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1. Assimakis Tseronis, Dissociation in Argumentative Discussions: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective

Message 1: Dissociation in Argumentative Discussions: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective

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From: Assimakis Tseronis <assimakis.tseronis@lcp.cnrs.fr>
Subject: Dissociation in Argumentative Discussions: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective

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AUTHOR: Agnes van Rees
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SUMMARY

This is a monograph about the argumentative technique of dissociation, a reasoning process by which elements that are regarded as forming a whole are separated, bringing about "a more or less profound change in the conceptual data that are used as the basis of argument" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 412). In her book, van Rees offers an in-depth analysis of dissociation from a specific theoretical model in the field of argumentation studies, the
pragma-dialectical theory developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) and extended by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002). According to this approach, argumentative discourse is studied in terms of a dialogical model which postulates the moves that two parties exchange with the aim of resolving a difference of opinion by critically testing the argumentation advanced.

The study is divided in three parts and prefaced by a short introduction. In Part I (Chapters 1-3), the argumentative technique of dissociation is introduced. In Part II (Chapters 4-8), dissociation is analysed as a technique that can be employed at the various stages of an argumentative discussion. In Part III (Chapters 9-11), the conditions under which the use of dissociation can be considered dialectically sound and the characteristics of this technique that make it effective in argumentative discussions are discussed.

In Chapter 1 (The Concept of Dissociation), van Rees introduces the argumentative technique of dissociation by first presenting Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's account of it and then by comparing dissociation with other related notions, such as 'distinction', 'dichotomy', 'precization' and 'semantic shift'. In their Treatise on Argumentation (1969), Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca devote one whole chapter to the "Dissociation of Concepts." They treat dissociation as one of two complementary argument schemes, the other being association. Systematizing Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's account of this technique, van Rees proposes a certain typology of dissociations by considering the relation of the original concept to which dissociation is applied with the two terms that result from it. On page 9, she provides the following definition: "Dissociation is an argumentative technique in which, in order to resolve a contradiction or incompatibility, a unitary concept expressed by a single term is split up into two new concepts unequally valued, one subsumed under a new term, the other subsumed either under the original term, which is redefined to denote a concept reduced in content, or under another new term with its own definition, the original term being given up altogether." When Maria Montessori's granddaughter, as the author informs us, defended her grandmother against an accusation of being vain by saying "She loved beautiful things, but was not vain," she was making use of this argumentative technique (p.8). In the remainder of the first chapter, the author compares dissociation to a number of related concepts that have been used or introduced by other scholars. She thus discusses the concepts of 'semantic shift', 'distinction', 'dichotomy', 'precization' and 'persuasive definition'. She concludes that while there is certain overlap with some characteristics of these other notions, dissociation can be distinguished by three constitutive features, namely: a) in dissociation the speech acts of conceptual distinction and definition are performed; b) the two terms that result from the performance of these acts are placed in a value hierarchy; c) dissociation is meant to resolve an incompatibility or contradiction.

In Chapter 2 (The Uses of Dissociation), van Rees provides a short overview of studies that examine the use of dissociation in the fields of philosophy, law, politics, and science. From the field of philosophy, van Rees presents examples that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have discussed in their Treatise of Argumentation, derived from some of Plato's dialogues as well as from Spinoza and Schopenhauer. One example comes from Plato's dialogue Gorgias, in which Socrates dissociates the notion of art from the notion of 'routine' or 'knack' in order to allocate rhetoric into this latter activity. The field of law is also a primary field in which dissociation is put into practice, mainly in order to solve incompatibilities that may arise for a judge who needs to justify his decision in the court, for example, or incompatibilities that arise in the interpretation of the law, as well as in the interpretation of cases that need to be judged by the law. Van Rees presents studies by Stahl (2002) on the Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment's free exercise of
religion clause, and by Schiappa (2003) on the interpretation of the notion 'personhood' in the abortion debate, and on the interpretation of the term 'rape' in the related literature. Concerning the use of dissociation in the field of politics, van Rees refers to a study by Schiappa (2003) about the dissociation applied to the notion of 'wetlands' by President George Bush Sr., and to a study by Zarefsky et al. (1984) about the employment of dissociation by President Ronald Reagan in defending his proposed cuts in the Federal domestic budget. In the scientific field, van Rees refers to Schiappa again and to Lynch (2006). The former examines the employment of dissociation in the definition of the notion of 'death' as it has evolved in medical science. The latter studies the use of dissociation in the development of the notion of stem cell in biological and biomedical research.

In Chapter 3 (Indicators of Dissociation), the author distinguishes types of clues that can indicate the use of dissociation by a speaker or writer. To this end, van Rees distinguishes three groups of clues, each corresponding to one of the features typical of dissociation presented in Chapter 1. These are: a) clues concerning the performance of the speech act of distinction or the speech act of definition; b) clues concerning the value hierarchy that is applied to the dissociated terms; c) clues connected to the resolution of a contradiction, which is the goal for which dissociation is used. Van Rees uses examples to illustrate what each of these three groups of clues stands for. As far as the first group of clues is concerned, words and expressions signalling a distinction or a definition, such as 'difference,' 'distinction,' 'not the same as,' can be considered as a clue for the use of dissociation. Moreover, the use of a performative formula such as 'I make a distinction' or 'I define x as y' constitutes an explicit way of performing the acts of distinction and definition. Clues that signal that the performance of these acts is presupposed in the discourse include the use of a noun phrase with the definitive article ('the difference is'), the use of paradox ('to lose in order to win') or tautologies ('business is business'), and the opposition of synonyms (opposing 'dying' to 'departing from life,' for example). Regarding the second group of clues, van Rees refers to the use of expressions like 'real', 'pseudo' and 'true', which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also mention, as well as to the use of scare quotes or the distinction between 'theory' and 'practice'. The last group of clues points to an interpretation of the context as one in which dissociation is used to resolve a contradiction or paradox. Such a clue may, in certain cases, be the use of negation or the presence of 'but' combined with a negation, as illustrated in the statement by Montessori's granddaughter cited earlier ("but was not vain").

In Chapter 4 (The Model of Critical Discussion), the author introduces the pragma-dialectical approach to the study of argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, 2004), within which she analyses dissociation as a discussion technique. In this dialectical framework, argumentative discourse is analysed as an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion by following a regimented procedure that is governed by standards of critical reasonableness. This procedure of dispute resolution is presented in terms of a dialogue between a protagonist of a standpoint and an antagonist. It goes through four stages, namely the confrontation, the opening, the argumentation, and the concluding stage. At each stage a number of rules are specified that need to be followed by both parties if the goal of resolving the difference of opinion is to be reached. The stages and the moves that are to be performed by the parties at each stage, as well as the rules that govern these stages constitute what is known as the ideal model of a critical discussion. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002) have extended the pragma-dialectical framework by accounting for the rhetorical goals that the parties in an argumentative discussion have and the way in which these goals are balanced against the dialectical exigencies of a
critical discussion. Within this framework, van Rees seeks to specify how
dissociation is used to enhance the dialectical reasonableness and the
rhetorical effectiveness of the moves that each party may perform. In chapters
5-8, which borrow their titles from the four stages of a critical discussion,
the author specifies how dissociation may be used at each stage.

At the confrontation stage (Chapter 5), it becomes clear which standpoints are
disputed and what the exact shape of the dispute is. According to the
pragma-dialectical analysis, three moves are performed at this stage: The
protagonist brings forward a standpoint, the antagonist brings forward
criticism, and the protagonist responds to this criticism. For each of these
moves, van Rees describes the dialectical and rhetorical effect of the use of
dissociation and discusses examples in order to illustrate this. For the use of
dissociation when bringing forward a standpoint, van Rees gives the example of a
Dutch comedian who stated that "real originality is absent" (p.56). According to
the author, the dialectical effect of the use of dissociation in this move is
that it serves to delineate the standpoint against other possible standpoints,
while the rhetorical effect is that it makes the standpoint easier to defend. In
turn, the antagonist may employ dissociation when bringing forward criticism to
the standpoint, particularly when in doing this he presents the opposite
standpoint. This is what a Dutch soccer player did, as van Rees describes, when
he rejected the conclusion of his interviewer that he must regret his transfer
to a new club that performs far worse than his old club by saying "It is too
bad, but too bad is something else than regret" (p.60). The dialectical effect
is that it helps the antagonist bring forward a particular other standpoint,
distinguishing between what is and what is not the case. The rhetorical effect
is that the standpoint of the initial protagonist is not only negated but
replaced by a standpoint that is more to the liking of the antagonist, who now
becomes protagonist of the opposite standpoint. In response, the protagonist may
employ dissociation either in his move of maintaining the standpoint or in his
move of withdrawing it. In the first case, the dialectical effect, according to
van Rees, is that dissociation helps the protagonist maintain the standpoint in
a particular interpretation while withdrawing it in another one. The rhetorical
effect is that the protagonist appears granting a concession on an
interpretation of the standpoint that is marginal, while he maintains it on an
interpretation that is presented as crucial. Finally, according to the author,
employing dissociation when withdrawing the standpoint helps the protagonist
escape from an accusation of having acted inconsistently.

At the opening stage (Chapter 6), the discussants jointly establish the starting
points on the basis of which the standpoint can be defended at the argumentation
stage. Van Rees describes how dissociation may be employed by either party in
the moves of proposing starting points or in attacking these proposals, as well
as in the reaction to criticism of a starting point. She remarks that the
dialectical and rhetorical effect of the use of dissociation in any of these
three moves at the opening stage is similar to the effect of the use of this
technique in the respective moves at the confrontation stage. The difference
lies in the fact that the effect of the use of dissociation at the opening stage
is to be understood as pertaining to the sublevel of the discussion in which the
starting points are discussed.

At the argumentation stage (Chapter 7), the protagonist defends the standpoint
by making use of the starting points in order to advance arguments that support
the standpoint, in response to the antagonist's questions. In this chapter, van
Rees presents the dialectical and rhetorical effects of the use of dissociation
in the antagonist's critical questions regarding the way in which the
protagonist connects the starting points to the standpoint. The antagonist may
use dissociation when posing any of the following three critical questions: a)
when criticising the relationship between the standpoint and the argument adduced in support of it (first critical question), b) when pointing out that the argument adduced does not support the standpoint advanced (second critical question), or c) when pointing out that the standpoint cannot be defended by the argument provided (third critical question). According to van Rees, in the first case, the use of dissociation helps the protagonist propose a different interpretation of the relationship between the standpoint and the argument, allowing him/her thus to attack it more easily. In the second case, dissociation helps the antagonist provide an alternative conclusion than the one that it is postulated to lead to. In the third case, the use of dissociation helps establish a distinction between the argument provided as support for the given standpoint and the argument that is required as support of it.

At the concluding stage (Chapter 8), the parties jointly assess the result of the critical testing of the standpoint. According to van Rees, dissociation may be used at this stage by both parties in their attempt to give a more precise interpretation of the standpoint when they conclude that it is tenable or when they conclude that it is not. That is, the protagonist may use dissociation when agreeing to retract the standpoint, while the protagonist may use dissociation when agreeing to accept the standpoint. In both cases, according to the author, dissociation helps the parties interpret the result of the discussion in a way that has the least favourable consequences for themselves.

In Chapter 9 (The Dialectical Soundness of Dissociation), van Rees seeks an answer to the question: Under what circumstances is dissociation a dialectically viable technique? To this direction, she starts from the ideal model of a critical discussion and the pragma-dialectical rules according to which a reasonable discussion that aims at resolving a difference of opinion should proceed. In this model, the distinction that dissociation introduces in an argumentative discussion concerns the modification of what was considered agreed upon up until that moment by the protagonist and the antagonist as part of the starting points of a critical discussion. Considering the procedure along which starting points are proposed at the opening stage, van Rees extracts two conditions that need to be fulfilled for dissociation to be dialectically sound, namely: a) that the protagonist puts the proposed change in starting points up for discussion (what the author calls "procedural requirement" (p.99)), and b) that the antagonist in the end of such a side-discussion accepts the change (what the author calls "material requirement" (p.102)). The procedural requirement is fulfilled when the change in starting points is put up for discussion through the explicit and recognizable performance of the speech acts of definition or distinction, or when the protagonist explicitly defends the change by advancing argumentation in favour of it. The material requirement is fulfilled when the antagonist is of the opinion that in actual fact a distinction can be made between term I and term II, and when the proposed definition or distinction is not ad hoc. According to the author, both the procedural and the material requirements are necessary for establishing the dialectical soundness of dissociation.

In Chapter 10 (The Persuasiveness of Dissociation), the author turns to the question: What is it that makes dissociation so effective from a rhetorical point of view? For dissociation to be successful, audience acceptance is of great importance. According to van Rees, the requirements for the dialectical soundness of dissociation presented in the previous chapter can be a basis for describing what should be the case for an audience to accept the proposed dissociation: (a) that the audience must be of the opinion that there is some difference between the two notions that result from the dissociation, (b) that the value hierarchy in which the two members of the dissociated pair are placed is accepted, and (c) that the audience accepts that dissociation solves the
incompatibility to which it was supposed to provide a solution. Among the characteristics of the argumentative technique of dissociation that make it fit for gaining audience acceptance, van Rees mentions the fact that dissociation inherently acknowledges the audience's views, that it helps the arguer bypass the need to argue for his position and the fact that dissociation is often presented as self-evident. A speaker may, for instance, counter the assertion of his interlocutor that a certain object is green by introducing a dissociation that distinguishes between an object that is optically green and one that is technically green. As van Rees writes "through the use of this dissociation, the speaker gives the audience's views much more acknowledgement, than if he had countered the assertion by merely saying, for example, that the object is not green, but yellow" (p.121).

In Chapter 11, as the title 'An Extended Example' suggests, van Rees summarizes the analysis of the argumentative technique of dissociation proposed in this study by discussing a single, extended text. This is U.S. President Bill Clinton's testimony before the Federal Grand Jury on an accusation of perjury, in the case that is known as 'Monicagate'. Van Rees analyses Clinton's use of dissociation on the definition of 'sexual relationship.' In order to avoid an accusation of perjury, Clinton proposed a narrower definition of 'sexual relationship,' placing activities like having oral sex and telephone sex outside of it, for which he introduced a new term, 'inappropriate intimate contact.' This dissociation allowed him, on the one hand, to recognize the facts, namely that he had had oral sex with Ms. Lewinsky, while, on the other hand, he maintained his standpoint that he did not have a sexual relationship with her. Even though this line of defence succeeded in acquitting the President of the accusation of perjury, as van Rees concludes, the particular use of dissociation was neither dialectically sound nor particularly persuasive since it was not well received by the general public, despite the President's acquittal.

EVALUATION:

To my knowledge, this is the first book-length study of a specific argumentative technique that is proposed within the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation. Moreover it is the first within this theoretical perspective that devotes a significant part to the discussion of a number of examples taken from actual discourse. It succeeds in illustrating how the analytical potential of the tools developed within pragma-dialectics can be exploited for a systematic understanding of the workings of a particular argumentative technique. By specifying the use of dissociation with respect to the moves that are performed at the various stages of a critical discussion, and by referring to the pragma-dialectical rules for evaluating the soundness as well as the effectiveness of this particular technique, this monograph proposes a promising model for systematizing the study of other argumentative techniques, too, within the same theoretical perspective.

The following remarks address questions that are raised when reading the book both from the perspective of someone who is informed about the specific theoretical approach to the study of argumentation and from the perspective of someone who is interested in what argumentation studies can offer to the analysis of discourse. I will begin with some general remarks and then move to some more technical issues.

One of the main contributions of this study, as its author rightly states, is the presentation of discourse fragments that come from a broad range of domains compared to earlier studies of dissociation, by scholars like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Schiappa and Zarefsky, who have mainly looked at institutional discourses. The examples that van Rees cites come mainly from news reports in
the press or the Internet as well as from ordinary conversations. When looking at the sources of the texts or their content, the reader realises that the vast majority of them have a Dutch source. However, since the texts discussed appear in English, there is confusion as to whether this is the original language or the language into which they have been translated (and by whom), and whether their discussion is based on the original or the translated version. For a study of the argumentative technique of dissociation this may be not such a grave omission or methodological shortcoming, since the interest is more on the reasoning underlying the use of the specific technique rather than on the language in which this technique is manifested in discourse. Nevertheless, it would help the reader to know whether the texts have been translated, especially if translated texts are used to illustrate the indicators of dissociation in Chapter 3.

Moreover, when reading the chapter about indicators of dissociation (Chapter 3), one feels that more could be said about the choices afforded by the language system to present dissociation in discourse. To begin with, there is a lack of a definition of 'indicator' that would help the reader understand what he/she could be looking for in a text if he or she were to find out whether dissociation is employed in it or not. From the examples discussed, it seems that an indicator can be anything from a lexical unit (single word or phrase) to a grammatical concept (definiteness or negation), as well as a typographical convention, such as the use of scare quotes, and even a stylistic device like tautology and paradox, which could be considered as argumentative techniques in their own right. While the reference to the three constitutive features of dissociation provides a systematic theoretical basis for identifying groups of clues for the use of dissociation, a systematic presentation of the ways in which the use of this discussion technique can be realised in discourse is still lacking. Maybe this has to do with the fact that looking for indicators is a language-specific matter and the author's aim is not to present dissociation as an argumentative technique in a specific language, such as English or Dutch.

Nevertheless, it remains an issue whether the three groups of clues are to be used in order to identify dissociation in discourse or if one is to make use of them in order to justify retrospectively the fact that dissociation is employed in discourse. For example, it is not clear why the fact that the speaker says 'there is a difference between our cultural and our constitutional nationality', in fragment (2) on p.33, counts as a clue for 'dissociation' and not for 'distinction.' There is nothing in the text or in the particular clue that signals a certain hierarchy of values, which constitutes the difference between 'distinction' and 'dissociation', as the author argues in Chapter 1.

In what follows, I turn to the more technical issues, regarding the use of the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion to specify the workings of the argumentative technique of dissociation. When one compares the way dissociation is presented in the second part with the way it is treated in the third part of the book, one may wonder whether dissociation is to be analysed in the ideal model of a critical discussion as a strategy employed at a certain stage of the discussion or as a certain realization of the various moves performed throughout.

In the second part of the book, van Rees analyses dissociation as a discussion technique that can be employed by either party in the performance of any move at all four stages of a critical discussion. She argues for this view: "Usage declaratives like definition and distinction, that are inherent to dissociation, may be used in all stages of a critical discussion. By the same token, dissociation can occur in all stages of a critical discussion" (p.53). Indeed, usage declaratives are one of the speech act types that can be performed by one or the other party throughout the stages of a critical discussion with the aim
of clarifying or explaining a previous move performed by either party. In that sense, usage declaratives are discussion moves on a par with other moves that can be performed in the course of a critical discussion, such as the move of advancing a standpoint, the move of casting doubt or the move of advancing argumentation, among others. Dissociation, however, is not a discussion move but a discussion technique, as the title of the second part of the book states. Therefore, the argument for the use of dissociation at all the stages of a critical discussion cannot be based on the resemblance of dissociation to a discussion move that is performed at all the stages.

In the third part of the study, the author proposes criteria for the evaluation of this argumentative technique that derive from the conditions for accepting a change in the starting points of the discussion at the opening stage. Here it seems as if dissociation is an argumentative technique that works at the opening stage of an argumentative discussion and not at the rest of the stages. If the view that dissociation is a technique employed in the moves of all the stages is to be maintained, then the evaluation of its use should consider the rules that govern the performance of the specific move in which dissociation is employed at a particular stage each time. It thus remains a question how the soundness of this argumentative technique is to be judged when it is used in the moves performed at other stages, such as the move of advancing a standpoint at the confrontation stage or the move of criticising the argumentation scheme employed at the argumentation stage, and the move of maintaining the doubt over the standpoint at the concluding stage, among others.

One last remark concerns the conditions for the sound use of dissociation. In Chapter 9, van Rees takes the recognizable and explicit performance of the speech act of creating a distinction or of introducing a definition, on the one hand, and the acceptance of the new distinction or redefinition introduced by dissociation, on the other hand, to be the two necessary conditions for deciding on the dialectical soundness of dissociation. The author derives these two conditions from the requirements for the acceptance of a proposition as a starting point in a critical discussion. The one requirement has to do with the protagonist's readiness to put the proposed change in starting points up for discussion. The other requirement has to do with the antagonist's acceptance of the proposed change. While these may provide clear and systematic criteria in theory, their application for deciding in practice whether a certain fragment of discourse in which dissociation was employed is dialectically sound or not is far from evident. This is because in written discourse the antagonist's reactions can only be marginally reconstructed if at all. Even in spoken discourse where there is an interlocutor present who plays the role of antagonist, it is not always the case that he/she reacts explicitly to the proposed change in starting points. It is in these cases where it seems to me that the analyst cannot check whether the dissociation violates the procedural rules for a critical discussion without being the one who judges whether the proposed change is acceptable or not, contrary to what van Rees maintains when she writes "The theorist does not need to worry about whether a definition is good or a distinction tenable. That judgement is left to the participants themselves, who can start a discussion about that" (p. 108).

Despite its conciseness, the present study succeeds in providing a well-written and theoretically informed monograph on the argumentative technique of dissociation that bears the mark of the author's mastery in combining her genuine interest in the analysis of everyday real discourse with her deep knowledge in argumentation theory.


ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Assimakis Tseronis has defended his PhD on Qualifying Standpoints at Leiden University. He holds an M.A. in Language Studies from Lancaster University and an M.Phil. in Logic, Language and Argumentation from the University of Amsterdam. His research interests lie in the fields of argumentation studies and discourse pragmatics, in particular, in the study of the linguistic realization of argumentative moves in both written and spoken discourse. He currently works on a post-doctoral project on argumentative markers at CNRS Paris (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Laboratoire Communication et Politique).