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*Argumentation across communities of practice:  
Multi-disciplinary perspectives*

**Uncontroversial arguments**

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**Abstract:** Most contemporary argumentation theories stress the pragmatic and interactive aspects of argument. Some even claim that any argument takes place in a dialectical and/or dialogical context, based on a preliminary disagreement. Hence all arguments could be said controversial. I propose a revision of this view, based on a distinction between *dialogical* and *dialectical*, two terms often considered as synonymous. I suggest they do not entail each other and to associate an agonistic connotation only to *dialectic*. A second suggestion is that, unless you make it a postulate, an argument does not always presume a preliminary disagreement between individual arguers or communities. There are arguments which are not controversial. I grant that it is possible to imagine a virtual opponent to any standpoint but, in practice, sometimes nobody opposes our arguments. This may happen when someone puts forward strongly field or disciplinary dependent arguments in front of people who are beginners or outsiders with no opinion about the standpoint at stake. This may look borderline cases, but this kind of situation is quite frequent in the media. Hence, in practice there are uncontroversial arguments and argumentation theories should take into account that the reach of argument goes beyond expert controversies.

**Keywords:** Dialectic, dialogue, virtual opponent, controversy, explanation, disciplinary argument.

**From pragmatic to interaction**

Although most contemporary theories pay attention to the pragmatic aspects of argument, not all of them claim that dialectic considerations are essential to a fair understanding and evaluation of an argument. There is a long way from pragmatic to dialectic.

A middle term is *interaction*, itself open to a variety of interpretations. In its broadest sense, it is not limited to human activity. There are interactions between things, for instance gravitational interaction, between human beings and their environment, for instance between man and climate, and, of course, between human beings. *Interaction* is a factual term: there is or not an interaction, namely a mutual<sup>1</sup> action between agents. It can be verbal or not<sup>2</sup>. I will focus only on verbal interactions involving at least two human agents.

By definition, a pragmatic discourse analysis includes contextual features, beyond the mere semantic content of what is said. Not all pragmatic analyses that focus on human relations study a direct interaction, because not all human relations are interactive.

In the most classical scheme of rhetoric, a speaker is addressing an audience. Is there an interaction when it keeps silent? A speaker who feels a feedback from a silent audience will certainly give an affirmative answer. The silence of an audience is commonly taken as sometimes gives evidence of an interaction since you usually do not speak when you listen to a speaker. An audience which speaks is seldom an audience and if your description of a feedback loop between speaker and audience begins by the audience, the speaker's utterance can be interpreted as a reaction to the prior silence of the audience. Speakers usually wait for it before speaking. This preliminary tuning necessary to a speech is an interaction quite different from a reply from the audience. A speaker can feel a feedback from her audience but, at the same time, complain about a lack of reaction through questions, comments or even a silence whose meaning would differ from the preliminary one<sup>3</sup>. So, in a broad sense, a verbal oral exchange can be said interactive even if only one participant talks, but preliminary conditions, like presence, silence, attention, are necessary. In a narrower sense, to be said interactive a verbal process requires at least one manifest verbal reaction, even if it is not symmetrical or balanced when compared to the first speech act. Now, the agents become interlocutors.

Usually, a controversy or a dispute is an interaction of this last kind, with at least one turn of speech or one written answer or comment that opposes the point of view previously set forth. In a controversy, the reaction that identifies a second party is typically directly addressed to the proponent but against her thesis. If it is addressed to a third party who knows the position of the first one, the whole process will count as a controversy only for the second and the third party, and only if the third one grasps that the position of the second goes against the view of the first one.

Controversy takes us close to dialectic. First, let us keep in mind that *dialectic* offers the same kind of ambiguity as *interaction* with its broad and narrow sense. Even leaving aside the way it is used by F. Engels (2012) in his *Dialectics of Nature* and limiting ourselves to human verbal exchanges, *dialectic* is often taken in a broad sense that makes it roughly synonymous with *interaction*, taken in the broad sense. But sometimes it is taken in a narrower sense which comes close to dispute or controversy. Note that in these two cases it

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<sup>1</sup> I take for granted that "mutual" means that A acts on B and B acts on A: this does not entail that A's action on B is the same, or of the same kind, as B's action on A.

<sup>2</sup> I use a "is or is not" dichotomy for the sake of clarity of my main point. I am ready to discuss the possibility of mixed cases.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes you can hesitate about the meaning of the silence you face: but silence can be equivocal if and only if there are different kinds of silence.

does not presuppose the preliminary uncertainty that is essential to Aristotle's concept of dialectical argument.<sup>4</sup> Let us recall that, for Aristotle, it is the uncertainty resulting from the opposing views of the members of a community which makes *dialectical* a statement or an argument.

The classical speech act theories of Austin and Searle provide an illustration of the ambiguity of *interaction* and *dialectic*. Both in its Austinian and Searlian variants, speech act theory is a theory of action. Yet, you can wonder whether these speech acts are interactions and are dialectical? My impression is that they are in the broad sense of both terms but not in the narrow ones because this theory requires much from the speaker but nothing, or so, from the addressee, beyond the necessary preliminary requirements that make the utterance an action on this addressee. Classical speech act theory is neither interactive nor dialectical in the narrow senses since no verbal manifest reaction to the speaker's act is required or expected from the addressee. This is why pragma-dialectics, for instance, which is partly based on speech-act theory, had to enhance speech act theory with extra rules and requirements like the cooperative stages of “confrontation” and “opening”. This ensures the possibility to reconstruct an argumentative exchange as an interactive and dialectical process in the narrow sense of these words and to make it fit into the frame of dialogical logic, the second main source of pragma-dialectics (Van Eemeren & al, 1996, 274).

### **Dialogue and dialectic**

When *interaction* and *dialectic* describe a verbal exchange, they meet another close friend, *dialogue*. Its proximity with *dialectic* brings us back to their common Greek roots: *dialogos*, *dialogesthai*, *dialekticos*. Ancient Greek texts may give the impression that these terms were not equivocal; yet textual exegesis reveals an early equivocation, confirmed by the difficulty to translate the Greek word *logos*. Nowadays, *dialogue* is still ambiguous. Like *dialectic* and *interaction*, it can be applied to a human verbal exchange, to an interaction between a human and a non-human being, for instance the dialogue of Man and Nature, or even to an interaction between non-human beings<sup>5</sup>. Again, I will focus on human dialogue.

Even in the limited field of argumentation studies some authors easily shift from *dialectic* to *dialogue* (and conversely) making them quasi synonymous. But according to standard dictionaries and also, I think, to common use, their meanings do not coincide<sup>6</sup> and sometimes are even at odds.

Two conditions are commonly held as necessary to have a dialogue: there must be a turn of speech (someone participates to a dialogue only if she verbally intervenes) and the contributions of the participants must be relevant to the current orientation of the exchange<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See his preliminary “dialectical” treatises, *Topics* and *On Sophistical Refutation* about the status of dialectical arguments.

<sup>5</sup> In electronics and computer science, to speak of dialogues between machines is quite common.

<sup>6</sup> A first practical reason of this difference is that *dialectic* sounds more specialized than *dialogue* that is more common.

<sup>7</sup> We sometimes dialogue “just for the pleasure to chat” or to be together. Is this a goal and how does it organize the conversation? I leave open these questions that are not essential to my point.

Dialogue is also commonly taken as a peaceful and cooperative activity while dialectic, especially after its Hegelian version, involves opposition and even conflict. This difference has evaluative consequences. Dialogue is commonly associated with ethically positive attitudes, like cooperation, care and peace. An ombudsman, for instance, strives to make enemies sit at the same table to initiate a dialogue that would be a first step to peace. On the contrary, dialectic is agonistic: this connotation is not only a by-product of German idealism but is sometimes already present in ancient Greek thought. Diogenes Laertius<sup>8</sup> explains that the members of the Megarian school of philosophy founded by Euclid of Megara, a disciple of Socrates, were first called the Megarian, then the Eristics and later the Dialecticians because of their use of questions, their love of arguments and their interest in paradoxes. A close association and a possible confusion between *dialogue*, *dialectic* and even *eristic* is not recent. Yet, Plato's Socrates made an important distinction between a dialogue and a dialectical (eristic) conversation<sup>9</sup>. A dialogue does not always presupposes a controversy and the will *to win against* an interlocutor as it is the case in some contemporary dialectical argumentation theories like Walton's *New Dialectic* (1998).<sup>10</sup> I believe that an exchange of arguments can be dialogical without being dialectical in this narrow, agonistic sense.

A comparison between verbal exchanges and games could help strengthen this point. Many multi-players games are interactive in the broad sense of playing together. Some are also interactive in the narrow one if the move of a player is a reaction determined by the previous moves of the other players. Finally, a game can be interactive in this narrow sense and agonistic when the goal is to win *against* the opponent(s). In this case, in spite of alternating moves and a shared meta-goal (to play) beyond the specific goal of each player (to win), this background of conflict can be a motive to resist the temptation to say that these games are dialogical.

Later on, I will give a few more examples to show that an argumentative exchange can be interactive and dialogical without being dialectical in the agonistic sense of this term. Thus, my answer to the question "Are arguments always dialectical?" will depend on the scope given to this ambiguous predicate. This is also why I will replace *dialectical* by *controversial* to mean an agonistic use of argument.

On that topic, we know that in English, *argument* has an ambiguity which seems to be unique, at least among western European languages. An English argument can be the process and/or the product of giving reasons to support a claim, but it can also be a dispute, a quarrel. The habit to link argument and dispute could then be a good reason for native English speakers to refuse the very concept of uncontroversial argument. Yet, in other languages and communities of practice, the meaning of *argument* that Walton considers *ordinary* is not ordinary at all and the logical or structural definition of *argument* that he finds *artificial* in English is not that artificial. He is right when he says that the classical logical approach to argument does not take into account pragmatic components, but his call to "everyday conversations" to reduce the use of *argument* to controversial arguments addresses a limited audience:

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8 See the article about Euclid in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book II.

9 See, for instance, Plato's *Euthydemus*.

10 His information-seeking dialogue is an exception.

The word 'argument' as it is used in everyday conversations, includes the idea of a quarrel, a kind of angry or adversarial verbal exchange based on a conflict between two parties (perceived or real). Logicians have traditionally suppressed this meaning and have defined 'argument' in terms of reasoning, a kind of orderly sequence of steps of inferences from premises to a conclusion. But the logician's definition of 'argument' is artificial, and certainly at odds with the ordinary, more robust, and inclusive conversational meaning of the term. (Walton 1998, 178)

In this passage, it seems that you cannot separate the conversational and the agonistic view of argument. If you drop the conversational aspect of an argument you certainly take the risk to alter it, but this does not entail that the “abstract” (i.e. non-conversational and sometimes non-pragmatic) view of argument is “artificial”. When a theoretical concept borrows a common name (i.e. used in “everyday life”), it does not have the obligation to account for every shade of meaning that it has in the “ordinary” practice of a limited community, unless it has been explicitly chosen to do so. In Physics, for instance, the concept of mass comes from its common use, but it does not fit with it since a mass can be negative. In the same way, in Mathematical Geometry planes are not flat. Furthermore, the fact that a concept appears artificial or not is not scientifically relevant since “artificial” concepts (i.e. concepts based on new or renewed definitions) may be more fruitful than familiar ones, even to account for actual practice. Even if we accept popular support to decide whether a definition is better than another, Walton's position is still in trouble. Even if they appear too abstract, epistemic or logical accounts of argument (Lumer, 2005a, 2005b) would gain a majority of popular support among Western European countries, because they roughly account for the most central feature of argument in their own languages, namely to give reasons for a standpoint. The argument that it is natural to introduce controversy in the definition of *argument* because it is part of its meaning in the language of a limited community is likely to be not very convincing, even for empirically minded argumentation scholars. Controversy, anger, adversarial behaviors are quite common in argumentative discourses, but is it a sufficient reason to limit the scope of *argument* to agonistic exchanges? Walton's call to the adversarial connotation of *argument* in English could be seen as an example of what the French linguists Anscombe and Ducrot (1983) call “argumentation (embedded) in language” (*argumentation dans la langue*). Better reasons than a limited *ad populum* are expected to support the controversial view of argument.

### **Finocchiaro's scale**

Finocchiaro (2006; 2013 chap. 4&5) ranks some contemporary argumentation theories according to the importance of dialectic in their definitions of argument. The main reason of his classification was his puzzlement in the face of pragma-dialecticians' claim that argumentation is or should at least be conceived as essentially dialectical. First of all, let us notice that neither he nor the authors he quotes to support his view seem to make a clear

distinction between *dialectical* and *dialogical*. This is why I emphasize the occurrences of these terms in the following quotations borrowed from Finocchiaro's paper:

In a *dialogical* approach, every argument is regarded as a means to overcome some form of doubt or criticism. Sometimes this doubt or criticism is left implicit by both parties so that it must be inferred from the arguments that are advanced. (Snoeck-Henkemans, 1992, 179)

Finocchiaro also quotes Van Rees (2001, 233) who wrote against Johnson's idea that an argument is constituted by an illative core and a dialectical tier:

If the notion of argument is indeed to be rooted in the *dialectical* practice of argumentation, the two should coincide. In a truly *dialectical* account, argument *per se* would be defined as an attempt to meet the critical reactions of an antagonist, that is to take away anticipated objections and doubt.

What is meant here by *dialectical*? According to pragma-dialecticians, what makes an argument dialectical (or dialogical) is that it tries to overcome or take away anticipated criticisms or doubts that can be left implicit by both parties. Thus, the dialectical (=dialogical) practice of argumentation is necessarily controversial (=agonistic) since an argument is put forward *against* real or virtual objections or doubts that it tries to *overcome*.

Finocchiaro stresses that some contemporary argumentation theories are not dialectical, and some others partly or fully dialectical. He orders them on a four steps scale according to the importance their definitions of argument give to dialectic, taken in the agonistic sense.

The first type of definition is purely illative: an argument is an attempt to support a conclusion with reasons. According to this view, this illative condition is necessary and sufficient to define an argument. Although Finocchiaro does not mention it, most epistemic theories or argument are illative. They incorporate no dialectical requirement, but do not preclude a dialectical use of argument.

In the second type of definition, an argument is an attempt to justify a claim by supporting it with reasons *or* defending it from objections. Each condition is sufficient but not necessary to have an argument. So, an argument is dialectical only when it is controversial. Finocchiaro endorses this conception that he describes as *moderately* dialectical.

According to the third type of definition, an argument is an attempt to justify a claim by supporting it with reasons *and* defending it from objections. Both tiers – illative and dialectical – are necessary, but not sufficient, to have an argument. This definition is *strongly* dialectical. Johnson (2000) would be the best known example of this conception. (See further my comments on Johnson's two requirements).

Finally, the fourth type is the *hyper* dialectical definition of argument. Now the dialectical tier has become necessary and sufficient, whereas the illative one is neither necessary nor sufficient. Pragma-dialectics is certainly the most famous contemporary example of this approach.

The two first definitions, the illative and the moderate, do not preclude the possibility of the use of arguments in a context of controversy. However, in the first definition this possibility is left implicit whereas the second explicitly states that an argument is dialectical when it has to meet objections. It is only in the third and fourth definitions that a dialectical requirement is necessary.

### **Virtual and real objections**

Finocchiaro's classification has the merit to try to make the landscape of contemporary argumentation theories more clear, but his paper does not say how to test their competing definitions. Since I contend that there are uncontroversial arguments, my view comes close to the two first definitions. But I also grant that a fair description, understanding and evaluation of an argument usually requires taking into account social, pragmatic and interactive considerations. So, my position shifts toward more dialectical definitions, but I prefer to avoid the word *dialectic* as long as the question of a possible agonistic connotation is not clearly set out.

According to me, a crucial distinction should also be made between virtual and real objections. Accordingly, the ontological status of the objections or doubts required by the dialectical conceptions of argument should be clarified. Is it sufficient that they be potential? In what sense of *potential*? Walton reminded us that the ordinary English concept of argument “includes the idea of a quarrel, a kind of angry or adversarial verbal exchange based on a conflict between two parties (perceived or real).” So, quarrel and conflict could be unreal since only perceived. A first step is to disambiguate this idea of “unreal but perceived”.

When objections and criticisms are explicit a fair interactive approach of argument can hardly drop them since they are part of the interaction and sometimes of the dialogue. This is also true when the argument bears about a topic that is notoriously controversial, for instance God's existence. In such a case, even if no opponent is present, the standpoint is actually controversial and objections or doubts are not only potential, they have been made. The situation is quite different when objections or doubts are only potential. To clarify this point, let's have a look at two paradigmatic representatives of Finocchiaro's third and fourth definitions.

First, Johnson's important thesis (2000, 156):

In the typical interchange, there is a difference in point of view that has crystallized around an issue and one of the participants. The arguer is attempting to persuade the Other of the truth of the thesis being advocated.

Notice that this situation is only *typical*. Here, the difference of point of view is an empirical claim that is not as systematic as in pragma-dialectics. Next, the controversy is actual: it *has* already crystallized. So Johnson focuses on the many cases where the controversy is already identified and recorded, then it is not only perceived. Johnson goes on (2000, 160):



I have shown that the practice of argumentation presupposes a background of controversy. The first tier (the illative core) is meant to initiate the process of converting Others, winning them over to the arguer's position. But they will not easily be won over, nor should they be, if they are rational. The participants know that there will likely be objections to the arguer's premises. Indeed, the arguer must know this, so it is *typical*<sup>11</sup> that the arguer will attempt to anticipate and defuse such objections within the course of the argument. If the arguer does not deal with the objections and criticisms, then to that degree, the argument is not going to satisfy the dictates of rationality; more precisely, to that very degree the argument falls short of what is required in terms of structure – never mind the content; that is, the adequacy of the response to those objections.

Johnson's pragmatic approach introduces the Others, with a capital O, because he thinks that the process of arguing “includes the response by the Other” and that “it will *typically*<sup>12</sup> take the form of introducing objections to or criticisms of the argument” (157). We know that Johnson presupposes that something identified as a first claim, objection or argument has already been introduced, has crystallized. Yet, an illative piece of discourse can be identified as an argument without knowing the arguer or the Other. This is a reason to doubt that the dialectical tier is necessary, even if the product that you have identified, for instance on the basis of indicative words, is not the whole story. If you believe that there are no actual Others, or that they are just virtual, when, actually, there are Others, you make a mistake and fail to identify the whole argumentation process. But, on the other hand, you can always imagine an Other, a virtual Super-Other who, like a cousin of Descartes' devil, would doubt or deny any proposition you like. So, any argument produced can be perceived as part of a controversy or a dialogue with a virtual Super-Other. But this sounds as a systematic irrefutable claim, of the kind that critical rationalists do not like very much.

Johnson's starting point is more modest. He describes a situation that he finds “typical” with a preliminary actual background of controversy. But is something “typical” normal enough to be theoretically normative? The problem comes from non-typical situations. As we shall see further, it happens that an audience does not have the competence to level a counter-argument or has no clear position about the standpoint of an arguer or can't reply for practical reasons. All this does not run counter to Johnson's dictates of rationality and I agree with his careful “there will *likely* be objections”. I also agree that a clever arguer would do better to anticipate the objections and criticisms she can foresee, even if no actual Other has already been identified. This is no manifest dialectic but it reminds the kind of dialogue that Socrates said he had with his soul. Is this internal dialogue virtual or actual? Is it a literal or metaphorical dialogue? I am not sanguine about the answer to these questions. When I read over a paper to check the spelling is it me or an Other who is at work? I do not know.

Johnson writes a categorical (but slightly paradoxical) statement about the necessity of a dialectical tier: “an argument without a dialectical tier is not an argument” (172). But we know that he is more prudent about the necessity of dialectic in actual practice: the situations

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11 My emphasis.

12 My emphasis.

he describes are just *typical* and objections *likely*. Then I ask: an argument is an argument when it has what kind of dialectical tier? Actual (with real participants) or virtual, as in Socrates internal dialogue with possible opponents (including himself) helping him to put forward better arguments? To claim that an argument is an argument only if its dialectical tier is fed by actual opponents is a very strong demand. On the contrary, to claim that an argument is an argument only if it faces virtual counter-arguments supported by potential opponents is a very weak necessary condition that can be accommodated by any situation.

At the end of chapter four of their book *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992) write,:

Argumentative discourse can, in principle, always be dialectically analyzed, even if it concerns a discursive text that, at first sight, appears to be a monologue. The monologue is then, at least partially reconstructed as a critical discussion: the argumentative parts are identified as belonging to the argumentation stage and other parts as belonging to the confrontation, the opening or the concluding stage. Usually, this construction is not so much of a problem as it may seem.

First, notice that the monologue does not become a dialogue but is only analyzed as a dialectical discussion.

I shall not pronounce on the ease of the reconstruction, but I agree that a statement (although, here, the point is made about a discourse) can “always be dialectically analyzed”. We have already seen that you can always imagine an objection or a doubt coming from Super-Other. The possibility of a dialectical analysis of any monologue can also be seen as an illustration of what Finocchiaro calls “the symmetry of the dialectical and illative tiers”. The basic idea is that a monologue (especially a monological reasoning) can be described dialectically and, conversely, that an argumentative dialogue (at least a set of reasons pro and con) can be reduced to a single monological reasoning. If Finocchiaro is right, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst are also right, but a proponent of the illative approach to argument is right, too, when he claims that a controversy can be reconstructed as a monologue.

Notice also that, by definition, reconstructions are made after the identification of objections: actual ones in the case of an actual controversy, virtual in the case of an arguer anticipating possible objections. Furthermore, if it is “not so much a problem” to convert an argumentative monologue into a dispute<sup>13</sup> as it is claimed by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst and a dispute into an argumentative monologue as suggested by Finocchiaro, his four definitions may not be as exclusive as they appear: the supporting and defensive views of argument are pragmatically different but as far as the reconstruction of an argument is concerned they can be reduced to each other.

Johnson makes a similar point about the necessity of dialectic to identify an argument. Apparently against Finocchiaro's reading, he acknowledges that the dialectical tier is not necessary: “In practice, many arguments consist of the first tier only – the illative core” (Johnson 2000, 166). They are arguments, yet he adds that a purely illative argument “is, as it

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<sup>13</sup> I avoid the word *dialogue* to preserve the distinction I made between dialogue and dialectic.

were, unfinished, incomplete” (166). But, what is a complete argument? Is it a modified version of a first argument that keeps track, in its premises or in the modality of the inference, of the criticisms already faced or anticipated? Dialectical approaches to argument, especially when they are normative like pragma-dialectics or Johnson's model maximizing rationality, stress that the improvement of an argument is the result of a virtual or actual collaborative process. But, as granted by Johnson, in practice “incomplete” arguments, i.e only illative ones, are put forward and actually identified as such. Some people may then find themselves involved in a critical process of interpretation and evaluation, and this may lead to an improved argument, not to say a complete argument.

### **Uncontroversial argument**

If a standpoint or an argument can always be interpreted as the answer to a question, an objection or a doubt, the claim that any argument is dialectical is true but weak. A bolder claim is that any argument is the answer to an actual question, objection or doubt. Let us call it the realist dialectical view. If it claims to be a scientific approach of argument and not a fancy speculation, realist dialecticians have a burden of proof on their shoulders. Of course, it may happen that an actual challenge to a standpoint existed but is now unknown because it has been forgotten or lost. Nevertheless, realist dialecticians have to provide minimal historical information about the actual controversy. Who was involved? Where? When? Why? And so forth.

Since an attitude of opposition is always possible, the challenge for the thesis of the existence of uncontroversial arguments is to show that, in practice, some arguments are used in a non-agonistic context. Granting that some topics are notoriously controversial, say, God's existence or societal topics like abortion, any argument about them can be said actually controversial even if no opponent is actually in front of the arguer. Yet, an argument will be said uncontroversial on the basis of pragmatic conditions.

#### *From doubt to ignorance*

We have seen that Johnson thinks that argument is rooted in controversy. We also know that Walton is attached to the adversarial view of argument associated with the English ordinary meaning of the term, a position already present in a definition he gave almost thirty years ago (1990, 411): “Argument is a social and verbal means of trying to resolve, or at least to contend with, a conflict or difference that has arisen or exists between two (or more) parties. An argument necessarily involves a claim that is advanced by at least one of the parties.” Commenting on their definition of argumentation opening *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, 2) write that “The speaker or writer defends this [her] standpoint by means of the argumentation, to a listener or reader who doubts its acceptability or has a different standpoint.” The key words *doubt* and *different standpoint* are supposed to support the idea of a dialectical process. In other places of their writings, the dialectic is more explicitly agonistic. *Divergence* instead of *difference* can be found in an older work (1992, Chap 2) and the more agonistic *conflict of opinion* in (2004,

45). So, in Walton and in Van Eemeren and Grootendorst we find both *conflict* and *difference*. Wouldn't *difference* suffice since a conflict of opinion is one manifestation of a difference of opinion? Is there an influence of the English semantic proximity between *argument* and *quarrel* on their view? I will leave aside this empirical question that is certainly too complex to find an answer here.

Among the epistemic attitudes considered in the previous definitions, doubt is less clearly bound to controversy than *divergence* or *conflict*. But doubt has many faces. It can be sincere or not. When it is, the doubter is uncertain about the truth of the proposition he doubts. Sometimes, doubt is just a challenge to check that evidence can be found to support the dubious point of view. This is the case of Descartes "methodological" doubt. It can be seen as agonistic, but probably less than a denial which presumes a preliminary assertion, virtual or real.

When it is sincere, doubt comes close to ignorance and can even be seen as a mark of ignorance: you doubt because you have no clear-cut opinion about the proposition at stake. One morning, Jane says that Paul is likely at home. You answer: "Maybe". She argues: "Well, his car is in the garage". You have already seen it and answer: "Yes, I know". But you have been told that, one evening, he got so drunk that he spent the night at his workplace and a colleague had to drive his car home. So you keep on doubting about the fact that he is at home. You have no opinion about it. Is there a difference of opinion between Jane and you? Yes, if you grant that no opinion is an opinion, but this is debatable. Both of you think that Paul is probably at home. Is there any conflict, controversy or adversarial attitude between you? I doubt it. If you think that this short argumentative dialogue is not adversarial, you should grant that Jane's argument is uncontroversial.

Although they sometimes meet, ignorance and doubt are different attitudes. In some cases, ignorance is just a lack of information that could help to make a decision about a standpoint. You know that Paul came back home yesterday evening but you ignore whether he arrived after or before 8 pm. Jane, too, says she does not know but argues that he likely arrived before 8 pm because you told her that he usually does. You answer: "Yes, but we don't know". Both of you ignore whether Paul arrived after 8 pm and the best both of you can do to support this view is to state that he usually does. Is there a difference of opinion between Jane and you? This is an uneasy question. Even if you think that you have different opinions, Jane's argument can hardly be seen as controversial.

More generally, a situation is quite common in didactic or cross-disciplinary contexts: a person uses technical reasons to support a strongly field or disciplinary dependent standpoint in front of an inexpert audience. Imagine it is composed of outsiders unable to decide by themselves about the truth, or acceptability, of the standpoint or that it is an audience of beginners or students who have a limited knowledge of the area. A speaker usually foresees three possible critical attitudes from her audience: a denial, a doubt or the expression of a lack of understanding. But sometimes none is expressed and some members of the audience just utter a vague "yes". Perhaps they (wrongly) think that they have understood the standpoint and its reasons, or judge that it is true because an expert who seems to have good reasons says so. Such a context can be seen as interactive and even dialogical, but the actual use of argument is not dialectical in the agonistic sense.

## *Explanation*

Explanation is a broad concept and some of its uses cannot be mistaken for an argument. But when it can be interpreted as an answer to a why-question it can be considered as an argument since why-questions ask for a justification and justification is essential to argument, at least for those who think it necessarily has an illative component. When no pragmatic consideration is taken into account it may be difficult for people who make a sharp distinction between argument and explanation whether the answer to a why-question is an argument or an explanation. Why is the weather going to change? Because the sky is more and more cloudy. When no further contextual information is given, they hesitate.

People who closely link argument and controversy, for instance supporters of a dialectical view of argument or English native speakers, have a pragmatic criterion at hand to distinguish argument and explanation and then solve such a dilemma. Its principle is quite simple: if the participants to the exchange disagree about the standpoint it is an explanation, if they agree it is an explanation. Now, if you grant that an arguer who asserts an illative structure like “ $p$  because  $q$ ” usually agrees with her own utterance, it is the manifest attitudes of the addressees that will make the difference. The utterance is an argument for an addressee who disagrees with  $p$  (and then with the speaker) and an explanation for an addressee who agrees. The label to apply to the verbal interaction is neither determined by the formal structure of the utterance nor by the only consideration of the attitude of the speaker but by the doxastic attitude of the listener. So, this pragmatic epistemic approach of argument clearly limits the scope of argument and leaves undetermined the status of an illative utterance as long as the opinion of its audience stays unknown. Walton thinks that a purely illative view of argument is artificial, but the consequences of a strong dialectical view of argument lead to distinctions which are theoretically clear but, in practice, uneasy to apply when no audience or interlocutor is clearly determined.

What can be said of a Johnsonian expert who cares about the dialectical tier of her still incomplete argument and, accordingly, anticipate objections that her audience cannot raise because it is not expert enough or already agrees because the speaker is supposed to be an expert? This incomplete argument is a (virtual) argument for the arguer but an (actual) explanation for this last audience. This kind of situation is not unusual. A similar situation occurs in political meetings, when a politician addresses his political opponents “over the head” of the already convinced members of her own party, gathered at her feet. When she justifies her standpoints is she explaining or arguing? According to the pragmatic criterion it is an explanation for the actual audience (even if it already knows the whole story) and an argument against missing opponents. On the contrary, if the arguer addresses an actual audience of opponents, her speech is an argument for them but can be seen as an explanation for the missing members of her party.

The pragma-dialectical approach can lead to the same kind of strange situation since the normative reconstruction of an argumentative discourse requires a preliminary “confrontation stage” which may stay potential or have actually occurred after the beginning of the exchange of justified standpoints. This confrontation stage is crucial for pragma-dialectics since it makes “clear that there is a standpoint that is not accepted ... thereby establishing a ... difference of opinion” (2004, 60) which can be “real or presumed”. Thus, if

the difference of opinion is only presumed we may have the same kind of phenomenon: a speaker can rightly take her own speech as an argument if she presumes that her interlocutor has a different opinion, or she can take it as an explanation if she presumes an agreement about her standpoint. When the actual opinion of the interlocutor differs from the presumptions of the speaker about it, they should have different views about the type of their exchange.

At a larger scale, when a speaker faces an audience where several different communities of opinion are present she argues with the communities who disagree and, at the same time, explains to one who agrees. This is possible from a theoretical point of view, but you can stay skeptical about the practical benefit of this distinction between argument and explanation. It could rather be a sign of the limits of models trying to reduce complex interactions using arguments to the paradigmatic case of a dispute between opposing parties.

If you drop the principle that an argument presupposes an opposition, this nominal border between explanation and argument is blurred, but the actual epistemic and doxastic positions and relations between agents remain unchanged. To drop the controversy oriented approach does not necessarily amount to a move backward towards an abstract, non-pragmatic, concept of argument. A critical pragmatic analysis of argument has to take into account the opinions and, if possible, the anticipations of the participants. So, even if it is true that arguments are mostly used in controversies, a theory which claims that an adversarial attitude is a necessary condition to say that an exchange of motivated standpoints is an argument has two major linked practical drawbacks. First, it amounts only to a theory of controversy and, second, it cannot account for the case of an arguer addressing an interlocutor having no opinion or no clear opinion about the standpoint at stake or to an audience having multiple positions. Unless it takes refuge behind the comfortable principle that a virtual difference of opinion is sufficient to say that a premiss-conclusion reasoning is an argument, it makes the status of argument highly dependent on the manifest doxastic attitudes of interlocutors. Accordingly, it prevents the possibility to recognize that an argument has been put forward before the record of a manifest opposition, even if the speaker has offered reasons to support her standpoint.

### *Media*

The empirical challenge leveled against agonistic theories of argument is especially strong when speakers use mass media to address a large and often wildly anonymous audience. This challenge has many faces.

First, the extension and the doxastic attitude of the audience imagined or expected by a speaker or a writer may drastically differ from the reality. The extension of the audience can range from no audience at all to an indefinite audience much broader than expected. This kind of mistake can be made by the speaker or writer, but also by any member of her audience. It can also be made by a third party, typically an analyst who is not directly concerned by this discourse. A similar mistake can be made about what the members of the audience think about the standpoint expressed. This kind of mistake is possible but probably less common when no media is used, because, usually, a confrontation is easier to make.

Furthermore a mass media audience is not stable over time: some members may disappear and newcomers may arrive, stealthily or not. What is the audience of Plato's dialogues? In such a case, it seems complicated, not to say strange, to stretch a model based on dyadic interactions to accommodate a situation where the audience is unstable and (partly) unknown. This kind of objection has been made by Blair (1998) and Govier (1999, 2006). But we know that some dialecticians accept the idea that the speaker addresses a virtual audience: this is the core of Krabbe's reply (1998) based on the idea of hypothetical opponents who can reply, raise objections and ask questions. But this principle is also at the root of weird situations like a trial in absence of the defendant or a game of chess against oneself: deliberately or not, questions, answers and objections may be influenced by the opinions of the proponent who plays the role of the hypothetical opponent. This simulation is likely to reveal not only the moves that the proponent expects from opponents, but also her own beliefs, preferences and presuppositions.

Besides the problem of an anonymous and virtually unlimited audience, another difficulty for dialectical theories of argumentation comes from the practical conditions of feedback. Internet and other electronic networks offer the possibility of quasi instantaneous verbal interactions, so that agreement or disagreement can be instantly expressed. But we should not forget that most traditional media do not offer this possibility or are weakly and slowly interactive. This is the case of books and, more generally, of writing. When no reply or comment is possible and the topic is not notoriously controversial, the traditional model of face to face controversy is in trouble. The challenge raised by material difficulty to answer, affects not only controversy oriented theories but any interactive approach of argument. Walton agrees that this problem that he calls the RTD (respondent-to-dialogue) problem is a genuine challenge for the dialogical approach he fosters (2007, 138-142). This is the reason why he turns to the old rhetorical notion of *prolepsis* (the anticipation of the attitude of the interlocutor) to try to save the dialectical/dialogical approach in the context of mass-media. But, again, *prolepsis* is just an internal virtual dialectic. The issue raised by the use of mass media is a real challenge to dialectical theories of argument.

## **Conclusion**

Against a fairly common tendency to identify *dialectical* and *dialogical* when they are applied to a verbal exchange, a first step was to consider that they are neither synonymous nor equivalent. Since *dialectic* is notoriously equivocal and may support the previous confusion, its scope has been here reduced to an agonistic interaction. This helps to make clear that an exchange of arguments can be a pragmatic interactive process, sometimes a dialogue, without being dialectical.

Even if you can always imagine a virtual opponent to a standpoint, in practice, there are uncontroversial arguments. Unless you postulate it, an interactive exchange of arguments is not always addressed to an opponent or a skeptic and is not always something that you win or lose. Uncontroversial arguments are common in the fringes of disciplinary fields when you address people who have no clear-cut opinion about the conclusions supported by arguers. Didactic arguments, too, are usually uncontroversial. The media, too, often conveys

arguments who finally meet people or communities who are actually neither opponents nor skeptics.

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