The Case of Pragma-Dialectics*

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Abstract. The pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation aims to provide a sound integration of both dialectics — the study of critical exchanges — and pragmatics — the study of language use in actual communication. Pragmatic dialectics thus combines a dialectical view of argumentative reasonableness with a pragmatic view of the verbal moves made in argumentative discourse. This paper provides an overview of the current state of the pragma-dialectical approach, insofar as this can be done adequately in a single paper, and provides many pointers to the full range of work in this area.

1 The Pragma-Dialectical Approach to Argumentation

In the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation the term argumentation is used to refer to a process (“I am still in the middle of my argumentation”) as well as to its result (“Let’s examine what her argumentation amounts to”). Characteristically, argumentation is then studied from a communicative perspective. This communication, which can be oral or written, will generally take place by verbal means, but non-verbal elements (such as gestures and images) may also play a part. In pragma-dialectics, argumentation is viewed as aimed at resolving a difference of opinion by critically testing the acceptability of the standpoints at issue. Thus perceived, the study of argumentation does not only have a descriptive dimension that pertains to the way in which argumentation is conducted in communicative practice but also a normative dimension pertaining to the norms of reasonableness that are employed when argumentation is judged for its quality and possible flaws are detected.

Logicians, whether they are in favor of a formal or an informal approach, tend to concentrate on the problems involved in the regimentation of reasoning. Social scientists and linguists, particularly discourse and conversation analysts, generally focus on empirical observation of argumentative discourse and its effects.¹ In the pragma-dialectical view, however, these two approaches must be closely interwoven. Both the limitations of non-empirical regimentation and those of non-critical observation need to be systematically transcended.Pragma-dialecticians make it their business to clarify how the gap between normative and descriptive insight can be methodically bridged. This objective can only be achieved with the help of a coherent research program in which a systematic connection — a trait d’union — is created between well-considered regimentation and careful observation.

* This article, which gives an overview of the pragma-dialectical approach, is for a large part based on [15] and [21]. A textbook version is in preparation.

¹ For protagonists of a purely normative or a purely descriptive approach, see [4] and [58, 59], respectively.

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Following a classical tradition, the study of the regimentation of critical exchanges is called *dialectics*. The study of language use in actual communication, which belonged in the past largely to the domain of rhetoric, is nowadays generally called *pragmatics*. Hence the choice of the name *pragma-dialectics* for the approach to argumentation that aims for a sound integration of insight from these two studies.Pragma-dialectics combines a dialectical view of argumentative reasonableness with a pragmatic view of the verbal moves made in argumentative discourse.\(^2\)

## 2 The Five Components of the Pragma-Dialectical Research Program

Because the pragma-dialectical research program is designed to achieve a well-considered integration of normative and descriptive insight, it is on the one hand aimed at developing a philosophical ideal of critical reasonableness and, grounded in this ideal, a theoretical model for acceptable argumentative discourse in a critical discussion. On the other hand, argumentative reality is investigated empirically to acquire an accurate description of the actual processes of argumentative discourse and the factors influencing their outcome. Starting from the results achieved in these two enterprises, the conceptual tools are developed to analyze argumentative reality in light of the critical ideal of reasonableness. Then the individual and the procedural problems of the practical analysis, evaluation and production of argumentative discourse — the alpha and omega of the study of argumentation — can be tackled methodically. The research program thus includes a philosophical, a theoretical, an empirical, an analytical, and a practical component.\(^3\)

The fundamental question in the philosophical component is what it means to be reasonable in argumentation. As it happens, the conceptions of reasonableness entertained by argumentation scholars diverge from the outset, leading to quite different outlooks on what acceptable arguments are considered to be. Dialecticians maintain a critical outlook. For them, reasonableness does not solely depend on inter-subjective agreement on the norms, as many rhetoricians think, but also on whether these norms are conducive to the goal of resolving a difference of opinion by way of a critical discussion. Because the ideal of reasonableness is linked to the methodic conduct of a critical discussion, the dialectical philosophy of reasonableness is *critical-rationalist*.

In the theoretical component the philosophical ideal of reasonableness is given a shape by designing a model of what is involved in acting reasonably in argumentative discourse.

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\(^2\) The dialectical conception of reasonableness is inspired by critical rationalists and analytic philosophers, such as Popper [49, 50], Albert [1], and Naess [45], and by formal dialecticians and logicians, such as Hamblin [29], Lorenzen and Lorenz [44], and Barth and Krabbe [3]. The pragmatic conception of argumentative discourse as consisting of making regulated communicative moves is rooted in Austin [2] and Searle’s [51, 52] ordinary language philosophy, Grice’s [27] theory of rationality in discourse, and other studies of communication by discourse and conversation analysts. It is in the first place the combination of dialectical and pragmatic insight that distinguishes pragma-dialectics from ‘formal dialectic’ as developed by Barth and Krabbe [3] that incorporates dialectical insight in a formal (logical) approach.

\(^3\) For a more elaborate explanation of the research program, see [15, ch. 2].