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## MOTIVATED DOUBTS: A COMMENT ON WALTON'S THEORY OF CRITICISM

Discussion paper on Douglas Walton's "How to Refute an Argument Using Artificial Intelligence", *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric*, 23 (36), 2011, 123-154.

**Abstract.** In his theory of criticism, D. N. Walton presupposes that an opponent either critically *questions* an argument, without supplementing this questioning with any reasoning of her own, or that she puts forward a critical question and supplements it with a *counterargument*, that is, with reasoning in defense of an opposite position of her own. In this paper, I show that there is a kind of in-between critical option for the opponent that needs to be taken into account in any classification of types of criticism, and that should not be overlooked in a system of dialogue norms, nor in a procedure for developing a strategically expedient critique. In this third option, an opponent questions and overtly doubts a statement of the proponent and supplements her doubts with a *counterconsideration* that *explains* and *motivates* her position of critical doubt, yet without supporting any opposite thesis, thereby assisting, as it were, the proponent in his attempt to develop a responsive argumentation, tailor-made to convince this particular opponent. First, I elaborate on the notion of an explanatory counterconsideration. Second, I discuss Walton's distinction between premises that can be challenged by mere questioning ("ordinary premises" and "assumptions") and premises that must be challenged by incurring the obligation to offer counter-argumentation (somewhat confusingly labeled "exceptions"). I contend that the latter type of premises, that I would label "normality premises," can be attacked without incurring a genuine burden of proof. Instead, it can be attacked by means of incurring a burden of criticism (Van Laar and Krabbe, 2013) that amounts to the obligation to offer an explanatory counterconsideration, rather than a convincing *ex concessis* argument. Of course, providing the opponent with the right to discharge her burden of criticism with explanatory counterconsiderations brings a clear strategic advantage to her. It is much less demanding to motivate one's doubts regarding proposition P, than to convince the proponent of not-P. If we want to encourage opponents to act critically, and proponents to develop responsive arguments, the importance of the notions of an explanatory counterconsideration and of a motivated doubt should be emphasized in the theory of criticism.

**Keywords:** burden of criticism, counterargument, criticism, exception, explanatory counterconsideration, D. N. Walton

## 1. Introduction

Argumentation cannot be understood without having a clear grasp of the nature of the criticism that it purports to respond to. And criticism cannot be evaluated as legitimate or strategically expedient without having appropriate norms for criticism at our disposal. The conceptual background of the intricate links between argumentation and criticism has been developed in dialectical approaches to the subject, where argumentation is dealt with as a co-production of a defending proponent and a critical opponent. The proponent develops a (more or less) responsive defence of his thesis against an opponent who critically tests the thesis and the subsequent arguments, in a shared attempt to resolve their difference on what they perceive as the merits of both sides (cf. on critical discussion, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004; and on persuasion dialogue, Walton and Krabbe, 1995).

Walton's article "How to Refute an Argument Using Artificial Intelligence," published in this journal (2011), contributes to the much-needed *theory of criticism* (cf. Johnson, 2000; Govier, 1999; Krabbe, 2007; Krabbe and Van Laar, 2011; Van Laar and Krabbe, 2013; Walton, 2012). Walton deals with a large number of issues, three main ones of which are: (1) How to distinguish and characterize types of criticism such as rebuttal, attack, challenge, refutation, exception, defeater, and objection? (2) What norms govern these types of criticism in dialogue? (3) With what procedure can one develop a strategically expedient attack on an argument? In this discussion paper, I shall restrict my attention to a supposition that underlies Walton's ideas on what he calls *premise attacks*, and that has consequences for his views on each of these three issues. According to this supposition, an opponent either critically *questions* an argument, without supplementing this questioning with any reasoning of her own, or she puts forward a critical question and supplements it with a *counterargument*, that is, with reasoning in defense of an opposite position of her own. The supposition becomes apparent when Walton distinguishes between: (1) two kinds of premises, called *assumptions* and *exceptions*, and the corresponding types of critical questions (sometimes also called *assumptions* and *exceptions* by Walton: 2011, p. 137); (2) the norms that apply when an opponent chooses to criticize assumptions and exceptions; and (3) between the ways they fit in expedient strategies for attacking an argument. In this paper, however, I want to emphasize that there is a kind of in-between critical option for the opponent that deserves to be taken into account in any classification of types of criticism, and that should not be overlooked in a system of dialogue norms, nor

in a procedure for developing a strategically expedient critique. In this third option, an opponent questions and overtly doubts a statement of the proponent and supplements her doubts with a *counterconsideration* that explains and motivates her position of critical doubt, yet without supporting any opposite thesis of her own, thereby assisting, as it were, the proponent in his attempt to develop a responsive argumentation.

In Section 2, I shall elaborate on this notion of an explanatory counterconsideration, and how it can be used to express motivated doubt. In Section 3, I shall examine how this third option could be taken into account in a computational approach to criticism.

## **2. Motivating doubts**

In order to introduce the idea of an explanatory counterconsideration, and to show how it can be used in an argumentative exchange to motivate one's doubt and thereby to substantiate one's critical position yet without really offering an argument, I shall consider the following variant of an example used by Walton. Suppose that the proponent puts forward as his thesis that video games lead to violence, and that the opponent addressed challenges this by requesting for argumentation: "Why do you think so? How can you convince me? What would be your argument?" Then, within the normative framework of any argumentative exchange along the lines of a persuasion dialogue or a critical discussion, it is on the proponent to defend his thesis, and to discharge his burden of proof. But then, he may not know in sufficient detail how to address the opponent, and what kind of reason might turn out to be convincing to her. Thus, there is an incentive for the proponent to request the opponent to inform him about what motivates her doubt, so as to become clear about what kind of propositions would take away her motivations for being critical.

For example, the proponent might want to know whether the opponent is reluctant to accept his opinion for taking into account the possibility that there is no causal link between playing video games and committing acts of violence, yet without having any doubts about the existence of correlations between playing these games and committing these acts. Or, alternatively, whether the opponent is taking into account the possibility that there are not even clear correlations between playing these games and committing these acts. Each situation would require a different argumentative defence on the proponent's part, and so he might want to be informed about the specific motivation that underlies the opponent's criticism, so as to be able

to maximize his chance of developing a responsive argument, tailor-made to convince this particular opponent. In such a situation, the proponent might want to pose a *request for explanation*: Instead of rushing into giving an argument to discharge his burden of proof, the proponent first requests a counterconsideration that would show what motivates the opponent to doubt the thesis at issue: "Please, explain why you do not accept that video games lead to violence" (See on such *requests for explanation* and the positive role they may play in persuasion dialogue: Van Laar and Krabbe, 2013).

The requested explanation can (but need not) be presented as a regular kind of assertion, which can be criticized in turn by the proponent if he would want so. For example, the opponent might state: "Well, there are clear correlations, but the causal connection cannot be made." In that case, the proponent should be allowed to force the opponent to become a second proponent, and to develop a convincing argument of her own.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the opponent's explanation is wrapped up in a counterassertion, and the proponent obtains the option to attack it, thus requesting a counterargument. The proponent's request for a counterargument cannot be refused by the opponent, on pains of committing the fallacy of Evading the Burden of Proof. And so, she might discharge her obligations by saying something along the following lines: "Because, being disposed to violence is a separate character trait that both causes a person to play violent video games and to commit violent acts. Persons without this special disposition, then, can play these games without any danger of becoming violent persons themselves!"

But then, the opponent may in at least two ways convey her counterconsiderations *without* wrapping them up in a counterassertion and a counterargument. First, she may express a counterconsideration with what Rescher has called a "cautious assertion," that is, a proposition of the form "P is the case for all that you (the adversary) have shown" or "P's being the case is compatible with everything you've said (i.e., have maintained or conceded)" (Rescher, 1977, p. 6). In our example, the opponent might, for one, state: "As far as you've shown, these correlations might not be indicative of any direct causal link at all. Being disposed to violence might be a separate character trait and ..." Second, she can offer her counterconsiderations in a purely questioning form: "How about P? Might P be true, in your view?" The opponent, for one, might utter: "How about the absence of any causal link? Could these be just correlations, not causally linked at all? What about being disposed to violence as a separate character trait that ..." In both these cases, I shall label such a proposition P an *explanatory counterconsideration* (Van Laar and Krabbe, 2013). The function, then, of such explanatory reasoning is primarily to inform the proponent of her motivations for her doubt,

and, secondarily, to give some strategic advice to the proponent about how to go about developing a convincing argument in favour of his stance. But the function is not, as in the case of a counterargument, to convince the proponent to accept a contrary position.

The differences between counterconsiderations expressed with a cautious assertion and those with a question are mostly superficial, for in both cases the opponent explains her critical stance, as well as gives – albeit in a somewhat indirect manner – strategic advice to the proponent for how to go about his attempts to convince the opponent of his thesis. In both cases, the proper reaction for the proponent is to refute the counterconsideration (by showing it to be false or by showing it to be probatively insufficient or even irrelevant) or to show that the counterconsideration is far-fetched. And in none of them should the proponent be allowed to challenge the opponent to offer a persuasive argument in favour of the propositions that make up her explanation. In other words, if the counterconsideration is not wrapped up in a counterassertion, and nevertheless the proponent challenges the proposition – “What is your argument in favour of there *not* being any causal link; How can you convince me?” – the proponent must be seen as having committed a straw man fallacy, for as a matter of fact, the opponent has in her criticism not genuinely asserted that there is no causal link. She had merely challenged the proponent to elaborate on his position, suggesting that the way to do so is by refuting this very counterconsideration (See Van Laar, 2011, for a formal dialogue model that implements this idea).

Offering counterconsiderations fits the kind of persuasion dialogue that is probatively asymmetrical (Rescher 1977) in being based on a division of labour between a proponent – who has the task of defending his standpoint vis-à-vis his opponent – and an opponent – who has the task of critically testing the standpoint and the defence offered in favour of it. In many dialectical models, the proponent's task amounts to the task of showing (*arguing*) that the opponent's critical stance towards his thesis is untenable, given the opponent's propositional commitments, such as those that she has conceded as indisputable starting points in the preliminary stage of the dialogue, or those that she has conceded in the course of the argumentative exchange itself. The opposite task of the opponent's, then, amounts to the task of showing (*explaining*) that her position of not accepting the proponent's standpoint is tenable after all, notwithstanding her propositional commitments. With explanatory counterconsiderations, the opponent offers a reasoned criticism that goes beyond a mere question and yet she stops short of developing an argumentation of her own. In this manner, the opponent can critically test the proponent's position in a highly active,

substantive, creative and directive manner, yet without becoming a second proponent.<sup>2</sup>

That the opponent uses reasons to criticize the proponent's position should not fool us into analyzing this reasoning as itself an instance of argumentation, at least not as argumentation in the sense of an attempt to convince the initial proponent on the basis of what he has or should have conceded. Different from counterargumentation, an explanatory counterconsideration can be fully legitimate and successful even if it is *not* matching, or derivable from, propositional commitments of the proponent. As a consequence, *motivated doubt*, made up from the expression of critical doubt and an explanatory counterconsideration, forms a kind of criticism *sui generis*.

### 3. Considering Walton's distinction between assumptions and exceptions

Walton does not account for the kind of criticism where an opponent puts forward her motivated doubt. This becomes apparent when he discusses the options for an opponent who is confronted with a proponent who advances an argument that instantiates a particular argumentation scheme. Further elaborating on Walton's example, the proponent might employ the defeasible argumentation scheme From Expert Opinion, saying: "Dr. Smith is an expert on video games and Dr. Smith says that video games do not lead to violence. Therefore, video games do not lead to violence" (cf. Walton, 2011, p. 143). According to Walton, a critical reaction could, first, focus on one of the two ordinary, explicit premises, in which case, according to the norms he proposes, the proponent should argue in favour of the attacked proposition, in order to save his argument from defeat. Second, the opponent could focus her criticism on a kind of implicitly left premise that Walton dubs "assumption." This is the kind of premise that is not explicitly stated, but that is a legitimate focus of attack, such that if the opponent challenges it by mere questioning, it is, again, up to the proponent to provide an argument in support of the challenged proposition if he wants to save his argument from defeat. That Dr. Smith is a knowledgeable expert would be such an assumption in the example. Thirdly, the opponent could focus her criticism on a different kind of implicitly left premise that Walton dubs "exception." In the paper at issue here, Walton gives as an example of an exception associated with arguments from expert opinion, that "[expert] E is not trustworthy" (2011, p. 140). This example is difficult to understand as a premise, at least in an argumentative context, given that this proposition

does not support, but leads away from the argument's conclusion (to wit: whatever the expert stated). Yet, in a more recent paper, Walton gives as an example of an exception in an argument from expert opinion "the statement that the expert is personally reliable as a source" (2012, p. 380). Given that this fits the notion of a premise of a supporting argument, I assume that this illustrates his concept of exception best. (In my view, it would have been more clear to label that proposition a "non-exception" or, even better, a "normality premise.")<sup>3</sup> An exception, then, is conceived of by Walton as the kind of proposition normally left implicit by the proponent, such that if the opponent challenges it, the proponent does not need to provide an argument in support of this exception (normality premise), at least not before the opponent has offered an argument that supports the opposite proposition that the situation is exceptional, for example that expert E is *not* personally reliable as a source. Different from attacks on ordinary premises and assumptions, the mere challenge of an exception (normality premise), unaccompanied by supporting evidence, cannot defeat and rebut, let alone refute the exception (normality premise). In Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008), this norm is implemented in the rules of a formal dialogue system: If the opponent attacks an exception premise, "Pose C" (but not when he attacks a different kind of premise), the proponent has the option to request the opponent to offer a counterargument, "Why not-C?" (2008, p. 386).

The upshot of the discussion in the previous section should be that the opponent, if she has challenged an exception (normality premise) could be seen as having also fulfilled her dialectical obligations as soon as she has provided the proponent with an explanatory counterconsideration, and consequently without providing the proponent with a full-fledged counterargument. When challenging an exception (normality premise), she should not be forced to put forward a persuasive argument, starting from propositions that the proponent would be willing to subscribe to. Instead, she should be given the freedom to explain her critical stance with a cautious assertion, rather than with a real assertion, or with a counterconsideration in a questioning mode, thereby trying to direct the proponent to fulfil his burden of proof in the specific way of refuting that particular counterconsideration.

Walton does not provide a criterion for determining what propositions should count on the one hand as ordinary premises or assumptions, and on the other hand as exceptions (normality premises). In my view (presented in Van Laar 2011), it is plausible to construe a criterion on the basis of the concept of an explanatory counterconsideration. Suppose that the dialogue participants have (or can be assumed to have) accepted the following defeasible argumentation scheme: "Expert E says that P. Therefore P."

Then if the proponent puts forward an argument that instantiates this very scheme – “Dr. Smith says that these games do not lead to violence. Therefore, these games do not lead to violence” – then any proposition part of the proponent’s argument that instantiates one of the premises of the scheme counts as an ordinary premise or as an assumption (if left implicit). Normality premises (exceptions), then, can be connected with those counterconsiderations that motivate an opponent to doubt and challenge the *connection* between premises and conclusion. How?

If an argument instantiates a defeasible argumentation scheme, such as From Expert Opinion, the opponent may also challenge the connection between the set of premises and the argument’s conclusion: “Why should I accept that these games do not lead to violence if Dr. Smith says so?” On the proponent’s request, the opponent should (at least if she has underwritten the argumentation scheme as *prima facie* acceptable) be obligated to provide an explanatory counterconsideration, and specify it to some sufficient degree: “Well, as far as you’ve shown, Dr. Smith is not personally reliable. To be more specific about it, he might, for all you’ve shown, have been paid by the game industry.” Now, it is up to the proponent to refute the counterconsideration, and he may do so either by showing it to be false (“Dr. Smith is reliable, and he has no financial stake, because ...”) or by showing it to be insufficient to refute his position (“Even if he would have been paid by the game industry, you can still take his word on it, because ...”). The former statement, with which the proponent refutes an explanatory counterconsideration as false, can be seen as fulfilling the same function that Walton assigns to exceptions (normality premises). In short, exceptions (normality premises) can be analyzed as those statements with which the proponent denies propositions that the opponent puts forward in explanation of why she doubts the connection between the premises and the conclusion of the proponent’s argument.

Three concluding remarks on this issue: (1) Whether or not a proposition counts as a normality premise (exception) depends, in this view, upon the choices made within the (possibly implicit) dialogue, especially those by the opponent. (2) Whether or not a proposition counts as a normality premise (exception) also depends upon the specifics of the argumentation schemes that the participants have adopted. Suppose they accept the following pattern: “Expert E says that P. E is personally reliable. Therefore P.” Then, an attack such as “Is Dr. Smith personally reliable?” possibly explained by “Might he have a financial bias?” would simply count as an attack on an ordinary premise or on an assumption. (3) By advancing such a normality premise (exception), the proponent has started to discharge his



burden of proof, and in a way suggested by the opponent. In line with the dialectical division of labour, it can be expected that the opponent critically tests the correctness of the new statement – “What would be your argument for your view that Dr. Smith is not being paid by the game industry?” – thus enabling the proponent to refute the counterconsideration in full.

Consequently, the notion of an explanatory counterconsideration can be used in order to elaborate on Walton's theory of criticism.

#### 4. Conclusion

It hardly needs mentioning that providing the opponent with the right to discharge her burden of criticism with explanatory counterconsiderations brings a clear strategic advantage to her. It is much less demanding to motivate doubt regarding proposition P, than to convince the proponent of not-P. If we want to encourage opponents to act critically, and proponents to develop responsive arguments, the importance of the notions of an explanatory counterconsideration and of a motivated doubt should be emphasized in the theory of criticism.

#### N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> Of course, in such a mixed dispute, the initial proponent's burden of proof does not evaporate.

<sup>2</sup> Given that offering counterconsiderations can often be considered a more cooperative way to criticize a position than merely challenging it, the opponent's *burden of criticism* should, in some situations, bring the obligation to offer explanatory counterconsiderations, such as when the opponent challenges a proposition with the status of a (common) presumption (Van Laar and Krabbe, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Walton (2011) labels two propositions on pages 139 and 140 as both assumptions and as exceptions. I surmise that the labelling in the list on p. 140 is the correct one. In addition, as just explained, I also think that the examples of exceptions (normality premises) in this list should express that the situation is *not* exceptional.

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