Part I
The Concept of Dialogue

1 Commitment: When Do You Have to Argue?

An important part of being in an argumentative dialogue with others involves the making, defending, and sometimes the retracting of commitments. It is important to understand commitments and how they work in order to be able to assess whether certain moves made by parties in a dialogue are legitimate or not. Understanding commitment can also give one a clearer sense of what one’s reasonable burdens of argumentation ought to be when he or she makes an argument for a particular conclusion. It will be helpful to look at some of the ways that commitments can be gained or lost in order to understand how they work. What follows is my summary explanation of the conditions under which commitments are gained and lost, the primary source for which is the second chapter of Walton/Krabbe (1995).

1.1 Acquiring and Losing Commitments in Dialogue

There are three vectors along which commitments can be gained or lost. These are as follows: 1. By one’s social position 2. By one’s own action 3. By the action of others In what follows both the acquisition and loss of commitments will be explained in terms of these three ways. Acquiring Commitments

Acquiring Commitments by Social Position

One can wind up responsible for defending the actions of groups of which one is a member, in virtue of one’s role as a member of that group. This is especially so if one has a leadership role within the group. A group, say a club of some kind, may make its membership policies in deliberation as a group, but the president of the club will bear a special commitment to defend those policies to non-members, even if he disagrees with the policies himself.

1.1.1 Acquiring Commitments by One’s Own Actions

This is the most intuitive kind of commitment. Essentially, one has a commitment to defend any proposition one advances as a premise or a conclusion in an argumentative dialogue with others. It is not always appreciated that this can extend to denials, concessions, and questions. Suppose Sam is insisting that aliens built the pyramids (his conclusion) on the grounds that I do not believe that Ancient Egyptians had the means to move that much stone with that much precision (his premise), and Dave refutes this premise with knock-down evidence that they did, in fact have the means to do that. Sam might concede the point—that is, retract his commitment to that premise. If he retains his commitment to the conclusion, then he now has an argumentative burden to produce new grounds that support his conclusion. Sam’s continued commitment to his conclusion requires, as a practical matter, that he commit to some
other, new premise that supports it. This happens because he concedes his original premise when Dave disproves it with hard evidence. This can happen with questions too. Suppose Jake and Mary are having an argument about the ethics of medical experimentation on animals. Jake holds that such experimentation is morally wrong because of the animal suffering involved. Mary asks Jake if he thinks that the human lives saved by such testing are less important than the suffering of the animals involved. Notice that Mary’s question contains a presupposition: a proposition to which she commits herself by asking the question. In this case, the proposition is "medical experimentation on animals saves human lives". Mary takes on a commitment to defend this proposition the moment she asks the question. If Jake challenges this proposition, Mary must defend it successfully or give it up (if she gives it up, her question must be retracted too).

1.1.2 Acquiring Commitments by the Actions of Others

The moves that our partners in dialogues make, when those moves are in-bounds, can saddle us with commitments too. The clearest example of this is the obligation we have to answer questions that are relevant to our arguments. Suppose Jake is arguing for the conclusion that the Second World War was a just war. It is perfectly relevant for Elwood to ask Jake what definition of 'just war' he is using. If he does ask this, Jake thereby becomes committed to providing his definition of 'just war'. If he does not uphold this commitment, the overall quality of his argumentation suffers for the resulting vagueness in such a critical piece of terminology.

1.1.3 Losing Commitments by Social Position

In the example given above, a person’s role as president of a club gave them commitments regarding the defense of the club’s membership policy. The president could lose those commitments if she resigned from office. The same thing would be true if she lost her bid for re-election. The commitments that go with the office would no longer be hers.

1.1.4 Losing Commitments by One’s Own Actions

There are two ways one typically lose commitments in a dialogue as a result of one’s own actions. One is by discharging them. This means that one meets one’s argumentative burdens with respect to them. The other is by giving up the propositions to which one is committed via some act of concession or retraction. In the first case, let us imagine that Sam claims that it must be colder than 32 degrees Fahrenheit outside on the grounds that, looking through a window, he can see ice on the sidewalk from where he is sitting. Given that it must be below the freezing point for ice to form, and given that the freezing point in degrees Fahrenheit is 32 degrees, Sam reasons, it must be colder than 32 degrees outside. Dave challenges him by saying "I don’t see any ice." Sam’s commitment to defend the proposition that there is ice outside is discharged when he proves
it by switching places with Dave so that Dave can see the ice for himself. The proposition "There is ice outside" will need no further defense in this argument.

The second way in which one can lose a commitment is by retraction of the proposition in question. Suppose Mary and Wanda are having a disagreement about the meaning of the Latin phrase res ipsa loquitur. Mary insists that it means 'the king speaks for himself' on the grounds that the word 'res' means 'king'. Wanda disagrees, skeptical of Mary’s abilities in Latin. So they look it up in a Latin dictionary and it turns out that the word for king is 'rex', not 'res'. In the face of this evidence, Mary (intelligently) retracts her commitment to the proposition that the word 'res' means king. (She also has failed to prove her conclusion about the meaning of the phrase, and in fact her conclusion is false.) The point is that once Mary retracts her commitment to the proposition about the meaning of the word 'res', she no longer has an obligation to defend it. However, and this is important to note: she may no longer use that proposition as a premise in her argument! Retracting a commitment to a proposition means giving it up completely for purposes of the dialogue. Retracting commitments does not necessarily mean that one will fail to prove one’s thesis as it does in this example, however. Human beings are fallible creatures. We make mistakes. We can be wrong about some things, admit that we are wrong, and still go on to prove our thesis if the remaining evidence and argumentation on our side of things is strong enough.

1.1.5 Losing Commitments by the Actions of Others

Commitments can be lost depending on the actions of others. A familiar example from courtroom dramas is when a defense attorney asks a question of a witness to which the prosecuting attorney objects. Suppose the witness is a psychologist who is on the stand to discuss her evaluation of the mental state of the defendant, and the defense attorney asks the question "How drunk were you at the time of your evaluation of the defendant?" The prosecuting attorney objects on the grounds that the question has no basis in any prior history of addiction or similar dereliction of duty on the part of the witness, and there is nothing anywhere in the facts of the case to suggest that the witness was drinking on the day of the evaluation. Were the prosecuting attorney not to object, the witness would, as a result of the defense attorney’s question, be committed to the defense of the proposition that she had not been drinking at all. The objection, if sustained by the judge, of course, removes that commitment. The witness no longer bears any commitment pertaining to the stricken question—even though she herself has done nothing either to gain or to lose that commitment.

Another example of losing a commitment as a result of the action of another person would be when one party simply grants without challenge one or more points the other party is advancing in the discussion. This is called a concession. Imagine that Jake and Elwood are arguing about global warming. Jake thinks it is a hoax, while Elwood thinks it is real and deeply troubling. Elwood’s grounds for his conclusion that global warming is real are the melting of polar ice and greater seasonal fluctuations in temperature. Jake, for his part, grants Elwood
that the polar ice is melting, but wishes to challenge his premise about seasonal fluctuations in temperature. Ordinarily, Elwood would have a commitment to defend the proposition that the polar ice is melting with arguments and evidence that show this. Because Jake concedes this point, however, Elwood may make use of that premise without defending it. He no longer bears that commitment for purposes of the dialogue. Jake’s concession relieves him of it.

2 The Critical Discussion

Pragma-dialectics is an approach to the study of argument and argumentation that has its origins in the 1980s at the department of Speech Communication at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In pragma-dialectics it is assumed the goal of the parties in an argumentative encounter is the resolution of a difference of opinion between them. The result of this goal is a discussion in which the participants exchange arguments, ask questions and/or engage in criticism of each others’ arguments. There are different types of discussion, but this type is called a critical discussion. It is important to note that this kind of argumentation is seen as a cooperative endeavor (think back to Grice’s Cooperative Principle). It is not supposed to be an angry contest of wills where people try to attack each other by tearing apart treasured beliefs (though a critical discussion can devolve into that sort of thing). In a critical discussion there are at least two parties: a protagonist who advances a position, and an antagonist who attacks that position, either by offering questions, criticism, and doubt about it or by advancing a position of his or her own, or by all of these methods. It is possible for a person to be both the protagonist of his own conclusion, and the antagonist of his opponent’s conclusion simultaneously. There is nothing wrong with merely acting as an antagonist—one does not have to have a position of one’s own to advance in order count as a full participant in the discussion. (pp.24-25) According to pragma-dialectics, a critical discussion takes place in four distinct stages, the first of which is a confrontation stage where the parties acknowledge their difference of opinion. I share the view of Walton (2008) that we lose little or nothing by including the acknowledgment of a difference of opinion in the opening stage, and that the resulting model is a little more economical. Hence, for our purposes, we will employ a three stage model of critical discussion rather than the standard four-stage model used by the pragma-dialectic school.

2.1 The Stages of Critical Discussion

1. The opening stage: The parties decide to resolve the difference of opinion, rather than simply ignoring it or taking some other course of action. It is at this stage that the parties takes on their roles of protagonist and antagonist.

\footnote{The most complete and current version of this theory can be found in van Eemeren/Grootendorst (2004).}
2. The argumentation stage: The parties present their various arguments for their own views and against the views of their opponents. This stage also includes the asking of questions that help to clarify or critique the positions put forward.

3. The concluding stage: The parties assess how far they’ve gotten in resolving their difference of opinion, and whose conclusion (if anyone’s) has emerged as the one most deserving of the parties’ favor. If one’s conclusion is not the one that emerges from the discussion in this way, then one is rationally obligated to withdraw. (p.25)

Note: It’s important not to confuse the outcome of the concluding stage with "winning" or "losing" a debate before an audience or a jury. One doesn’t engage in critical discussion to gain victory but to resolve the difference of opinion. If the difference is resolved then all parties "win" the critical discussion, no matter whose conclusion emerges from the argumentation stage as having best withstood the scrutiny of critical investigation. Note also that it is possible for critical discussions to terminate in split decisions, or to fail to resolve the difference of opinion that occasions them. Of course parties in a critical discussion would prefer a more decisive outcome. According to the pragma-dialectic school, following certain rules makes such an outcome more likely. Violating those rules can result in fallacies that reduce the likelihood of a resolution of the difference of opinion, and perhaps even derail the whole project of critical discussion.

2.2 The Rules for Critical Discussions

These are the rules for successful critical discussion according to pragma-dialectics. The following list is a direct quotation from Frans van Eemeren (2002, 182-3).

1. Freedom Rule: Parties must not to prevent each other from putting forward standpoints (i.e. conclusions) or casting doubt on standpoints.

2. Burden of Proof Rule: Any party who puts forward a standpoint is obligated to defend it if asked to do so.

3. Standpoint Rule: A party’s attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party.

4. Relevance Rule: A party may defend his or her standpoint only by advancing argumentation related to that standpoint.

5. Unexpressed Premise Rule: A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he or she has left implicit.

6. Starting Point Rule: No party may falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point or deny a premise representing an accepted starting point.
7. Argument Scheme Rule: A standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme that is correctly applied.

8. Validity Rule: The reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or must be capable of being made valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises.

9. Closure Rule: A failed defense of a standpoint must result in the protagonist retracting the standpoint, and a successful defense of a standpoint must result in the antagonist retracting his or her doubts.

10. Usage Rule: Parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of the other party as carefully and accurately as possible.

It is important to remember that while these are called rules, it is perhaps best to think of them as guidelines, or best practices. Though they do not guarantee success, when followed they make successful argumentation more likely.

3 Being a Virtuous Arguer

It is no secret that argumentation is often a scenario that brings out a display of one’s character. Blair (2010) proposes a typology of character types based on habits of argumentation. With his permission, I share this typology in the hopes that it gives the reader a rough guide to how one’s behavior in argumentation reflects not just upon one’s intellectual character traits, but on one’s moral character traits as well.

The Deserter

The deserter will argue, but when he is cornered, or caught in an inconsistency, or if it looks as though the case he makes is about to fail, or if the reasoning starts getting too hard, he will abandon his case entirely—either giving up or mumbling something about "agreeing to disagree", or how "no one really knows anyway".

The Tyrant

The tyrant considers argumentation to be a matter of telling you what you think, why you are wrong, why he is right, and how it’s all moot because we’re going to do what he wants anyway.

The Self-deceiver

The Self-deceiver thinks of himself as a reasonable fellow and claims to want argumentative discussion to show just how reasonable he can be. When engaged in such discussion however, he betrays how unreasonable he is by his partiality,
willingness to quarrel with sound argumentation, liberal use of fallacious arguments and strategies of argumentation, and utter refusal to give up his point of view in the face of decisive objections to it.

The Double-dealer
The double-dealer is a smoother version of the tyrant, governing by “false voice” rather than by force. Like the tyrant, he doesn’t really care what you think. Unlike the tyrant, he will let his interlocutors exhaust themselves in argumentation while he pretends to listen, making a very public show of "hearing all sides of the issue" and "taking it under advisement". His partners take the measure of his hearing by his near tendency to do what he wants to do regardless of anyone’s argumentation against it, and regardless of any argumentation for relevant alternatives.

The Repeater
The repeater is a self-absorbed person who doesn’t follow the argumentation in a discussion, and then jumps in with a point that has already been made and responded to by others. To be an habitual repeater is a vice of inconsiderateness or perhaps egoism. The egoistic repeater might be the kind of person who believes that even if you’ve heard the argument a hundred times, you haven’t really heard it until he delivers it.

The Hog
The hog monopolizes the discussion at the expense of other participants, using more than his fair share of the time and attention of all persons in the discussion. To be habitually hoggish is a vice of egoism.

The Dead Horse Kicker
The dead horse kicker is someone who insists on making his case even though the decision has already been made or the argumentation decided. Where it would be appropriate to move through the stages of grief for one’s lost argument, the dead horse kicker remains stuck at denial, and continues to annoy others with moot argumentation for a conclusively refuted view or against a decision that has been made with finality. Once one is on the train, it is too late to buy a ticket to somewhere else. When this sort of behavior is a vice, it sometimes is a vice of egoism, and sometimes a vice of wishful thinking.

The Eager Beaver
The eager beaver is the opposite number of the dead horse kicker. Things have been resolved in his favor, but he cannot resist the temptation to keep piling on the argumentation for it. A number of faults could make one an eager beaver, including egoistic attachment to the cleverness of one’s own argumentation or
perhaps a jingoistic will to eradicate any pocket of latent resistance. But no matter what the effect is the same—the eager beaver annoys others and wastes their time with moot argumentation. To continue the quaint train metaphors, the eager beaver insists on carrying coal to a train that has already left the station.

**The Bully**

The bully is the half-bright cousin of the tyrant and double-dealer, who tries to win the day by shouting, interruption, stifling others’ responses, fallacious ad hominem attacks, generally disrespecting his interlocutors, and other such tactics. Whereas the tyrant and the double-dealer actually have a goal, e.g. trying to get their way in a deliberation, the bully seems to take more pleasure in just pushing people around. He’s a kind of argumentative sadist.

**The Weakling**

If the bully is the sadist of argumentation, the weakling is the masochist. The weakling has argumentation but won’t deploy it. Instead he passively agrees with what the loudest voices are saying even when he knows that those voices are wrong, or that the decisions they advocate are poor ones. The weakling’s vice is lack of self-esteem, or perhaps a kind of argumentative cowardice.

**The Patronizer**

The patronizer does what his name implies, he talks down to his fellows in a condescending manner. You are lucky to receive his wisdom direct from his lips, but there is no need to thank him. He’s just happy to “help”. The patronizer has something in common with the tyrant and double-dealer in that he does not believe that others are as clever as he. Unlike the tyrant, he will listen to the argumentation of his opponents, offering lots of clarifications and criticisms as he does. Unlike the double-dealer, he isn’t patiently waiting for his interlocutors to wear themselves out so he can do as he wishes. No, he is using the discussion as a teachable moment to share his wisdom with his interlocutors. If you wind up not agreeing with him, that will be okay. Just be ready to hear him cluck his tongue and say "I told you so" when things don’t work out—as he is certain they will not—if you draw a different conclusion than does he.

**References**

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