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Response to Questions for Dr. Dima Mohammed

1- Argumentation theory at large, Pragma-Dialectics in particular, is committed to the **externalization** principle which suggests targeting “the public commitments entailed by the performance of certain language activities” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2003, 53). The principle in itself does not undermine **the importance of states of mind**, it simply requires that the study of argumentation should not deal with them since they are not readily accessible.

Assuming that **states of mind play an important role in argumentation**, it may be said that a commitment to the externalization principle sets the bar of the study of argumentation too low, giving up on important elements of arguing. This evokes the question of the scope of commitment to externalization: What, in your opinion, should the scope of the principle be? Would a narrow focus on “language activities,” suffice for the study of argument in context?

What, in your opinion, is the strongest case against a commitment to the externalization principle? What sort of conceptual tools or theoretical resources hold the promise of paving the way for “accessing” states of minds? For example, resources and tools that could serve as umbrella categories for linguistic markers - which of course can be contextual and culturally-dependent - that can be associated with specific states of mind?

Of course, states of mind play an important role in argumentation. There’s surely no doubt about that. But I am not sure that “a commitment to the externalization principle sets the bar of the study of argumentation too low, giving up on important elements of arguing”. In my understanding, the principle of externalisation is meant to avoid the speculation about states of mind and to have the argumentative analysis based on the externalised commitments instead. So, it isn’t just “not undermining the importance of states of mind”, but it is also not excluding them from the argumentative analysis – instead, deal with only those states of mind that are traceable from the commitments incurred on the arguers on the basis of their (speech) acts. I am not certain to what extent this interpretation of pragma-dialectics is accurate, so let me say that this is the version of the externalisation principle that I would personally defend. Mental states are important, but we need to look for evidence in the (speech) acts of the arguers before we can attribute any commitment to a mental state.

That said, I think there is a need to be more nuanced in the commitment to the externalisation principle. I would say that externalisation is relevant (even recommendable) for the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse but it is not necessarily equally relevant when considering

teaching argumentation and debate. That is in line with the idea that externalisation does not imply that states of mind are irrelevant to argumentation – instead, states of mind are inaccessible and thus should not be the basis of the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse. In that vein, I would stress that the study of states of mind is important, even that it is crucial for a good understanding of argumentation, but I would also insist on assuming the principle of externalisation when examining argumentative integrations (namely to avoid speculation).

As an analyst committed to the externalisation principle, the biggest challenge I face is how to deal with discursive hypocrisy. I mean when we “**know**” the speaker does not believe in what they say but the externalisation principle seems to tell us we have to take their commitments from their words. Also challenging is how to deal with implicitly communicated meaning (think of insinuations, and dog whistles among other examples). I believe there is a need to develop the conceptual and analytic tools that allow us to reveal the implicitness as well as the hypocrisy without muddling with speculative mental states. I am not sure what we need is “accessing states of minds”. This is probably helpful, and fields such as cognitive pragmatics are very useful in that endeavour, but I personally believe we need to find ways to extract and attribute commitments beyond the explicit communicative acts. That is to say maintain commitment to externalisation but become more capable of dealing with implicit (argumentative) meaning. It is in this vein that I have been developing tools to study the argumentative potential (Mohammed, 2019; see also Kjeldsen, 2017; Serafis, 2022), i.e. the implicit argumentative dimension that may be attributed to a certain discourse or to parts of it in function of some argumentativity that may be inherent in language (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1983) or in the context of its use (see for example Amossy, 2009). Paying attention to the argumentative potential is an important way of making sense of intertextuality and interdiscursivity as two fundamental aspects of discourse (Resigl & Wodak, 2015; Wodak, 2009), and in that sense it is especially important when examining argumentation in context. Obviously, there is more to mental states than the argumentative potential, and for that, more tools would need to be developed. The important thing is that we distinguish between theorizing about argumentation where mental states are surely relevant, and analysing and evaluation argumentative practice where mental states are also important but since they’re not accessible, the principle of externalisation is important to observe (given that we keep trying to develop tools that can trace the mental states in the discourse).

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- Kjeldsen, J. E. (2017). Chapter 2. *The rhetorical and argumentative potentials of press photography* (pp. 52–80). <https://doi.org/10.1075/aic.14.03kje>
- Mohammed, D. (2019). Standing Standpoints and Argumentative Associates: What is at Stake in a Public Political Argument? *Argumentation*, 33(3). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-018-9473-y>

- Resigl, M., & Wodak, R. E. (2015). The discourse-historical approach. In R. E. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (3rd ed., pp. 23–61). Sage.
- Serafis, D. (2022). Unveiling the rationale of soft hate speech in multimodal artefacts. *Journal of Language and Discrimination*. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jld.22363>
- Wodak, R. (2009). *The Discourse of Politics in Action*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230316539>

2- This question is on *sequencing* - how an arguer orders or arranges her critical moves. The Munazara protocol seems to suggest deferring the moves with high illocutionary force, and by starting with mere objections (We send you a paper on this, in case further information is necessary).

Please consider the following example: Upon receiving the proponent's claim and her argument in support of that claim, an opponent identifies: a) A consideration that could cast serious doubt on the acceptability of one of the protagonist's premises, b) A way to indicate how the protagonist's argument could lead to an infinite regress, and c) One valid argument whose conclusion contradicts the protagonist's conclusion. Obviously, the opponent could organize her argumentative moves strategically in various ways (a then b then c; or, b then a then c; etc.). In your opinion, **how important is such organizing (*sequencing*) as a component of argumentation? Do you think *sequencing* could have any normative role?**

Could the way in which an opponent organizes her moves help determine the type (inquiry, deliberative, etc.) of the argumentative engagement? How could it? Would it be possible to say that how an opponent organizes her moves is indicative of certain argumentative virtues or vices?

Finally, what, in your opinion, can be the connection between *sequencing* and argumentative style, understood as a link between the schemes of argumentation (symptomatic, comparison, causal) and the typology of standpoints (descriptive/evaluative/prescriptive)?

I think sequencing is important for argumentation, and it is important in many different ways. To explore the question of sequencing, I would look at it through the lens of the triad of Logic-rhetoric-dialectic as three perspectives on arguments as suggested by Josef Wenzel (1990, 2006). Before elaborating on this, it is important to emphasize that the triad presents different perspective on the same practice (of arguing). As Wenzel puts it, "all arguments can be regarded as rhetorical, dialectical and logical phenomena" (2006, p. 9). Logic, rhetoric and dialectics are "three different ways of *thinking* about argumentation (ibid, my emphasis) rather than a classification of different types of argument". In other words, the perspectives should be understood as "different points of view. Like the plans for a building, showing front, side and top views, the three perspectives discussed here reveal different aspects of any instance of argumentation" (ibid). Wenzel suggests that the three perspectives may be distinguished on the basis of the following elements:

the practical and theoretical purposes relevant to each perspective; the general scope and focus of each perspective; conceptions of the argumentative situation or context in each one; the resources employed or examined within each perspective; standards of evaluation applied in each perspective; (and the) the roles of arguers envisioned in each perspective (2006, p. 13).

Generally speaking,

rhetoric helps us to understand and evaluate arguing as a natural process of persuasive communication; dialectic helps us to understand and evaluate argumentation as a *cooperative* method for making critical decisions; and logic helps us to understand and evaluate arguments as products people create when they argue (Wenzel, 2006, p. 9).

Through this lens, we can see that sequencing might acquire different degrees of importance depending on what perspective we take in our study of argumentation.

From the point of view of Logic, sequencing is normally not an issue. That is mainly because logic sees arguments as ways of establishing the truth of some conclusions through valid patterns of reasoning; the order of premises has no implications for either the truth of the premises nor the validity of the inferences. Furthermore, the order of premises is also not a choice an arguer makes, at least not in valid argument forms (e.g. syllogisms). So sequencing is not a strategic choice of arguers nor is it a consequential matter when the (logical) quality of arguments is concerned. The situation is considerably different when arguments are examined from the perspective of rhetoric or dialectic.

From the point of view of rhetoric, an argument aims at persuading a public, and for persuasion, the order of argumentative moves is a strategic choice that arguers make as well as a consequential decision once the quality of arguments is concerned. Persuasion research (e.g. O’Keefe, 2016; Linne et al., 2022) shows clearly that sequence matters: “The same argument may be perceived as weak, strong, or anything in between, depending on what initial piece of information (POI) has preceded it” (Linne et. al. 2022, p. 2). In other words, the persuasiveness effects would be different depending on the order in which the different argumentative moves are performed.

From the perspective of dialectic, argumentation is viewed as part of a critical method (or a critical discussion) aimed at arriving at the best decisions. If we’d accept the pragma-dialectical interpretation of this, this will be the (joint) critical testing of claims. In general, order is a relevant consideration in dialectical models. For example, when considering the burden of proof in a mixed dispute (when we have claims both pro and contra) is normally established considering the status

quo: a position that goes against the status quo ought to be defended first. What is at stake here is a **normative dialectical consideration on sequencing**. Within a critical discussion, sequencing is also important (or even more important?) from a (rhetorical) strategic perspective. The pragma-dialectical notion of strategic maneuvering does not include sequencing as a distinct aspect of maneuvering -the three aspects being **topical potential, audience adaptation and stylistic devices**, but sequencing may be part of the strategic choices made in them all. Worth-noting though is that strictly speaking, this is not part of dialectics – it is a rhetorical consideration within a dialectical model.

Coming back to your question on whether sequencing has a normative dimension or not, I would say it depends on the purpose of the argument and consequently on the perspective we are assuming. Whenever rhetoric is a useful perspective, then sequencing surely is. That means that also **the type of dialogue has consequences for the relevance (both normative and strategic) of sequencing. But here, I would keep the criteria need to remain set by the logic-rhetoric-dialectic triad.** One might decide which of the perspectives best serves the particular argumentative practice and on the basis of that determine the place of sequencing. What is a virtue in this sense is employing an order that is line with the perspective best suited for the practice of argumentation in the particular context where argumentation occurs.

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- O'Keefe, D. J. (2016). *Persuasion: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wenzel, J.W. (1990). Three perspectives on argument: Rhetoric, dialectic and logic. In R. Trapp and J. Schuetz (eds.), *Perspectives on argumentation, Essays in honor of Wayne Brockriede*, pp. 9-26. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

3. In “The Argumentative Potential of **Doubt**” the authors distinguish between ambivalent doubt (that is conducive to epistemic progress) and denialist doubt (that makes one vulnerable to deception). The authors also ask whether one should engage with denialist doubt, and distinguish between “confrontation” and “ignorance” options when it comes to denialist doubt.

How can we distinguish between good and bad doubts? Does **the way in which one expresses** a “beneficial doubt” have a role to play in the doubt being beneficial, or is the benefit of a doubt completely determined by the substance of the doubt?

If “the way in which” one raises a doubt has a role to play, then what are the modes of expression that fit beneficial doubts? And, what are the modes of expression that do not fit beneficial doubts? More generally, in an argumentative encounter, what should be **the procedural requirements** for the expression of beneficial doubts? Could you suggest any procedural regulation to unleash the argumentative potential of doubt?

Turning to bad doubts, such as denialist positions (climate denial, vaccine refusal), should these be **banned** altogether from public dialogue? Or, alternatively, should they be permitted on the condition that they are expressed in appropriate modes/ways?

The idea of exploring the argumentative potential of doubt (Mohammed and Rossi 2022) is meant to benefit as much as possible from doubt as a vehicle for epistemic progress and at the same time managing to minimize the damage caused by manufactured doubts, especially in the context of conspiracy theory. The gist of the idea is basically that doubt expressed about a certain affirmation (p) can have multiple potentials. The minimum potential is the expression of an ambivalent position about p: I am not sure if p is true / correct / acceptable ... (?/p). A doubt that is motivated is always reasonable in its ambivalent potential. That is to say that doubt ought to be considered always reasonable in its ambivalent potential (?/p). This is in line with the idea of critical testing (for example, the Pragma-dialectical freedom rule). Beyond the ambivalent potential (?/p), an expressed doubt can also be part of a more critical position, in the sense of it being the basis for rejecting a certain affirmation, and then the potential of the doubt has a potential that is skeptical about the affirmation (i.e., supporting -p). Think for example of the doubt about the safety of vaccines: sometimes the doubt supports the negative claim that vaccine are not safe (-p). In this potential, the doubt may be either reasonable or not, depending on whether or not the doubt rebuts the affirmation or undercuts the grounds on which it is being defended. So, in this case, we may say that doubt is in principle reasonable, but it has to be

evaluated case by case. Finally, in the context of conspiracy theories, doubt is often used to dispute not just the affirmation it challenges (p), but also the credibility of an “official story” of which the affirmation is part, and the challenge is presented as evidence of a conspiracy behind the official story. Think of the doubt about vaccine safety (?/p) which has been employed as evidence that there’s a vaccine conspiracy (C). Doubt in such a context acquires a denialist potential, which may be considered unreasonable by definition: the justificatory link between the doubt about vaccine safety (?/p) and the alleged conspiracy (c) is just untenable – or as Hofstadter describes it, a too “big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable” (1964, p. 35).

Does the formulation have a role to play in the rational quality of doubt? Not sure.. but the formulation has a role to play in clarifying or obscuring what potential meant in the doubt. So an arguer can help the discussion by making clear if the doubt is meant as ambivalent (?/p), as skeptical (supporting -p) or as a denialist doubt (supporting the conspiracy claim C). Equally important is the way the doubt is interpreted by the discussion partners: it is part of the responsibility of the opponent to verify what of the potentials is meant and to respond accordingly. *A great mistake in the public sphere happens when ambivalent doubt is interpreted in its denialist potential -a straw man fallacy is committed.* So, if I would think of a procedural requirement, I would make sure that the procedure includes such verification. Such a verification can help us (discussants and analysts alike) to distinguish the good doubts from the bad ones. Despite the perils of doubt in contexts where conspiracy theories thrive, I would not go for banning (certain types of) doubt. That would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater – unnecessary and a pity. I believe it is important to learn how to deal with doubt, and learning how distinguish the different potentials is an important first step.

Hofstadter, R. (1964). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Harvard University Press.

Mohammed, D., & Rossi, M. G. (2022). The Argumentative Potential of Doubt: From Legitimate Concerns to Conspiracy Theories About COVID-19 Vaccines. In *Argumentation Library* (Vol. 43). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_7