UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Relevance reviewed: The case of argumentum ad hominem.

van Eemeren, F.H.; Grootendorst, R.

Publication date
1992

Published in
Argumentation

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (1992). Relevance reviewed: The case of argumentum ad hominem. *Argumentation*, 6(2), 141-159.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

A078499143

NCC/IBL AANVRAAGBON

KOPIE PERIODIEK EGB

(12)

02-05-2005

Datum indienen : 01-05-2005 12:54 5493-1 Clearing House
Datum plaatsen : 01-05-2005 12:54
Aanvrager : 0004/9998
Aanvraagident :
Aanvragerident : 0004/9999
Eindgebruiker : 041631433

Telefoonnummer : 050-3635057
Cooperatiecode : R

Leverwijze : Elektronisch
Fax :
Ftp :
E-Mail : m.s.van.delden@rug.nl
Ariel :

Plaatscode : 863273092 ; CBa 1811 ; ; 1987 V1 - 2001 V15

(1) [] Origineel gestuurd	(6) [] Niet beschikbaar
(2) [] Copie gestuurd	(7) [] Uitgeleend
(3) [] Overige	(8) [] Wordt niet uitgeleend
(4) [] Nog niet aanwezig	(9) [] Bibliografisch onjuist
(5) [] Niet aanwezig	(0) [] Bij de binder

A078499143

NCC/IBL AANVRAAGBON

Verzamelnota volgt.

KOPIE PERIODIEK EGB

02-05-2005

Datum indienen : 01-05-2005 12:54 9620-1 UB Groningen
Datum plaatsen : 01-05-2005 12:54 UvA Keur
Aanvrager : 0004/9998 Broerstraat 4
Aanvraagident : 9700 AN Groningen
Aanvragerident : 0004/9999
Eindgebruiker : 041631433 tav

Aantal

PPN Titel : 863273092
Titel : Argumentation : an international journal on reasoning
Auteur :
Deel/Supplem. :
Corporatie : Externe database:
Jaar/Editie : 1987 Extern nummer :
Uitgave : Dordrecht D. Reidel Publishing Company
Serie/Sectie :
Pag-ISSN/ISBN : 0920-427X

Plaatscode : 863273092 ; CBa 1811 ; ; 1987 V1 - 2001 V15

Jaar : 1992-00-00
Volume : 6
Aflevering : 2
Eindgebruiker : 041631433 Aanvraagident. :
Auteur : F.H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst: UVA KEUR (UB GRONINGEN)
Artikel : Relevance reviewed: The case of argumentum ad hominem
Bladzijden : 141-159
Bron :
Opmerking : ARNO-ID 127705

Relevance Reviewed: The Case of Argumentum ad Hominem

FRANS H. VAN EEMEREN AND ROB GROOTENDORST

*University of Amsterdam
Instituut voor Neerlandistiek
Spuistraat 134
1012 VB Amsterdam
The Netherlands*

ABSTRACT: This article aims at providing some conceptual tools for dealing adequately with relevance in argumentative discourse. For this purpose, argumentative relevance is defined as a functional interactional relation between certain elements in the discourse. In addition to the distinction between interpretive and evaluative relevance that can be traced in the literature, analytic relevance is introduced as an intermediary concept. In order to classify the various problems of relevance arising in interpreting, analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse, a taxonomy is proposed in which the concept of relevance is differentiated along three co-ordinate dimensions: object, domain and aspect. With the help of this taxonomy, it can be shown that the problems of evaluative relevance with which the standard approach to fallacies cannot satisfactorily deal can be more systematically approached within a pragma-dialectical framework. This is demonstrated for the *argumentum ad hominem*, which is erroneously treated as a homogeneous type of relevance fallacy in logico-centric analyses, so that cases where this is not justified must be treated as *ad hoc* exceptions.

KEY WORDS: Argument, argumentative discourse, argumentum ad hominem, fallacies, pragma-dialectics, relevance.

PART I. THE CONCEPT OF RELEVANCE

1. *A General Definition of Relevance*¹

In our attempt to clarify the concept of relevance, we shall restrict ourselves to relevance in argumentative discourse, whether oral or written, in which an effort is made to resolve a difference of opinion. Thus far, an encompassing perspective that connects the various concepts of relevance prevailing in the literature on argumentative discourse is lacking. As all these concepts refer to related facets of textual cohesion and coherence at the syntactic, semantic or pragmatic level, such an encompassing perspective is nevertheless called for. In order to be able to start with a broad perspective on relevance that covers all crucial aspects, we shall first give a general definition of relevance:

An element of discourse is relevant to another element of discourse if an interactional relation can be envisaged between these elements that is functional in the light of a certain objective.

In this definition, relevance (or lack of relevance) refers to the relation between explicit or implicit elements in an oral or written discourse. The relevance (or lack of relevance) of a certain element of discourse is always tied to a certain interactional objective: only in the light of this objective is the one element relevant or irrelevant to the other. By this definition, relevance (or lack of relevance) does not refer primarily to a formal relation between discourse elements, but to their functionality in view of the interactional intentions that can be ascribed to the speakers or writers. The general problem for those interested in relevance in argumentative discourse is then to determine when there is a functional relation between discourse elements that are communicated by the language users in a given case in order to achieve a certain interactional objective.

This article aims at providing some conceptual tools for dealing adequately with relevance in argumentative discourse. Starting from the definition of argumentative relevance as a functional interactional relation between certain elements in the discourse, a distinction is traced in the literature between interpretive and evaluative relevance. In addition to this distinction, analytic relevance is introduced as an intermediary concept. In order to classify the various problems of relevance arising in interpreting, analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse, a taxonomy is then proposed in which the concept of relevance is differentiated along three co-ordinate dimensions: object, domain and aspect. With the help of this taxonomy, it will be shown that the problems of evaluative relevance with which the standard approach to fallacies cannot satisfactorily deal can be more systematically approached within a pragma-dialectical framework. This is demonstrated for the *argumentum ad hominem*, which is erroneously treated as a homogeneous type of relevance fallacy in logico-centric analyses, so that cases where such a treatment is not justified must be considered as *ad hoc* exceptions.

2. Interpretive and Evaluative Relevance

Different angles of approach lead to different conceptualizations of the functional relation inherent in the concept of relevance. Although most authors who have written about relevance in argumentative discourse do not explicitly acknowledge that their observations are made from a specific angle, two divergent approaches can be distinguished in the literature on relevance: a descriptive and a normative approach.

Authors who have a descriptive approach usually equate the concept of relevance with *interpretive relevance*. As a matter of course, they start from the proceedings in real-life cases of argumentative discourse and identify relevance and irrelevance empirically by describing what the language users themselves appear to consider as relevant or irrelevant. In this approach, relevancy or irrelevancy is dependent on the interpretive judgements of the participants in the speech event. Typical relevance questions are then, for instance: 'In what way

do the participants in a conversation determine what counts as a relevant sequel to what has been said before?', and 'When can utterance A be interpreted as a relevant reaction or a relevant sequel to utterance B?'

In her article 'On getting to the point', Tracy (1982) provides a clear illustration of this descriptive approach. She cites an example of interpretive irrelevance in a dialogue about the choice of subject to major in:

A: I don't know what to major in.

B: uhm

A: I'm really torn between the practical and the interesting. I'd probably be able to get a good job if I majored in accounting (...). But, I really like anthropology. It's fun learning about all those exotic cultures. But, look at Jim, he majored in anthropology in college. Now Jim's working in an office earning nothing.

B: Yeah, I ran into him the other day and we decided to play racquetball. (1982: 281-282)

When interpreting this dialogue, ordinary language users, such as A, usually regard remarks such as B's concerning racquetball as irrelevant. Tracy and other empirically-oriented researchers – linguists, psychologists, sociologists et cetera – are primarily interested in making descriptive observations of this kind concerning interpretive relevance.²

Authors who have a normative approach usually equate the concept of relevance with *evaluative relevance*. Without much further ado, they assign relevance to the context of evaluating arguments and identify relevance and irrelevance in argumentative discourse by referring to certain standards for sound argument. In this approach, relevancy or irrelevancy is dependent on the normative framework provided by a particular theory of argument. Typical relevance questions are then, for instance: 'Should a personal attack in an argument always be rejected as irrelevant?', and 'What about an appeal to authority, an appeal to pity, threatening with sanctions or pointing at the consequences of a standpoint?'

In their book *Logical Self-Defense*, Johnson and Blair (1983) deal with a woman's reaction to the Report of the Bertrand Commission from 1981, in which the oil companies are accused of unlawful conspiracy in order to freeze the prices of petrol. The lady's reaction is a clear illustration of evaluative irrelevance:

Bertrand and the commissioners must be out to lunch. In no possible way could he have one lousy shred of evidence to support their allegations. I can say this because my husband has been working for the oil company for 30 years and the company has always been good to him. To say that the industry my husband works for has been ripping off the public for years really irks me. (1983: 177)

According to Johnson and Blair, the position of the lady stems from her 'egocentric investment': her husband is an employee of an oil company, he has always been loyal to this company, and she is loyal to him. As the question of the freezing of the oil prices is not affected by whether or not his employer has always been good to the lady's husband, Johnson and Blair regard her contribution as an irrelevant argument. Johnson and Blair and other model-oriented

researchers – philosophers, (formal or informal) logicians, lawyers et cetera – are primarily interested in making normative assessments of this kind concerning evaluative relevance.³

3. *Reconstructing Analytic Relevance*

As argumentative discourse aims at understanding as well as acceptance, its interpretation anticipates its evaluation and its evaluation presupposes its understanding: standpoints, arguments and all other speech acts performed in the discourse, whether simple or complex, are not only meant to be understood but also to be accepted. An adequate treatment of relevance in argumentative discourse cannot therefore be restricted to either interpretive or evaluative relevance. In addition, a methodical reconstruction of the discourse is required in which all elements, and only those elements, in the discourse that are pertinent to its evaluation are brought together in an analytic overview. To denote this intermediary concept of relevance, we shall use the term *analytic relevance*.

Verbal interaction always takes place in a more or less clearly-defined speech event in which the speakers or writers attempt to evoke certain interactional responses from the listeners or readers by performing certain (simple or complex) communicative acts. The responses they get may vary from silent agreement to (undesired) explicit contradiction. The language users know that the speech acts performed are supposed to be interrelated. When interpreting the discourse, they will almost automatically try to find out what kind of relation between one communicative act and another would be functional in the light of some interactional goal that fits in with the direction of the speech event, thus establishing the interpretive relevance of the speech acts concerned.⁴

Especially if the argumentative discourse becomes more complex, ordinary language users may be mistaken in their interpretation, or disagree about the correct interpretation. More importantly, certain relevant connections can escape their attention, and they may dismiss as irrelevant certain elements in the discourse which are of crucial importance to achieving a certain goal, notably that of resolving the difference of opinion. A calculated and systematic analysis of the argumentative discourse is therefore required, in which the relevant connections between speech acts are methodically reconstructed. The interpretation is then, as it were, theoretically programmed.

Depending on the analytic objective, different kinds of reconstruction may be required. An analysis aimed at revealing emotional tensions calls for a psychoanalytical reconstruction, an analysis aimed at detecting persuasive devices calls for a rhetorical reconstruction, et cetera. As a reconstruction can be based on different theoretical models, each type of reconstruction leads to a different kind of analysis of the same discourse. When analysing argumentative discourse, we make use of the pragma-dialectical model, in which the discourse is regarded as part of a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of

opinion.⁵ This means that each speech act which may be regarded as part of a critical discussion will be included in the analysis.

Normally, in argumentative discourse not all stages of a critical discussion are explicitly and completely represented, let alone in the same order as in the model, and the discourse will also include speech acts which are not regarded as part of a critical discussion or whose function is not quite clear. In quite a few cases, at first glance, irrelevance seems to prevail, but at second glance this is often not so. In a pragma-dialectical analysis it is determined, in a cyclic reconstruction process, which of the elements that are apparently interpretively irrelevant are analytically relevant, because in view of their difference-resolving functionality they can, after all, be reconstructed as part of a critical discussion.

4. *Dimensions of Relevance*

According to the pragma-dialectical model for critical discussion, the relevance of speech acts is linked to a specific stage in the process of resolving a difference of opinion and the specific (sub)goal aimed for in that stage: they are not functional at every stage. As a consequence, lack of functionality, or irrelevance, is also stage-bound. When dealing with relevance problems, a specification is therefore required of the exact domain in which the relevance of speech acts is to be considered. Furthermore, the relevance of a specific component of the speech acts performed may be at issue: their functionality need not be questioned on all points. This means that a specification is required of the exact object on which the considerations concerning the relevance of speech acts are concentrated. Finally, the considerations concerning the relevance of speech acts can focus on a particular aspect of their performance: their functionality may only be at stake in a certain respect. This means that it should also be specified exactly which aspect of the speech acts is being considered.

In order to be able to deal adequately with the concept of relevance, it is not enough to clarify whether one is dealing with interpretive, analytic or evaluative relevance; some clarification in terms of domain, object and aspect should also be given as to the specific type of (ir)relevance referred to. The concept of relevance can be differentiated along these three dimensions with the help of the pragma-dialectical theory.⁶

With regard to the domain dimension, the central issue is the contextual range of the type of relevance under consideration. Is it relevant to the opening stage of the discussion? To the concluding stage? To all stages? Are the speech acts concerned, for instance, interpretively, analytically or evaluatively relevant to the argumentation stage?

With regard to the object dimension, the central question is the relevance of the component of the speech acts which is considered. The relevance of the propositional content of the speech acts serving as premises or conclusions? The relevance of their communicative forces? Are the propositions that are put forward, for instance, interpretively, analytically or evaluatively relevant?

With regard to the aspect dimension, the central question is which form of

relevance of the speech acts is at stake. Do we concentrate on the question of their comprehensibility? Or their sincerity? Or their efficiency? Or their expendability? Are the speech acts concerned, for instance, interpretively, analytically or evaluatively relevant as far as their clarity is concerned?⁷

In the context of this exposition it is worth noting that, unlike Grice, we do not restrict the scope of the relevance concept to the maxim of relation. Saying too much, for instance, which amounts to violating the maxim of quantity, also leads to a relevance problem, as is reflected in observations by ordinary language users about 'irrelevant repetitions'. As problems of relevance may relate to all four Gricean categories, we agree with Sperber and Wilson that a broader concept of relevance is needed than is provided by the Gricean maxim of relation. We do not agree with critics of Grice who conclude that the maxim of relation can be skipped. Neither do we agree with Sperber and Wilson that Grice's four maxims can simply be replaced by a single principle of relevance (1981: 170).

The various types of relevance that can be distinguished by combining the scores on the domain, object and aspect dimensions can be represented in a 'relevance cube', with one co-ordinate level representing the domain dimension, another the object dimension, and the third the aspect dimension:

AS = argumentation stage
PC = propositional content
EX = expendability

With the help of this differentiation of the relevance concept the problems of interpretive, analytical and evaluative relevance can be specified. Each relevance problem can thus be characterized in a clear, consistent and theoretically-based way. This will result in a taxonomy of types of (ir)relevance.⁸

PART II. RELEVANCE AND THE FALLACIES

5. *Fallacies of Relevance*

In the standard approach to fallacies there is always a category of fallacies of relevance. Its prime function seems to be that of a depository for all those fallacies for which the standard approach has no adequate solution. This category is generally where the *argumentum ad hominem* can be found, together with the other *ad* arguments (*ad baculum*, *ad ignorantiam*, *ad misericordiam*, *ad populum*, *ad verecundiam*).

Strictly speaking, such fallacies fall beyond the scope of the logically-oriented standard approach. In fallacies of relevance there is usually no sign of an orderly argument, with two premises and a conclusion. If – by stretching a point or two – it is found possible to reconstruct a logical argument, then it will also be found that what is wrong is, after all, not simply a matter of formal invalidity. The standard approach deals with this discrepancy between theory (the definition of a fallacy) and practice (the examples of fallacies of relevance) by pretending that it is perfectly clear what the premises and the conclusion are in the examples. Alternatively, newly-constructed examples are adduced which neatly contain two premises and a conclusion. Furthermore, the concept of ‘relevance’ is given a logical overtone by emphasizing that the premises are *logically* irrelevant to the conclusion.⁹

If the standard approach is to be taken seriously, arguments have to be tested not only for their logical validity but also for their logical relevance. But since no attempt is made to produce any further definition of the concept of logical relevance and its connection to logical validity, it remains unclear what we are to make of it. Is the relevance of the premises to the conclusion in a valid argument always guaranteed? Or is it also possible for the argument to be valid even though the premises are not relevant to the conclusion? Do relevant premises perhaps guarantee that the argument is valid? Or is it also possible for the premises to be relevant while the argument is invalid?

In the absence of any further clarification it is hard to determine whether or not we are dealing with a fallacy of relevance in a particular case. This problem is circumvented in the standard approach by selecting only examples that are as it were dripping with irrelevance. The ‘explanatory comments’ that are added are confined to the observation that the premises are not germane, do not really support the truth of the conclusion, or something of the sort.¹⁰ The suggested clarity is then demolished by providing an arbitrary and not very systematic list of situations in which the way of arguing just declared irrelevant is suddenly relevant again.¹¹

6. *The Straitjacket of Logic*

In her widely used textbook *A practical study of argument*, Govier (1988) makes a serious effort to define 'relevance' more precisely:

The statement A will be relevant to the statement B if A either counts toward establishing B as true or counts against establishing B as true. If the truth or falsity of A has absolutely nothing to do with the truth or falsity of B, then A is not relevant to B. (1988: 98)

In this view, then, the relevance of a statement can be measured by the contribution that the truth of that statement makes to establishing the truth or falsity of another statement. A statement can be *positively relevant* to another statement (the truth of the first is a good reason for assuming that the second is also true), *negatively relevant* (the truth of the first is a good reason for assuming that the second is false) or *irrelevant* (the truth of the first tells us nothing about the truth or falsity of the second).

Govier says nothing about the criteria for determining whether or not a contribution is made to establishing the truth of a statement. More disquieting is the fact that two of the four forms of relevance that she discusses are rather problematical in the light of her own definition: relevance in deductively valid arguments and normative relevance.¹² On relevance in deductively valid arguments she remarks:

Obviously if the premises of an argument deductively entail the conclusion, they are relevant to the conclusion. [...] Deductive entailment, then, is one sure way of getting relevance. (1988: 110)

It is clear from her explanation that Govier is thinking of deductively valid arguments as arguments in which the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. In her definition of relevance the relation between the statements is 'material' and not formal (as in a deductively valid argument). Because the argument in the example she quotes happens to be deductively valid and the premises are relevant to the conclusion, this problem is not immediately apparent, but it is easy to find examples of deductively valid arguments in which the truth of the premises has no (material) effect whatever on the truth (or falsity) of the conclusion:

- a. Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands
- b. If Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands, Paul will pass his driving test
- c. Therefore: Paul will pass his driving test

This is perfect *modus ponens*, but the truth of the first premise does not contribute to the truth or falsity of the conclusion (nor does it detract from it). No wonder: for this conclusion, this premise is irrelevant.

The discrepancy between Govier's general definition of relevance and her definition of the specific form of relevance she calls 'normative' becomes immediately apparent when we put the two alongside each other. According to Govier, normative relevance (or irrelevance) occurs in arguments whose conclusion is a normative statement referring to the question of whether

something is beautiful or ugly, good or bad, ought or ought not to happen, and so on. She illustrates this by commenting on a letter sent to a newspaper by a reader:

Her premises are relevant to her conclusion because her conclusion is about something we should do, and her premises each give some reason why we should do it. (1988: 102)

However, no matter how good the reasons given by the letter writer may be, they will never contribute to the *truth* of her conclusion, simply because this conclusion cannot be judged in terms of truth or falsity.

Govier gives more information about what she means by relevance than most other authors, but she uses the term *relevance* in contradictory ways. Because of this, it is still difficult to arrive at a clear picture of what she means by it. All the same, we can characterize her position more closely with the help of the three dimensions of relevance we have introduced.

As far as the domain dimension is concerned, no specification is offered. Govier clearly assumes there to be only one context, which is not further differentiated.¹³ According to her definition, the relevance of a statement depends on the contribution the truth of this statement makes to determining the truth or falsity of another statement. Its relevance is thus contextualized by the goal which is aimed for in respect of the second statement. The context within which the relation of relevance between these two statements can be identified is thus, as it were, defined by this overall goal.

The object and the aspect dimension of Govier's concept of relevance are now easy to identify, especially if we take her (unavowed and perhaps unintended) logicistic attitude towards the subject into account. As she sees it, there can be a relation of relevance between the statements which serve as the premises and the conclusion of an argument. So the object of relevance she has in mind is automatically the propositional content of these statements rather than their communicative force. And since she considers these propositional contents exclusively in the light of their truth or falsity, the aspect of relevance she is talking about is truth-functionality.

How much use is this concept of relevance to Govier when it comes to analyzing fallacies of relevance such as *argumentum ad hominem*? Her definition of *argumentum ad hominem* is fairly traditional:

In *ad hominem* reasoning, people try to prove a point by attacking a person who holds the opposite view. Or they criticize a person's personality and background, and from that they infer that his position is faulty. These debating tactics are almost always mistaken as far as logic is concerned. Yet they are often practically and rhetorically very effective. Many a proposal has been defeated because the person putting it forward was not the 'right' age, sex, race, or social class. (1988: 108)

The first example of an *argumentum ad hominem* that Govier discusses is a reaction to Susan Sontag's book *Illness as Metaphor*. Sontag argues that the

probability of contracting cancer has nothing to do with a person's character. According to her, there is no such thing as a 'cancer-prone personality'. Govier discusses the following reaction to Sontag's point of view:

- (1) a. Sontag suffers from cancer.
Thus,
- b. Contrary to what Sontag contends, the theory of the cancer-prone personality is an acceptable theory. (1988: 109)

According to Govier, this is a fallacy because the premise is about Sontag's state of health whereas the conclusion is about the concept of 'the cancer-prone personality'. The one has nothing to do with the other, and the premise is therefore irrelevant to the conclusion.

Govier's second example is:

- (2) a. The men who support liberal abortion laws are cowards intimidated by feminists.
So,
- b. Liberal abortion laws are faulty laws. (1988: 109)

Govier finds the fallacy here so obvious that she contents herself with a brief but pithy remark: 'The premise is too obviously irrelevant to the conclusion'.

What makes these two examples so interesting is not their content but their provenance. Neither of these examples is quoted from an oral or written source: they are Govier's own inventions. There is nothing wrong in this *per se*, but in a textbook with practical pretensions it must be at least plausible that such examples could actually have been found in a real text, and this is exceedingly unlikely. Govier acknowledges this, for she introduces example (2) with the words 'seldom would you find in print an argument so blatant as this one'. We would go farther than this: this kind of argument is found exclusively in the examples of textbooks. In any event, Govier's claim that irrelevance is a common fault in argumentation is not made any more credible by these examples.

Govier concedes that *ad hominem* remarks are in practice generally presented 'more subtly', e.g., by not explicitly formulating the conclusion but merely suggesting that the view of a person who is suspect, is false. Her example comes from a magazine article about abortion:

- (3) Women's Lib is chic and news, and the men who praise it become chic and newsworthy. To this group belong the sycophant, the male camp-follower, the half-sexed male who allows his woman to have him gelded and then hits the media trail to brag about it. They are the male counterparts of women who allow their lovers to force them onto the Pill or into an abortion, or who wrote idiot books about male supremacy or sexual surrender. (1988: 109)

What conclusion is suggested here? That a liberal policy on abortion is wrong, says Govier, for that is how she reconstructs the argument which she says can be read into (3):

- (4) a. The men who support Women's Lib are weak attention-seekers.
- b. The men who support Women's Lib are less than fully male.

- c. The men who support Women's Lib are intimidated by the fact that feminism is fashionable.
- d. The men who support Women's Lib support a liberal policy on abortion.
Therefore,
- e. A liberal policy on abortion is wrong. (1988: 110)

To agree with Govier that argument (4) underlies example (3), must surely also mean agreeing with her that (3) is a clear example of an *argumentum ad hominem* in which the premises are totally irrelevant to the conclusion. But is her reconstruction actually right? We think not. What can be established on the basis of (3) is that the motives of men who support the feminist movement are being made to look suspect. If it is possible to draw any sort of conclusion from the list of these men's negative character traits, it is surely something like 'Men who support feminism are despicable creatures', or 'not real men' (which, to the writer, probably amounts to the same thing). And for that conclusion the premises are highly relevant.

It looks very much as if the *argumentum ad hominem* is not so much present in (3) as injected into it by the analyst – Govier – so that it can subsequently be triumphantly pulled out and paraded as an intolerable fallacy of relevance. Govier's reconstruction is a gross distortion of the position represented by the author of (3). What she does has more to do with the violation of Scriven's 'Principle of Charity' (1976: 71–73) and Grice's 'Cooperative Principle' (1989: 26) than with a correct application of the strategy of the maximally argumentative interpretation (van Eemeren 1987: 211). It is not the author of (3), but Govier, who is guilty of a fallacy: that of the *straw man*.

Govier's discussion of the *argumentum ad hominem* concludes – here she is entirely in line with the standard approach – by stating the exceptional cases in which an *argumentum ad hominem* is *not* a fallacy of relevance. The first exception is when the conclusion refers to a person:

- (5) a. Jones was convicted on a charge of embezzling funds.
Therefore,
- b. Jones is not a suitable candidate for mayor. (1988: 110)

The second example refers to cases in which the credibility of an eyewitness account or the expertise of an authority is at stake. If the arguments are calculated to show the unreliability of a witness or the incompetence of an expert, there can be no question of analyzing them as an *argumentum ad hominem*. Provided, Govier adds, that the arguments are relevant. What criterion has to be applied here Govier does not tell us, but she does give examples. This example is good:

- (6) a. Berthell is a figure whose findings have been disputed by other people in her field.
So,
- b. We cannot simply accept Berthell as an expert in this field.
Thus,
- c. Claims about the effects of low-level radiation are not to be accepted solely on Berthell's authority. (1988: 111)

Whereas this example is bad:

- (7) a. Berthell has never been married.
Therefore,
- b. Berthell is not an authority on low-level radiation effects. (1988: 111)

Again, these examples, particularly (7), do not strike us as very realistic. More importantly, by her juggling with the term 'relevance' in her discussion of exceptions, Govier makes it very difficult indeed to distinguish in practice correct examples of *argumentum ad hominem* from incorrect ones. An *argumentum ad hominem* is to her a fallacy because the premises are irrelevant to the conclusion, except in cases where the premises *are* relevant to the conclusion, unless they turn out not to be relevant on further reflection. In the absence of criteria for relevance, distinguishing correct and incorrect instances remains very much a matter of intuition, if not guesswork. In this respect, Govier's approach is no more methodical than the *ad hoc* standard approach.

Govier's treatment of the fallacies of relevance may be more thorough than the standard approach, but all the same it is clear from her analysis of *argumentum ad hominem* that on some crucial points she is still firmly tied to the logico-centric principles of the standard approach. This is clear from the persistent way in which she tries to describe the *argumentum ad hominem*, in spite of the fact that her norm is relevance rather than validity, in terms of an unsound premise-conclusion relation. The straitjacket of logic is still confining Govier just as much as the representatives of the standard treatment.

7. Violations of Discussion Rules

In the seventies, Hamblin's critique of the standard approach to fallacies (1970) stimulated some promising innovations. Among them are, of course, the great variety of insights put forward by Woods and Walton, and the formal-dialectic approach to fallacies as explained in an analysis of the *argumentum ad hominem* by Barth and Martens.¹⁴ In our opinion, a satisfactory and more-encompassing alternative to the standard approach can only be fully developed if the preoccupation with the logic of arguments is wholly abandoned. For the informal fallacies, such as *argumentum ad hominem*, the logico-centric approach has, after all, only led to unsystematic *ad hoc* analyses.

We think that such an alternative can be created by integrating formal-dialectical and other logical insights, and philosophical insights from critical rationalism, into a pragma-dialectical framework for analyzing argumentative discourse as critical discussion that is based on Searlean and Gricean insights from speech act theory and discourse analysis. We have first attempted to demonstrate this approach by way of an exemplary analysis of two notoriously intractable fallacies from the traditional list: *argumentum ad hominem* and *petitio principii* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984). In later publications we showed that other fallacies can be analyzed satisfactorily along the same lines (1987b, 1992).

In the pragma-dialectical approach, fallacies are defined as speech acts which

violate one or more of the rules for argumentative discourse stipulated in our model for critical discussion. A fallacious speech act is a discussion move which, in the discussion stage in which it is performed, hinders the resolution of a difference of opinion. The rules for argumentative discourse in critical discussion represent ten different norms which are to be observed for resolving the difference. As each norm can, in principle, be violated in a variety of ways, different kinds of fallacies may be at stake.¹⁵

The *argumentum ad hominem*, which is perhaps the most well-known informal fallacy, is analyzed from the pragma-dialectical perspective as a violation of the first rule of discussion: *Parties must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints*. This rule is basically designed for the confrontation stage of the discussion, where the difference of opinion is established by the protagonist and the antagonist of the standpoint at issue. Naturally, the rule also applies to substandpoints arising from arguments that are put forward in support of a standpoint and meet with doubt or other criticism.

The first discussion rule aims at ensuring that differences of opinion can be expressed without any hindrance. Odd as it may sound, in order to promote the resolution of differences of opinion the confrontation of opinions has to be stimulated. Clearing away potential obstacles is a prerequisite for this. Everything that prevents the parties in any way from advancing their opinions on any subject, or from casting doubt on any opinion held by others, must be avoided as far as possible. To put it more positively: in a critical discussion all parties have a fundamental and inalienable right to express any standpoint they wish and to express any doubt they wish.¹⁶

An implication of the first discussion rule is that a party may not improperly harm his collocutor's position as a serious discussion partner in any way. And this is precisely what happens in the various variants of the *argumentum ad hominem*. In the *abusive* variant, one party denigrates the other party's expertise, intelligence or good faith; in the *circumstantial* variant, he suggests that the other party is driven by personal interests and is therefore not capable of making an impartial judgement; and in the *tu quoque* variant, he denounces an inconsistency in the other party's opinions or behaviour. In effect, all three variants amount to one party claiming that the other party has no right to speak, thus violating the first rule for critical discussion.

This brief explanation suffices to show that the three variants of the *argumentum ad hominem* are offences against a fundamental norm for argumentative discourse aimed at resolving a difference of opinion. It also indicates what kind of criteria should be applied to determine which variant is in question in a given case. With the *abusive* variant, the criterion is whether something negative is being said about the other party as a person: about his intelligence, expertise, integrity, et cetera. With the *circumstantial* variant, the criterion is whether attention is drawn to some particular interests the other party has in adopting a specific position: financial gain, social success, spiritual well-being, et cetera. With the *tu quoque* variant, the criterion is whether an inconsistency is pointed

out between what the other party's words or actions now and in the past show him to support: he does something himself that he condemns in others, he says now this but yesterday he said that, he blames me for doing this but he allows other people do the same, et cetera. The more general criterion applying to all three different variants is whether a party's comments are calculated to undermine the other party's position as a credible discussion partner.

On the basis of these criteria it is easy to see that Govier's example (1), about Susan Sontag, is a *circumstantial ad hominem*: Sontag herself has cancer, so she has a psychological interest in denying that cancer is the result of some sort of character defect, therefore we do not have to take her opposition to that standpoint seriously. By the same criterion Govier's example (2), about more liberal legislation on abortion, is also a *circumstantial ad hominem*: men who support a more liberal attitude to abortion do this only out of fear of reprisals from feminists, therefore we do not have to take their standpoint seriously. In Govier's example (3/4), attributing suspect motives for defending their standpoint to such men is combined with direct insults: they are miserable seekers of attention and not real men at all. These insults meet the criterion for *abusive ad hominem*.

It is not always as easy as in these examples to establish whether a statement complies with one or more of the criteria for an *argumentum ad hominem*. Usually, speakers and writers do not explicitly announce that they are about to abuse their collocutor, unmask his ulterior motives or ridicule the inconsistencies in his statements or actions. And they rarely say in so many words that they do so to eliminate him as a serious discussion partner. Although their intentions do, in fact, almost always remain implicit, with some knowledge of indirect speech acts, conversational implicatures and other pragmatic phenomena a correct interpretation can generally be given and justified.

A clear advantage of the pragma-dialectic analysis of *argumentum ad hominem* is that a systematic solution is offered to the problem of the exceptions to the rule that an *argumentum ad hominem* is a fallacy. The treatment of exceptions in the various versions of the standard approach is always unsatisfactory. It is almost as if we must look at each case individually for mitigating circumstances. The criteria that are then – usually implicitly – applied have the appearance of being extremely arbitrary. The pragma-dialectic solution to this problem is very simple: there are no exceptions to the rule. If a discussion move fulfils the criteria for one of the variants of *argumentum ad hominem*, it is always a violation of the first rule for critical discussions and therefore a fallacy.

Let us have a look at the exceptional cases adduced by Govier. Her first exception relates to arguments in which the conclusion refers to a person. In her example (5) the conclusion is that Jones is not a suitable candidate for mayor because he was once convicted for embezzlement. Jones himself is clearly not a participant in the discussion, and for this reason the example is not covered by the first pragma-dialectical rule. As a consequence, the remark about his

financial misdeed meets none of the criteria for an *ad hominem*.

Of course, the observation that Govier's example (5) is not an *ad hominem* does not automatically mean that it is not possible to criticize this argument. One might, for instance, wonder whether it is really such a bad thing for a mayor to have some personal experience with financial malpractice. We agree that this looks like carrying things a bit too far, but the position would be quite different if the argument had been that Jones was unmarried and was therefore unsuitable as a mayor. In pragma-dialectical terms there is then, again, no *argumentum ad hominem*, but the relevance of the premise to the conclusion may be not so obvious any more.

Similar considerations apply to cases where a person's character is even more directly discussed: 'Helen is an unpleasant person: to your face she is amiability itself but behind your back she says the meanest things about you'. If this is the speaker's standpoint, he has little option but to come up with premises that relate to Helen's character. It goes without saying that this does not necessarily mean that he is committing a fallacy.

Govier's second exception to the *argumentum ad hominem* concerns cases in which the speaker attempts to undermine the credibility of an eyewitness account or the expertise of an expert by providing information which is true and relevant. According to Govier, in example (6) this is justified because a relevant fact is adduced: Berthell's ideas on low-level radiation are disputed by others in her field; in example (7) Govier considers it unjustified because she considers the fact that Berthell has never been married irrelevant. If the question of whether Berthell is or is not an authority on low-level radiation is central to the difference of opinion, as is the case in example (7) and partly in example (6), then, for the same reason as in Govier's example (5), there is in pragma-dialectic terms no *argumentum ad hominem*. The reason for this, however, is not – again – that this is a special and exceptional case.¹⁷

Authors such as Walton define a correct use of *argumentum ad hominem* as a countermove against the misuse of expertise or authority by the opponent. Then, however, the discussion seems not so much directed towards resolving the difference of opinion as towards settling a dispute, so that there is no point in calling this a fallacy (or in not calling it a fallacy). Since the move falls outside the scope of the rules for critical discussion there is no *argumentum at hominem* in the pragma-dialectical sense. If the countermove *were* indeed made in the context of a critical discussion, it *would* be a case of *argumentum ad hominem*. The fact that the fallacy would then be a reaction to another fallacy (the *argumentum ad verecundiam*) has nothing to do with it: two wrongs do not make a right.

One of the reasons for the typical *ad hoc* character of the treatment of 'exceptions' in the literature on fallacies is the one-sided and logico-centric concentration on the premise-conclusion relation in arguments. Another reason is the confusion in the terminology. The term *argumentum ad hominem* is sometimes used as a neutral term for a personal attack and sometimes as a term for the fallacy which arises when such an attack is incorrect. As a consequence,

it may seem as if the same discussion move is permitted in one case and not in another (and is in some cases a fallacy and in other cases not). On closer inspection the two moves will prove to be different, but they have one thing in common: something negative is said about a person. The *argumentum ad hominem* is more often used in its negative sense, denoting a fallacy, than in its neutral sense, so that the fallacy meaning appears to be the norm and the exceptional cases in which *ad hominem* argumentation is allowed represent the deviation. When an author uses the term *argumentum ad hominem* it is not always easy to see whether or not he believes that he is dealing with a justified exception. To avoid this kind of obscurity, we shall use the expression *personal attack* henceforth as the neutral term and the expression *argumentum ad hominem* as the technical term for the fallacy of an incorrect personal attack.

8. *The Evaluative Relevance of Personal Attacks*

When dealing with the evaluative relevance of personal attacks in argumentative discourse, the question to be answered is not only whether the attack counts as an *argumentum ad hominem*, but also in which cases this *argumentum ad hominem* must be regarded as fallacy of relevance. First, of course, it has to be established whether or not the discussion move concerned has interpretive and analytical relevance. If, in view of the rules for communication prevailing in argumentative discourse, it has no analytical relevance, so that it is not included in the analytic overview of the discourse, then it automatically has no evaluative relevance. But if it is analytically relevant, and is thus included in the analytic overview, then it must still be determined whether it violates one or more rules for critical discussion, so that it is a fallacy, and whether this fallacy is a fallacy of relevance.

As is argued in Section 3, a discussion move is analytically relevant in the pragma-dialectical sense if it can, in principle, contribute to the resolution of the difference of opinion at issue. Using Govier's distinction between positive and negative relevance, we might say that the move concerned also has positive evaluative relevance if it *does* indeed contribute to resolving the difference. If it impedes, or even prevents, the resolution of the difference of opinion, the discussion move is, of course, negatively relevant in pragma-dialectical terms. A personal attack that constitutes an *argumentum ad hominem*, because it meets the criteria for this type of fallacy, is always, and without any exception, negatively relevant. Such a move violates the first pragma-dialectical discussion rule, so that it is – again – always and without any exception a fallacy. The negative evaluative relevance of the *argumentum ad hominem* version of the personal attack is thus beyond dispute. It is only a fallacy belonging to the specific category of fallacies of relevance, however, if it violates the relevance rule for critical discussion (Rule 3), and this is not the case.

As such, all other kinds of personal attack are not fallacies in the pragma-dialectical sense. This is not to say that their relevancy cannot be assessed within another framework than that of critical discussion – for instance, an ethical

framework. Judged by other, non-pragma-dialectical, criteria they might just as well be evaluated as relevant or not relevant, and they could even be rejected as objectionable. So far, however, we have the impression that the development of such other criteria is still in its infancy.

In this article, we have attempted to illustrate how relevance problems are dealt with in a pragma-dialectical approach. We concentrated on the problems involved in the personal attacks usually known as the relevance fallacy *argumentum ad hominem*. The relevance problems involved in other types of fallacy can be approached along the same lines. In all these cases it is, in our view, crucial to create an adequate point of departure for determining the evaluative relevance of discussion moves by first determining their interpretive and analytic relevance. A discussion move that seems interpretively irrelevant (it is, for instance, taken to be just a question), may then appear to be analytically relevant (the question can be reconstructed as an argument), but evaluatively irrelevant (the argument is a fallacy of relevance).

NOTES

¹ This article is part of a research project on 'Relevance in argumentative discourse' being carried out by Douglas Walton and the authors, which started in 1990 at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS).

² Cf. Dascal (1977), Jackson and Jacobs (1983), Sanders (1980), Sperber and Wilson (1986), Werth (1981), and Tindale, and Jackson and Jacobs, in this issue.

³ Cf. Johnson and Blair (1983), Govier (1985), Iseminger (1986), Schlesinger (1986) and the representatives of the Standard Treatment of fallacies, and Blair, Freeman, Hitchcock, Krabbe, Walton, and Woods, in this issue.

⁴ Usually, they will succeed in this, even if two sentences are concerned which give the impression of being put together at random, so that their joint occurrence on the same piece of paper seems purely coincidental. In practice, it is generally not an insoluble problem to the interlocutors to determine the interpretive relevance of each other's contributions. This is, in fact, why Gricean implicatures can be successfully derived.

⁵ For an account of the pragma-dialectical model, with its four discussion stages and the distribution of speech acts among the stages, see van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 1992).

⁶ When dealing with relevance problems, these three dimensions always play a part. Here, we restrict ourselves to relevance in argumentative discourse.

⁷ In giving substance to the aspect dimensions we use our 'translation' of the Gricean maxims into rules for communication, which relates the interactional level of the maxims to the communicative level of the speech acts by way of which they are performed. In giving substance to the domain and the object dimensions, we also made use of pragma-dialectical insights (cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992). As is shown by other contributions to this volume, other theoretical concepts can also do the job.

⁸ An important advantage of such a typology is that in each case the most appropriate approach can be systematically selected for dealing with problems of relevance.

⁹ See, e.g., Copi (1972: 73), Rescher (1964: 78), and, much more recently, Damer (1987: 99). Copi says that the premises are logically irrelevant to the conclusion, but that there is a psychological connection.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Copi (1972: 76) and Rescher (1964: 81).

¹¹ As far as soundness is concerned, there seems to be a crucial difference in the standard approach between logical validity and logical relevance: in the former case exceptions are not allowed, in the latter they are.

¹² The other two forms of relevance mentioned by Govier are relevance in analogies and relevance in inductive arguments (1988: 100–102). Why she speaks of different *forms* of relevance is unclear.

¹³ Here, as Crawshay-Williams (1957) has pointed out, the danger exists of simply assuming a 'universal context'.

¹⁴ Cf. Woods and Walton, *Fallacies: selected papers 1972:1982* (1989) and Barth and Martens (1978).

¹⁵ In this article, we shall only refer to our simplified version of the rules for critical discussion discussed in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992). There the number of rules is restricted to ten. Cf. for the complete system of rules, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984).

¹⁶ Of course, this does not mean that a party is always obliged to continue the discussion after the confrontation has taken place. It may, for instance, become clear in the opening stage that the antagonist leaves too little room for a sensible discourse, so that there is no basis for critical discussion.

¹⁷ Cf., for similar cases, arguments in which the difference of opinion turns on the question whether someone is a reliable witness.

REFERENCES

- Barth, E.M. and E.C.W. Krabbe: 1978, 'Formele dialectiek: ter beslechting van conflicten over geuite meningen', *Spektator. Tijdschrift voor Neerlandistiek* 7, 307–341.
- Barth, E.M. and J.L. Martens: 1977, 'Argumentum ad Hominem: From chaos to Formal Dialectic. The Method of Dialogue-Tableaus as a tool in the Theory of Fallacy', *Logique et Analyse, Nouvelle Série* 20, 76–96.
- Copi, I.M.: 1972, *Introduction to Logic*, 1st impr. 1953, 4th impr. Macmillan/Collier-Macmillan, New York/London.
- Crawshay-Williams, R.: 1957, *Methods and Criteria of Reasoning. An Inquiry into the Structure of Controversy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Damer, T.E.: 1987, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, 1st impr. 1980, 2nd impr., Wadsworth, Belmont, California.
- Dascal, M.: 1977, 'Conversational Relevance', *Journal of Pragmatics* 1, 309–328.
- Eemeren, F.H. van: 1986, 'Dialectical Analysis as a Normative Reconstruction of Argumentative Discourse', *Text* 6(1), 1–16.
- Eemeren, F.H. van: 1987, 'For Reason's Sake: Maximal Argumentative Analysis of Discourse', in F.H. van Eemeren *et al.* (eds.), *Argumentation: Across the Lines of Discipline*. Foris, Dordrecht/Providence, 201–216.
- Eemeren, F.H. van and R. Grootendorst: 1984, *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions. A Theoretical Model for the Analysis of Discussions Directed Towards Solving Conflicts of Opinion*. PDA 1, Foris, Dordrecht/Cinnaminson.
- Eemeren, F.H. van and R. Grootendorst: 1987a, 'Het analyseren en beoordelen van betogende teksten', *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing* 9(1), 48–66.
- Eemeren, F.H. van and R. Grootendorst: 1987 b, "Fallacies in pragma-dialectical Perspective", *Argumentation* 1, 283–301.
- Eemeren, F.H. van and R. Grootendorst: 1990, "Relevantie in argumentatieve teksten" *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing* 12(3), 180–189.
- Eemeren, F.H. van and R. Grootendorst: 1992, *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies. A Pragma-dialectical Perspective*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, N.J.
- Eemeren, F.H. van, R. Grootendorst and T. Kruiger: 1986, *Drogredenen. Argumen-*

- tatieleer* 2, Wolters-Noordhoff, Groningen.
- Govier, T.: 1988, *A Practical Study of Argument*, 1st impr. 1985, 2nd impr., Wadsworth, Belmont, Cal.
- Grice, P.: 1989, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Haft-van Rees, M.A.: 1985, 'Relevantie van uitingen in argumentatieve teksten', in W.K.B. Koning (ed.), *Taalbeheersing in theorie en praktijk*, Foris, Dordrecht, pp. 46–54.
- Hamblin, C.L.: 1970, *Fallacies*, Methuen, London.
- Iseminger, G.: 1986, 'Relatedness Logic and Entailment', *Journal of Non-Classical Logic* 3(1), 5–23.
- Jacobs, S. and S. Jackson: 1983, 'Speech Acts Structure in Conversation: Rational Aspects of Pragmatic Coherence', in R.T. Craig and K. Tracy (eds.), *Conversational Coherence: Form, Structure and Strategy*, Sage, Beverly Hills, pp. 47–66.
- Johnson, R.H. and J.A. Blair: 1983, *Logical Self-defense*, 1st impr. 1977, 2nd impr., McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto.
- Rescher, N.: 1964, *Introduction to Logic*, St Martin's Press, New York.
- Sanders, R.E.: 1980, 'Principles of Relevance: A Theory of the Relationship Between Language and Communication', *Communication and Cognition* 13(1), 77–95.
- Schlesinger, G.N.: 1986, 'Relevance', *Theoria* 52, 57–67.
- Scriven, M.: 1976, *Reasoning*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson: 1986, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Tracy, K.: 1982, 'On Getting the Point: Distinguishing "Issues" from "Events", an Aspect of Conversational Coherence', *Communication Yearbook* 5, 279–301.
- Walton, D.N.: 1982, *Topical Relevance in Argumentation*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Werth, P.: 1981, 'The Concept of "Relevance" in Conversational Analysis', in P. Werth (ed.), *Conversation and Discourse*, Croom Helm, London, pp. 129–155.
- Wilson, D. and D. Sperber: 1981, 'On Grice's Theory of Conversation', in P. Werth (ed.), *Conversation and Discourse*, Croom Helm, London, pp. 155–179.
- Woods, J. and D. Walton: 1989, *Fallacies: Selected Papers 1972–1987*, Foris, Dordrecht.