the goal from the initial situation.

The properties of the six basic types of dialogue are summarized in table 1.1 (Walton 2006, p. 183). From the point of view of critical argumentation taken in this book, persuasion dialogue (critical discussion) is the single most important type of dialogue. It represents an ideal, or normative model of reasoned dialogue, because it has normative rules that, taken together, set a standard of how rational argument used to persuade should take place. However, it is important to be able to recognize the other types of dialogue indicated above, because significant errors and misunderstandings may occur when there is a dialogue shift (dialectical shift) from one type of dialogue to another. If such a shift goes unnoticed, it can lead to misinterpretations, errors, and fallacies of argumentation.

1.2 COMPONENTS OF ARGUMENTATIVE DIALOGUE

Any sequence of argumentative dialogue can be broken down into three stages.¹¹ In the *opening stage*, the type of dialogue should be specified. At

11 There are four stages of dialogue in the account of van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984). They divide what is called the opening stage into two stages called the confrontation stage

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this stage, the participants should agree to engage in a specific type of dialogue, or at least indicate their willingness to take part in a certain type of dialogue. All good dialogue has procedural rules, and the rules of the dialogue should be as clear as possible to the participants, as part of the opening stage of the dialogue. In some cases, these rules are explicitly stated or codified, e.g., in a criminal trial. In conversation, these rules are usually matters of custom and politeness which set normal expectations of dialogue conduct (rules of Gricean¹² implicature). Nevertheless, the rules can be explicitly stated, and agreed to by the participants, where it is useful and necessary, at the opening stage.

There are four kinds of dialogue rules. The *locution rules* state the kind of speech acts or locutions that are allowed. For example, typically in persuasion dialogue, questions and assertions are permissible locutions. The *dialogue rules* specify turn-taking, and other questions of when participants are allowed or required to advance locutions. The *commitment rules* specify how each type of locution leads to commitments on the part of a participant. For example, an assertion of a proposition by a participant is immediately followed by the inserting of this proposition into his store of commitments. Finally, the *strategic (win-loss) rules* determine what sequence of locutions constitutes fulfillment of the goal of the dialogue.

All dialogue arises from a problem, difference of opinion, or question to be resolved that has two sides. The two sides constitute the *issue* of the dialogue. The *opening stage* is the stage where the issue of the dialogue must be announced, agreed upon, or clarified, so that the goal of each participant in the dialogue is clearly agreed upon. At this stage, both parties agree to use the methods of argumentation appropriate for this type of dialogue, and to follow the rules for using these methods.

The *argumentation stage* is the middle stage, where each side puts forward its arguments to defend its view, and also puts forward criticisms and objections to the other party's view. During this stage, the obligation of each party in contributing to or fulfilling the goal of the dialogue must be carried out by the appropriate methods. A participant has an obligation to make a serious effort to fulfill his own goal in the dialogue. He also has an obligation to allow the other party to fulfill his obligation. These obligations imply certain dialogue rules. For example, they require that

and the opening stage. We have recognized only three stages to emphasize that a dialogue always has a start point, an end point, and a sequence of argumentation between.

12 Grice (1975).

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participants take turns in an orderly fashion, to give the other party a reasonable opportunity to reply to a question or make a point.

The *closing stage* of a dialogue is the point where the goal of the dialogue has been fulfilled, or where the participants agree that the dialogue can end. There are proper ways of closing a dialogue, and this has implications for rules of how a good dialogue should be conducted. A participant should not try to opt out illicitly just because things do not seem to be going his way. And in general, participants must continue to carry on with a dialogue, following the rules, until the dialogue is properly closed.

These general requirements of the four stages of dialogue imply other rules that are applicable to specific problems encountered in the remaining chapters of this book. *Relevance rules* require that a participant not wander too far off the point (the goal of dialogue), or he can be challenged. *Co-operativeness rules* require that a respondent answer questions co-operatively and accept commitments if they reflect his position accurately. *Informativeness rules* require that a participant tailor his arguments to what his respondent knows or does not know. A participant should provide enough information to convince his respondent, but not provide more information than is required or useful for that purpose.

Section 1.3 illustrates how these rules specifically apply to the type of dialogue called persuasion dialogue. Section 1.4 itemizes some negative rules or prohibitions that indicate some important types of faults or failures of persuasion dialogue. Section 1.5 gives an introductory survey of some of the most important of these failures that are especially significant to watch out for in argumentation, because they can be used as systematic, clever tactics of deception to cheat and trick you.

1.3 PERSUASION DIALOGUE (CRITICAL DISCUSSION)

As illustrated in figure 1.1, each participant in a persuasion dialogue is supposed to use arguments exclusively composed of premises that are commitments of the other participant. This obligation is an important feature of persuasion dialogue. It is an important kind of failure of an argument that it is not based on such premises, but on propositions that the party whom it is intended to persuade does not accept. Certain important fallacies, as will be shown below, violate this requirement. Generally, a persuasion dialogue can be successful only if both of the parties base their arguments on each other's commitments. They must try to persuade each other using the strongest and most probing arguments possible, to reveal both the weaknesses and strengths of their opponent's arguments