

Commentary

## Comments on ‘Strategic Maneuvering: A Synthetic Recapitulation’

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Van Eemeren’s and Houtlosser’s paper is inspired by an articulated research programme on *strategic manoeuvring*, supported by the Dutch National Science Foundation, in which the Amsterdam school of argumentation is currently involved. The notion of *strategic manoeuvring* was introduced by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2002) as an integration of the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992) that allows accounting for the arguers’ personal desire to win the cause (*rhetorical aim*), which, in actual argumentative practices, is always coupled with their commitment to maintain a standard of reasonableness (*dialectical aim*). The tension between the arguers’ dialectical and rhetorical aims develops along the four stages of critical discussion; the running research programme, in particular, focuses on a move belonging to topical potential in the confrontation stage: the exclusion of a standpoint. The confrontation stage is characterized by the identification of a difference of opinion, constituted by a standpoint and some form of disagreement on that standpoint (doubt or contradiction); in the confrontation stage, thus, the difference of opinion is delimited; the exclusion of a standpoint may occur in this context. Dialectical and rhetorical conditions of a reasonable use of such a move are investigated in the programme.

In relation to van Eemeren’s and Houtlosser’s contribution, providing a rich *topical potential* of aspects to comment on, I have chosen to focus on two particular perspectives, about which some of the results elaborated by the Lugano group within the project Argumentum<sup>1</sup> may contribute to the research endeavour on strategic manoeuvring.

### 2. ANALYSIS OF THE STANDPOINT

Qualitative evaluation of the dialectical and rhetorical conditions of a sound exclusion of a standpoint turns out to be extremely delicate; on

the one hand, in fact, the *freedom rule* of critical discussion guarantees that each arguer can put forward any standpoint; on the other hand, it also entails that any antagonist has the right to challenge the standpoint which the arguer has put forward, in relation to both its assertive content, and its presuppositions, which the protagonist has taken for granted. This entails that a standpoint can be excluded from the discussion if it is not relevant to it. The analysis of the ontological constituency of the standpoint, thus, turns out to be functional to the delimitation of reasonable confrontation stage. Here, the example of an historical controversy<sup>2</sup> will be briefly discussed in order to show the relevance of such an analysis.

After the discovery – or conquest – of America by the Europeans, a vivid controversy arose about the nature of American Indians. If Indians, those beings whose customs (such as practicing human sacrifices) had provoked a real culture shock for the new comers, were human beings, they had to be treated as human beings; on the opposite, if they were inferior creatures, they could be reduced to slavery. For the present purposes, we only analyse the standpoint “Indians are not human beings”. At a first level, the analysis can focus on the *strict ontology of the standpoint* (Rigotti, this volume). Congruity theory (Rigotti, 2005) offers the tools for semantic analysis of predicates which appear in the standpoint. At the lexical level, in the case of “Indians are not human beings”, semantic analysis allows categorizing *human* as a one-place predicate which can be congruously applied only to a living being. Indeed, the definition of this predicate turns out to be the very controversial point of the discussion: by the way, this problem provoked a real cultural evolution in the Spanish culture of the time, and its significance is still present nowadays<sup>3</sup>. According to the doctrine of *status causae*, the above-mentioned standpoint evokes an issue of *definitio*. The Aristotelian tradition would interpret this problem through the doctrine of classes of predicates – *categories* – and functions of predicates in the ontological structure – *predicables*. In our case, the predicate *human being* is to be ascribed to the category of *substance*. This definition could be structured recalling the predicables of *genus* (animated being), and *species* (human being), and then focusing on the *specific difference* distinguishing humans from non-humans.

The identification of the problematic aspect through the analysis of the standpoint is fundamental for the understanding of the confrontation stage, since it is necessary for evaluating the relevance of the standpoint itself to the discussion. In fact, when the standpoint is situated in the context of a communicative act, the relevance of its problematic aspect to the wider context of the discussion (which includes protagonist, antagonist, and context) can be evaluated. In terms of Congruity theory, a pragmatic predicate, namely *connective predicate*,

defines the standpoint’s function in relation to the protagonist and to the antagonist (Figure 1).

In this context, a possible move for supporting the exclusion of the standpoint “*Indios* are not human beings” from discussion, is focusing on the fact that no human being is in the position to evaluate the human nature. Such a move would question the congruity of the arguer in relation to the standpoint; according with the doctrine of *status causae*, the discussion would turn into a *translatio*, i.e. into a dispute about the “jurisdiction of the court” (about the pragmatic context of the standpoint).

The *contextual ontology of the standpoint* is also to consider through the analysis of the standpoint’s relation with other utterances (Rigotti and Greco, 2006). *Doctrine of causes, doctrine of oppositions* and *semantic paradigms* can be taken into account; if this kind of analysis is applied in a *mixed dispute*, it can contribute to highlighting the logical relations between the different standpoints advanced.

Generally speaking, from all the aspects concerning the ontology of the standpoint, it is possible to evaluate the standpoint itself, finding out its problematic aspect, and then identifying its relevance to the issue, and to its pragmatic context. This function brings us to argue that the analysis of the standpoint is an analytic tool bound to the sound development of the confrontation stage (Figure 2).

Moreover, a relevant feature of standpoints is the fact that, as they are statements whose acceptance has to be argued for (*ibid.*), they always contain a borderline between what has been already ascertained and what is still problematic. The borderline between ascertained and problematic can pose a problem about the relevance of the standpoint to the issue of the discussion. As mentioned above, the protagonist’s and the antagonist’s roles differ in this respect, because the antagonist has the right to cast doubt on what the protagonist presupposes, whereas the protagonist cannot re-discuss what has already been ascertained. On this fine line the evaluation of the reasonableness of excluding a standpoint from the discussion is often evaluated:

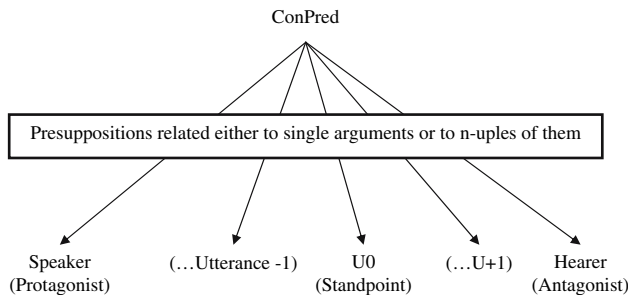


Figure 1. General structure of a connective predicate (adapted from Rigotti, 2005).

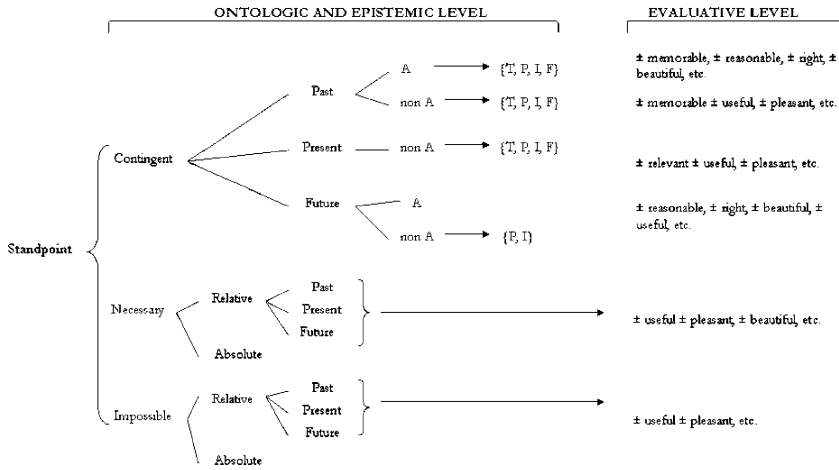


Figure 2. Diagram for evaluating the borderline between ascertained and problematic content in the standpoint (Rigotti and Greco, 2006).

### 3. STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING WITH ACTIVITY TYPES

A second line of research suggested by van Eemeren’s and Houtlosser’s paper concerns the notion of *strategic manoeuvring* in relation to the typology of *activity types* (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005). Research on argumentation in the perspective of communication sciences has brought to light the necessity of a precise consideration of the *communication context* where the argumentative discussion takes place (Rigotti, this volume). The notion of *context* is articulated into an *institutionalised dimension*, or *activity type* (interaction field and interaction scheme), and an *interpersonal dimension*. The *interaction field* is defined as institutionalised organization with its goals; within the interaction field, different *interaction schemes* are activated to reach these goals. If considering the human *implementing subjects* that cover the institutionalised roles required by the activity type, the interpersonal dimension of context emerges, which can also significantly contribute to the development of arguments.

As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) have pointed out, activity types impose boundaries on strategic manoeuvring in actual argumentative discussions. In this perspective, the discussion is interpreted as already inscribed in a precise activity type; another “preliminary” level of strategic manoeuvring could be identified, which concerns the selection of interaction schemes to be applied in a certain interaction field to reach a specific goal.

Suppose, for instance, that a problem emerges in a city council, and that the mayor imagines that the different opinions may degenerate

into conflicts, if he does not intervene in advance. He manoeuvres by choosing the most appropriate interaction scheme to find a solution for the problem; the best choice would be in this case reminding parties of their shared goals (their commitment towards the city common good) and make them engage in a process of joint *problem-solving*. If he cannot avoid that a conflict arises, he can try to propose a *mediation* or *arbitration*. Eventually, if the conflict has escalated, only a solution through *adjudication* could be feasible. The mayor's choices are part of his strategic manoeuvring, which aims at reaching his goal by an activity type which reasonably fits the involved interaction field. Such a manoeuvring occurs in a monological argumentation (Rigotti, 2005) which shapes the mayor's process of decision making.

However, strategic manoeuvring with activity types does not necessarily take place in an inner discussion; indeed, it might also be part of a collective decision making process (the discussion in a board of directors of a business, or in a newspaper editorial office, etc.).

Such a reflection brings to light that often a *chain of argumentative discussions* can be identified, whereby the boundaries of strategic manoeuvring in a certain discussion are influenced by preceding discussions activated in the same interaction field. Here, the analysis of the institutional constraints on argumentation turns out to be decisive.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Argumentum ([www.argumentum.ch](http://www.argumentum.ch)) is a project providing online courses on argumentation to which the universities of Lugano, Neuchâtel and Geneva collaborate.

<sup>2</sup> The argumentative relevance of this historical controversy has been brought to the attention of the Argumentum team by A.N. Perret-Clermont (Andriessen et al., 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of mixed race people in South is often evoked as a consequence of the acknowledgment of the Indians' human nature. The respect for other cultures is largely established in modern times; nevertheless debates about the nature of human beings are still present in other contexts, as suggested by E. Schiappa (2002).

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