The importance of belief in argumentation: belief, commitment and the effective resolution of a difference of opinion

David M. Godden

Abstract   This paper examines the adequacy of commitment change, as a measure of the successful resolution of a difference of opinion. I argue that differences of opinion are only effectively resolved if commitments undertaken in argumentation survive beyond its conclusion and go on to govern an arguer's actions in everyday life, e.g., by serving as premises in her practical reasoning. Yet this occurs, I maintain, only when an arguer's beliefs are changed, not merely her commitments.

Keywords   Acceptance · Argumentation · Belief · Commitment · Difference of opinion · Resolution of a difference of opinion

1 Introduction

The general problem I wish to address in this paper concerns the goal of persuasive argumentation and the way in which that goal is achieved or satisfied. Specifically, it concerns those theories of argumentation which hold the goal of persuasive argumentation to be the settling of a difference of opinion by rational means. Many such theories, not wanting to get bogged down in a quagmire of psychological considerations,

D. M. Godden (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA
e-mail: dgodden@odu.edu

hold that argumentation ends when there is some change in the commitments—rather than the beliefs—of the disputants such that there is no longer a difference of opinion between them. Argumentation is successful if this change in commitment was brought about according to the rules of the dialogue game. That is, differences of opinion are resolved, and the goal of persuasive argumentation can be achieved, when there is agreement at the level of commitment rather than belief.

I want to challenge the idea, which I take to be implicit in these commitment-based theories, that a change in commitment is generally sufficient to resolve a difference of opinion in an effective way. My central thesis is that, in many paradigmatic cases of persuasion, a change in commitment is insufficient to achieve a genuine reconciliation of differing opinions unless it is accompanied by a change in belief. My position is not that argumentation is only successfully concluded when disputants either come to believe the claim at issue or its negation.[1] Instead, I argue that the type of attitude change typically required to effectively resolve a difference of opinion is mental rather than verbal. Thus, despite the disinclinations of some argumentation theorists to become entangled in the psychological considerations that surround arguers' beliefs, I maintain that models of argument must operate at the level of belief if they are to provide effective means of resolving differences of opinion.

Here is a rough outline of the course of things to follow. I start by giving a brief account of the ideas of belief, acceptance and commitment as I understand them for the purposes of this argument. I then present the basic argument by identifying three theses which, when combined, bring about the failure of a model of persuasive argumentation. This failure results because changes in arguers' commitments are commonly not sufficiently binding upon them or determinative of their future behavior. Failures of this sort are especially apparent when the results of argumentation need to be effective beyond the bounds of the argumentative discussion itself. I then apply the basic argument to three different commitment-based theories by showing them to be committed to the three problematic theses. I conclude by introducing the notion of the *jurisdiction of argumentation* as a way to talk about that domain over which argumentative rules have normative force. If argumentation is to be effective in influencing or guiding arguers' behavior in the absence of external, social enforcement mechanisms, the results of argumentation must be self-enforced by arguers themselves. In these situations, if argumentation is to effectively resolve differences of opinion, the jurisdiction of argumentation must include the arguer's own belief-system which forms the basis for her actions.

---

[1] Pinto (2001) identifies a variety of doxastic (belief-like) attitudes which can be alternatives or competitors to straightforward belief. Further, he observes that non-doxastic propositional attitudes (e.g., should, desire, intend) as well as attitudes towards non-propositional objects (e.g., things in the world) can also be at issue in argumentation. This leads him to conclude (p. 10) that, instead of viewing argument as aiming to convince an audience to accept a claim, argumentation is better conceived of as "the attempt to modify conscious attitudes through rational means" (a view which he subsequently repudiated (2003)).

Generally, I agree with two aspects of Pinto's position: (i) that successful argumentation need not result in arguers being convinced of something, and (ii) that the attitudes at stake in argumentation are conscious mental attitudes. Because commitment-based theories are standardly contrasted with belief-based theories in the literature, I focus on belief in this paper. But I intend it only as a representative of the conscious mental attitudes which I take to be the proper focus of theories of argument.

2 The relation between belief, acceptance and commitment

2.1 Belief

Typically, the idea of belief is avoided by commitment-based theories of argumen-
tation because it is taken to be too psychological a notion (Hamblin 1970, p. 246;
van Eemeren et al. 1996, pp. 276–277; Walton and Krabbe 1995, p. 12). The account
of belief I argue for here need not be deeply psychological.[2] Rather, the notion of
belief required by argumentation has two significant characteristics. First is the idea
that beliefs are propositional attitudes.[3] Second is the idea that beliefs have a causal
role in the actions of believers.

   Beliefs are propositional attitudes in that they are one kind of doxastic attitude
that reasoners can take towards a proposition.[4] To believe a proposition is to take the
proposition to be true, and the conditions for the truth of the belief are the same as
the conditions for the truth of its contents. Doxastic attitudes have an epistemologi-
cal dimension to them because they have what Searle (1979, pp. 7–9) called a *world
to mind fit*. The rationality of belief is explained, at least in part, through a kind of
evidence proportionalism. As Engel (2000, p. 3) points out (following Hume (1777,
X.i.87; 1975, p. 110)), "[i]n general a belief is rational if it is proportioned to the degree
of evidence that one has for its truth." Further, as propositional attitudes, beliefs can
serve as starting points or end points in the activity of reasoning.

   The second principal property of beliefs as far as argumentation is concerned is that
our beliefs have a causal role in our behavior. As Ramsey (1931, p. 238) put it, beliefs
are "maps by which we steer." We act on the world as we believe it to be, which is
not always how it really is. *Ceteris paribus* when we believe a proposition, we act as
though that proposition were true. Our belief attitudes play a role in our inferential life
and practical reasonings, and they influence and contribute to a rational explanation of
our voluntary behavior. Roughly, the thesis that beliefs have a causal role in behavior
accords with Davidson's (1980) view that beliefs can act as primary reasons for our
actions.[5]

   L. Jonathan Cohen has challenged the view that beliefs are inherently connected
to behavior in any direct way. On Cohen's view (1992, p. 4), beliefs are dispositions
to feel a certain way about a proposition: to believe that *p* is to, upon introspection,
"normally . . . feel it true that *p* and false that *not-p.*" Importantly Cohen argues (1992,
pp. 4–16) that this disposition to feel a certain way about *p* can occur "whether or not
one is willing to act, speak, or reason accordingly" (p. 4) and being disposed to act
in a certain way is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for believing that *p*

---

[2] I do not here attempt to give a metaphysical account of the nature of belief, nor do I take my argument
to depend upon any particular metaphysical account.

[3] I hope here to be granted use of the language of propositions as a way of talking about the contents of
beliefs without thereby being committed to propositions as ontological entities.

[4] See footnote 1.

[5] I follow (Davidson 1980, pp. 4–5, footnote 2) in using the term *action* to indicate things intentionally
done by an agent. Broadly, Davidson conceives of an intentional 'doing' as something that, under some
description, can be said to be done *for a reason*.

(p. 8). One should grant these points to Cohen without losing sight of Ramsey's basic point. While beliefs may not be properly explained as dispositions to act, and there may be no direct connection between having a particular belief and acting a particular way (Geach 1957, p. 8), and there may be other influences on our behavior besides our beliefs, normally and generally our beliefs about the world causally influence our behavior in it. Our beliefs play a premissory role in our inferences and practical reasoning, they have a causal role in determining our actions, and they contribute significantly to a rational explanation of our behavior.

2.2 Acceptance

When discussing the notion of acceptance, it is best to clear up one point right away. Cohen has observed that "acceptance" is ambiguous between a speech act and a mental attitude.

> The word 'accept' is often used to signify the speech act of assent whereby a person may orally (or in writing) agree to the truth of a proposition whether or not his oral (or written) agreement accords with his actual state of mind. (Cohen 1992, p. 12)

With Cohen, I count acceptance as "a mental act, or a pattern, system, or policy of mental action rather than a speech act" (*ibid*.). Whether we mark this as a conceptual or merely an adverbial difference, "acceptance" has two senses described by Woodfield (2000, p. 225) as follows: the psychological operation of *mentally accepting* and the public speech-act of *verbally accepting*. Importantly for my purposes, these two types of accepting are logically and causally independent of one another. To distinguish these two senses, I use the term "concession" to indicate verbal accepting. In contrast to verbally accepting, Cohen describes mental acceptance as follows:

> to accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that *p*—i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that *p*. (1992, p. 4)

Cohen's account is generally consistent with Stalnaker's view that

> To accept a proposition is to treat it as a true proposition in one way or another—to ignore, for the moment at least, the possibility that it is false. … To accept a proposition is to act, in certain respects, as if one believed it. (1984, pp. 79–80)

On these accounts, acceptance, like belief, is a propositional attitude which has functional similarities to belief in terms of its connection to action.

2.3 The relation between belief and acceptance

In the contemporary literature belief is typically described as having a number of features distinguishing it from acceptance. While Stalnaker (1984) describes belief as a

sub-case of acceptance, Cohen (1992) proposes an account on which belief and acceptance are distinct and independent mental states. Beliefs, as Cohen describes them, are passive and involuntary; they occur at the level of feeling and are not always linked to language. By contrast, acts of acceptance are active and voluntary; they occur at the level of consciously adopting a policy of premising a claim and are always linked to language. In view of these differences, it is argued that belief and acceptance are logically and causally independent of one another.

That being said, belief and acceptance are not exclusionary of one another. Indeed in many normal situations an agent's belief and acceptance of a given proposition may coincide, e.g., in the case of "reflectively stable" beliefs (Foley 2001, p. 32), or beliefs which have been consciously adopted and are rationally held.

Perhaps the most useful distinction between belief and acceptance is offered by Paglieri and Castelfranchi (2006) who distinguish them according to the "different functional roles ... [they] play in the cognitive economy of the [rational] subject." Belief has an *alethic function* which "is meant to provide a veridical representation of the world", while acceptance has a *pragmatic function*: "its role is to provide a representation of the world that is suitable for supporting successful deliberation and effective action." Thus, as Engel writes, "[t]he reasons for accepting that p may be prudential, rather than evidential, and they are often tied to a context of practical deliberation" (Engel 1998, p. 145). In view of this pragmatic function, and in contrast to the picture I present, Paglieri and Castelfranchi hold that acceptance rather than belief has a causal role in influencing behavior.[6]

While there are many differences between belief and acceptance, there are also important similarities. First, both belief and acceptance are mental occurrences, not behavioral or verbal. Second is a functional similarity. On Cohen's account, both the belief that p and the acceptance of p involve an epistemic or rational 'commitment' to p,[7] and provide p with similar inferential roles. Also, both belief and acceptance have a causal role in influencing the behavior of the rational agent who holds them. Together with desires, beliefs, while not always directly manifested in behavior, form the ultimate bases for our actions by providing a representation of the world as we take it to be. What we accept plays a similar role in shaping our actions in that we undertake to treat what we accept as if it were true for the purposes of action.

Finally, there is an important correlation between acceptance and belief. In arguing for the independence of belief and acceptance, Cohen and others have always compared the belief that p with accepting that p. While accepting that p need not involve a belief that p, the acceptance of p requires and involves some corresponding belief attitude in the mind of the rational agent. This belief attitude may not be about p itself, but rationally accepting p does involve some corresponding belief attitude, e.g., about

---

[6] I do not here wish to challenge the view advanced by Paglieri and Castelfranchi, but only point out that it is broadly consistent with my own in the following respect: insofar as the acceptance of a proposition is a conscious mental attitude, an agent's acceptance of a proposition is both justified by and explained in terms of her beliefs about the acceptability (be it alethic or pragmatic) of that proposition. Paglieri and Castelfranchi would then hold that beliefs have an *indirect* link to behavior insofar as beliefs affect acceptances which have a *direct* link to behavior, while I hold that it is beliefs that have a direct link to behavior.

[7] That is to say, an agent's belief that, or acceptance of, p comes with certain rational obligations.

the evidential or prudential merits of p. If p is accepted for its epistemic merits, then its acceptance is accompanied by, and indeed is partly explained in terms of, a corresponding a belief about those epistemic merits. Similarly if the reasons are prudential. When an agent accepts a proposition, p, her acceptance of p is rationally explained in terms of her reasons for accepting that p, which are in turn given in terms of her beliefs about the merits of the case for p. Accepting is described as a voluntary mental act consciously undertaken on the part of a rational agent. This means that we are able to give an intensional or rational explanation of the action of acceptance. Accepting Davidson's view that beliefs are the rational causes of our actions, the action of mental acceptance has a doxastic dimension: acceptance is linked to belief, and facts about an agent's beliefs contribute an explanation of her rational acceptance of p as a basis for action.[8]

2.4 Nature of commitment

One of the key sources for an explanation of the notion of commitment as it is applied in argumentation theory is *Walton and Krabbe 1995*. Walton and Krabbe, in turn, draw upon and develop Hamblin's notion of commitment as it is set forth in his *Fallacies* (1970). Paglieri and Castelfranchi (2006, italics removed) have aptly summarized this notion as essentially "public, normative and based on dialectical rules."

The notion of commitment I take to be different from the notion of belief or acceptance in the sense described above. A commitment, as I take it, is a set of responsibilities one takes on in respect to a particular claim. Commitments are incurred by making certain kinds of speech acts in the right sorts of circumstances. For example, in making the assertion that c in an argumentative dialogue I have expressed my commitment to c and have undertaken responsibilities to do certain kinds of things like the following: (i) to provide adequate and acceptable reasons for c if challenged, and (ii) to retract c if I am unable to provide such reasons. Similarly, if I concede that c in an argumentative dialogue, I have taken on a different set of responsibilities that might include: (i) to revise my other commitments so that they remain consistent with c, and with this (ii) to not make assertions which I take to be inconsistent with c in subsequent argumentation, (iii) to allow c to be used as a premise in subsequent argumentation, and (iv) to not arbitrarily abandon c without sufficient reason for doing so.

These responsibilities are inherently public and social. They are responsibilities that are publicly undertaken, and to which arguers can be held socially accountable. Further, these responsibilities also have an epistemic basis. That is, it can be asked whether we are entitled to our commitments—whether we have good grounds for holding them. Commitments to which we are not entitled, we are rationally obliged to give up.

Importantly, as Paglieri and Castelfranchi (2006) observe, these responsibilities originate in, and are determined by, the rules governing the argumentative discussion in which the agents are engaged. Such a position has two important consequences: not only can the responsibilities arising from making a certain type of speech act vary

---

[8] These are also the reasons why I hold beliefs rather than acceptances to be the operative causes of action.

from one type of dialogue to another, but also, since the responsibilities arise from these dialectical rules, the responsibilities end when the dialogue rules cease to apply.

Now, while commitments have a social and normative dimension, they do not necessarily have a doxastic one. I can believe a claim without committing myself to it in any sense in which I am publicly accountable for it. For example, I can believe something without asserting it and thereby committing myself to it in the context of some argumentative dialogue. Further, I can take on commitments which I do not necessarily believe. That is, I can undertake the set of responsibilities associated with being committed to some claim without thereby endorsing or accepting that claim at a personal or psychological level. Obvious examples are: (i) claims that are accepted tentatively, for the purposes of argument, without actually being endorsed as acceptable, (ii) claims argued for by one who plays the 'devil's advocate', (iii) claims argued for by lawyers or other advocates whose job it is to present arguments in support of a position.

The sense of commitment just outlined is different from both belief and acceptance. The difference with belief I take to be obvious and uncontroversial, but perhaps the difference with acceptance is less so. Clearly, there is a link between commitment and concession, or verbally accepting. Yet, there does not appear to be a strong connection between commitment and mentally accepting. To adopt a policy of premising that p is a mental undertaking but it is not a social responsibility. The consequences of failing to act appropriately on one's beliefs or acceptances (e.g., as in the case of akrasia) are rational, not social. There can be additional social costs but only if our beliefs or acceptances are given a public expression (e.g., if they are asserted), and there is a normative framework in place to impart the associated responsibilities.

Further, while belief and acceptance are causally related to action, commitment is socially and normatively related to behavior. Because commitments do not necessarily have a doxastic dimension, they do not on their own have a causal role in determining behavior. Rather, the relationship of commitments to the behavior of agents holding them is normative and social.

My claim is that an arguer's responsibilities arising from her commitments are limited to the normative framework of the argumentation in which the commitment itself is undertaken. Indeed, in a practical sense, the responsibilities arising from commitments will be limited according to the extent that the rules of the argumentative discussion can be effectively enforced.

Further, I claim that an arguer's behavior will only be guided by her commitments to the extent that (i) she genuinely accepts or believes them, or (ii) she can be held accountable to them by others. In case (i) the arguer effectively holds herself accountable to her own commitments either by consciously adopting a policy of premising them, or by involuntarily feeling that they are true upon reflection. On my account, these are situations where a change in commitment is accompanied by a corresponding change in the mental attitude of the arguer. The measure of genuine acceptance is the degree to which an agent acts on her commitments, given her other beliefs and desires, in situations when she is not required to by external forces or agents. Since it is belief rather than commitment that has a causal aspect, it is the change in belief that is operative in guiding future action. In case (ii) that causal dimension is absent as the arguer does not genuinely accept the commitment she has undertaken. Here, the arguer

will only act from her commitments to the extent that she can be held accountable to them by others. But, this accountability is only effective insofar as the arguer is bound by the rules which create those responsibilities—i.e., within the argumentative dialogue itself. In case (ii), as soon as an agent can no longer be held accountable for her commitments, she will act exclusively on the basis of her beliefs and what she genuinely accepts in her own mind.

3 The basic argument

Given the above conceptions of belief, acceptance, and commitment, the following basic argument can be made for the importance of belief over commitment in argumentation. The argument applies to a range of theories so long as they assert the following claims concerning the goal of argumentation, the independence of belief and commitment, and the resolution of argumentation:

(I) *Goal*: The goal of persuasive argumentation is to settle a difference of opinion by rational means.[9]

(II) *Independence of belief and commitment*: Commitment and belief are logically and causally independent; a change in one does not always result in a corresponding change in the other.

(III) *Resolution*: A difference of opinion is resolved when the commitments of the disputants have reached a state of agreement with respect to the claim at issue.[10]

The positions I oppose state that change in commitment is generally sufficient for the resolution of an argumentative discussion. I maintain that in many normal situations—especially those of everyday persuasion—a concomitant change in an arguer's beliefs is also necessary.[11] The required change in belief need not be a belief in the claim at issue, but may be satisfied by the changes in belief concerning the merits of the case for a claim which precipitates its acceptance.

My position is that theories holding these three claims fail *by their own standards* to be effective normative models of argumentation. The basic argument goes like this: I take it as a paradigm of failure when an arguer concedes a position in argumentation and yet proceeds to act as if no such concession had been made. That is, I take

---

[9] I here wish to set aside the issue of whether argumentation itself—as opposed to individual arguers—can properly be said to have a goal (cf. Goodwin 2007). This claim might be re-formulated as the claim that the goal of an arguer is to persuade her audience to adopt her own position.

Theories asserting this goal thesis typically add some normative requirement to the effect that agreement must be reached by some rational means. A job of the theory then becomes spelling out what will count as rational.

[10] A further condition is often added stipulating that this agreement must occur in accordance with the rules of the dialogue game. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that this condition is always met.

[11] There are a variety of argumentative situations where belief change may not be required to effectively conclude argumentation, e.g., cases argumentation is merely a dialectical or pedagogical exercise. Importantly these types of cases are atypical in that they need not arise from a genuine difference of opinion for which a resolution is sought, persuasion need not occur, and the argumentation is not supposed to have practical consequences on the future behavior of arguers. There are still other argumentative situations where the obligations incurred when an arguer makes a concession are enforceable through some social institution; I discuss this possibility below in the context of the jurisdiction of argumentation.

argumentation to have failed if the results of argumentation are not effective in shaping the future actions of arguers.[12] In such a situation, I maintain, the goal of argumentation has not been achieved. While there may be an *ersatz* resolution of a difference of opinion (because of the moves made in the argumentative dialogue), there is no actual resolution (because subsequent actions of arguers do not adhere to the results of argumentation). As such, the argumentation itself has not been effective in resolving the difference of opinion.

Now, suppose an argument results in a change of an arguer's commitments *without* an accompanying change in the relevant mental attitude of the arguer. Does such a change in commitment effectively resolve a difference of opinion?

Suppose an arguer makes a concession in an argumentative dialogue that c (where c is the claim at issue) either because she is compelled to by the rules of the dialogue, or because she no longer sees the argumentation as fruitful and wishes to bring it to a close so she can move on to more productive endeavors, or for any reason other than her sincere acceptance of, or belief in, the claim at issue on the basis of the reasons given in the argument. Suppose, that is, that the verbal concession is not accompanied by a corresponding change in the mind of the arguer. In such a case, the arguer does not genuinely accept that c, but can come up with no acceptable counter-argument, objection, or other move that she could make except perhaps to say something like "well, I cannot refute what you say, but I still do not accept your position." Thus, despite her concession that c, the disputant neither believes nor accepts c, but continues to hold some contrary or contradictory position or some position which in her view opposes c.

Importantly, such a situation could easily arise if, for example:

(i) The acceptable information or legitimate moves available to an arguer is limited by the rules of the discussion itself.

Thus, in playing by the rules, arguers can be denied access to information they count as acceptable, or required to make concessions they do not in fact accept.

(ii) A disputant feels that she is not skilled enough to argue effectively against her opponent even though she thinks that his position is flawed, or

(iii) A disputant feels that she is not knowledgeable enough to produce countervailing evidence even though she may believe that it exists.

Thus, she may feel that if only she were smarter she could actually convince her opponent, and so the failing is her own and not that of the position which she believes.

(iv) A disputant feels that the reasons disputed in the argument do not address her real reasons for holding her position.

---

[12] Here I wish to exclude cases of cognitive failures (e.g., the arguer simply forgets what was conceded in the argument), cases of 'moral' failures (e.g., akrasia), and cases where the arguer re-thinks the issue (even only a few moments later) and comes to a different view or simply changes her mind. All of these can occur without entailing the type of failure I imagine here. The type of failure I imagine here comes from ignoring or flaunting the responsibilities incurred in the process of argumentation. For argumentation to be effective in shaping the future action of arguers, they must take proper account of its results in their practical and theoretical reasoning insofar as they are able.

An arguer who sincerely began the argumentative process may subsequently decide that it has become futile. She may simply feel that the argumentation is 'getting nowhere' and it is no longer worth pursuing as a means of dispute resolution.

In such a situation, having made a concession in the argumentative process, the arguer may be held accountable to it. That is, the dialectical rules constituting and governing the argumentative discussion in which she is participating place a set of social and normative responsibilities upon her. Thus, in whatever range of social activities the rules of argumentation are binding, and to whatever extent the results of the argumentation are enforceable, the arguer can be held responsible to the commitments she took on in the course of argumentation. But, not having genuinely accepted those commitments in her own mind, she does not hold herself accountable to them. So, as soon as she is no longer bound by the rules of the argumentative discussion she can act according to her own best rational lights. In the context of the example described, this will most likely mean that she will not behave as if c were the case, but will instead act on the basis of her belief that c is wrong.

Failures of this sort can always occur whenever (a) a change in commitment is not accompanied by a corresponding change in the mental attitude of the arguer, and (b) an arguer, having quit an argumentative dialogue, is no longer bound by the dialectical responsibilities created by the rules governing that dialogue.

4 Applying the basic argument

Having set forth the core argument for my position, I now consider how it applies to three commitment-based models of argument: the formal dialectics of Hamblin (1970), the contemporary dialectical theory of Walton and Krabbe (1995), and the Pragma-Dialectical theory of van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004). Here I seek to show that each of these theories is committed to the three claims I identified as jointly problematic: (I) the *goal* thesis; (II) *independence of belief and commitment* thesis, and (III) the *resolution* thesis.

4.1 Hamblin's formal dialectic

Concerning the *goal* thesis (I), Hamblin's formal dialectic approach does not explicitly ascribe a purpose to argument (ch. 7) or to the dialectical systems which he develops as models of argument (ch. 8). Still, Hamblin (p. 241) does say that "One of the purposes of argument … is to convince, and our [evaluative] criteria would be less than adequate if they had nothing to say about how well an argument met this purpose." Rather than by purpose, formal dialectical systems are defined according to a set of syntactical rules (e.g., p. 266), the application of which results in establishing the acceptability or unacceptability of a claim through a sequence of dialogue moves.

Though many contemporary commitment-based models of argumentation (e.g., Walton and Krabbe (1995) are directly traceable to Hamblin (1970) account, Hamblin himself did not develop a robust notion of commitment. Rather, Hamblin (p. 257) introduced the idea of a *commitment-store* to solve a specific problem in

argumentative dialogues: detecting inconsistencies. A commitment-store acts as a kind of tracking device logging the additions and deletions of statements over the course of an argumentative dialogue (p. 263). Statements are added to and removed from a participant's commitment store according to the moves (linguistic acts) made in the dialogue (pp. 266 ff.). The commitments of a dialogue participant, then, is that set of statements which the participant must keep consistent throughout some argumentative dialogue (pp. 263–264).

On the nature of commitment Hamblin asserts that while commitments are not identical to beliefs (p. 264), they can generally be treated as if they were (p. 257). Commitments are distinct from beliefs: "a commitment is not necessarily a 'belief' of the participant who has it. We do not believe everything we say; but our saying it commits us whether we believe it or not" (p. 264). Further, "[t]he purpose of postulating a commitment-store is not psychological. Although, presumably, the brain of an actual speaker must contain some remote analogy of a commitment-store, it contains much else besides" (p. 264). Yet, despite these differences between commitments and beliefs, Hamblin claims that "[t]he [commitment] store represents a kind of *persona* of [an arguer's] beliefs: it need not correspond with his real beliefs, but it will operate, in general, approximately as if it did" (p. 257). Thus, while Hamblin endorses the *independence of belief and commitment* (thesis II), he asserts that theories can treat them as if they were not independent.

Yet, as demonstrated above, the coincidence of belief (change) with commitment (change) is precisely what is at issue in determining the effectiveness of argumentation in resolving differences of opinion. To simply assume that commitments correspond to beliefs in all ways pertinent to argumentation, while also maintaining that argumentation theorists need not concern themselves with the messy psychological matters surrounding belief is to avoid the problem, not provide a solution to it.

This same issue occurs again when Hamblin (p. 245) sets out the dialectical criteria for argument evaluation. This Hamblin (p. 246) does in terms of acceptance.

> Why do I use the word 'accepted' in my primary formulation, rather than the word 'believed'? It would be natural to weaken [the epistemic criterion] 'S is known' to [the cognitive or doxastic criterion] 'S is believed' rather than [the dialectical criterion] 'S is accepted'. My reason for preferring 'accepted' is that 'believed' is too much a psychological word, conjuring up pictures of mental states. I can *accept* something simply by putting on the appropriate linguistic performance; and this behavioural manifestation is the only necessary constituent of the argument-situation.

Here, Hamblin explicitly endorses the *resolution* claim (III) that the verbal acceptance of a claim—and not its mental acceptance—is all that is required to allocate argumentative responsibilities and to determine the outcome of persuasive argumentation. Yet, I have argued that an arguer's behavioral performance within the dialogue is not the only important constituent of the argument-situation. Rather, it is the behavioral performance of arguers on into the future that is at stake, and which it is the goal of argumentation influence and affect.

4.2 Walton and Krabbe's persuasion dialogue

In *Commitment in Dialogue* (1995), Walton and Krabbe develop Hamblin's dialogue-based approach to argumentation beginning (p.1) with his "idea of commitment as the central concept in models of dialogue used to evaluate arguments."[13]

Whereas Hamblin was not explicit about the purpose of a formal dialogue system, Walton and Krabbe (ch. 3) recognize several different types of argumentative dialogue, each characterized by an initial situation, a goal, and the types of moves allowed within it. Of the persuasion dialogue, Walton and Krabbe (p. 68) explicitly endorse the *goal* thesis (I), writing, "The initial situation of a *persuasion dialogue* (or *critical discussion*), is a clash or conflict of points of view. The main goal is a resolution of the initial conflict by verbal means."

Commitments are conceived of as a special kind of bond, explained as an imperative, between a subject (a rational agent) and an object (an action) (p. 28). Thus, commitments are generally explained as obligations to undertake actions of a certain sort. Propositional commitments are incurred by making certain types of speech acts in a dialogue, and the actions to which one is thereby bound are other speech acts in the dialogue (p. 8). This model "gives a treatment of commitment that is not psychological but pragmatic and critical" (p. 12).

Beyond the recognition of 'dark-side' commitments (p. 12) (which are usually not explicit, but are nevertheless operative in the dialogue), Walton and Krabbe make no attempt to address the relation of commitments to the mental or psychological attitudes of arguers. While the combined commitment set of a subject describes a state of that subject, this is not to be identified with a mental state of the subject (p. 21). As such Walton and Krabbe's account is at least consistent with the thesis (II) of the *independence of belief and commitment*.

Further, though Walton and Krabbe never assert the *independence* thesis, the fact that they never address the connection between belief and commitment indicates that they do not see it as a pressing issue for commitment-based theories of argument dialogue. Instead commitments are presented as the (only?) important dimension of argument.

How, then, do Walton and Krabbe construe the resolution of the argumentative process? In many respects, Walton and Krabbe (pp. 9–10) conceive of an argumentative dialogue as a kind of commitment management system. They (p. 11) write "[w]e model dialogue as a sequence of connected moves or locutions (speech acts) that you can keep track of as a tableau or list of exchanges by the participants. Attached to this tableau are commitment sets (or stores) for each participant." The rules of a dialogue not only set forth the range of permissible moves at any given point, but also regulate the effects on a commitment store of any given move. The rules which constitute and regulate a persuasion dialogue come in four sorts: locution rules, structural rules, commitment rules, and win-loss rules (pp. 71–72). Importantly, the win-loss rules of persuasion dialogues are formulated exclusively in terms of the speech acts made by

---

[13] Together Barth and Krabbe (1982) developed and formalized Lorenzen's (1960) idea of Dialogue Logic, showing how it could serve as a model for everyday argumentation. These two significant works are not discussed in this paper.

the participants in the dialogue and the changes which have occurred to their respective commitment stores.[14] Thus the conception of dialogue proposed by Walton and Krabbe satisfies the *resolution* thesis (III).

Walton and Krabbe (pp. 9–10) realize that a central problem for dialogue theory is to provide a mechanism by which commitments are "sticky"—i.e., binding on participants. Yet, they conceive of the "stickiness" problem as occurring wholly within the argumentative dialogue itself. More generally, little consideration is given to how commitments and other obligations incurred in argumentative dialogues extend beyond the conclusion of the dialogue itself.

4.3 Pragma-Dialectics's critical discussion

Pragma-Dialectics [PD] (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 2004) offers the critical discussion is a model of an ideal discussion procedure designed to bring about the resolution of a difference of opinion concerning the defensibility of a standpoint. It has four basic stages: Confrontation, Opening, Argumentation and Concluding. Each is characterized by stage-specific goals and a set of permissible speech acts. This ideal model is informed by four meta-theoretical principles which together shape the PD methodology: externalization, functionalization, socialization, and dialectification.

Externalization stresses the external and the explicit over the internal and the implicit. It involves focusing on the public commitments of arguers arising from their linguistic activity, rather than their unexpressed, private beliefs. Functionalization stresses the goal-oriented and procedural aspects of argumentation. It involves adopting a process-based, or functional, view of argument over a product-based, or structural, view. The linguistic activity of argumentation is treated pragmatically as a regulated sequence of purposive speech acts. Socialization highlights a picture of argumentation which is interactional and has multiple agents, rather than one which is individual and has a passive-audience. It involves treating argumentation as a dialogue between two or more parties with distinguishable and opposing positions, each of whom actively participate in the argumentation process. Dialectification involves treating dialogue moves in a normative context, as attempts to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with critical norms of reasonableness. This allows evaluative principles to be stated as procedural norms regulating the activity of argumentation, rather than as standards against which a product is later measured.

That Pragma-Dialectics accepts the *goal* thesis (I) is apparent in its dialectical approach and in the meta-theoretical principles of functionalization and dialectification.[15]

---

[14] See the rules given for the Permissive Persuasion Dialogue [PPD_0] (pp. 149–153) and for the Rigorous Persuasion Dialogue [RPD_0] (pp. 158–161).

[15] There are two salient qualifications in the PD position: (i) the notion of resolution is inherently normative, as contrasted with merely settling a difference of opinion which can occur by means other than rational argumentation (2004, p. 58), and (ii) resolutions of a difference of opinion occur in the context of testing the acceptability of a standpoint at issue (2004, p. 52). Nevertheless, these two qualifications do not affect PD's commitment to the *goal* thesis set forth herein.

The commitment-based approach employed by Pragma-Dialectics follows from the principle of externalization. van Eemeren et al. (1993, p. 11) write that externalization is required in order that incompatible standpoints can be identified and considered rationally. Yet PD does not merely take explicit points of disagreement as its starting place. Instead, the model holds that the study of argumentation should not be concerned with psychological factors affecting belief.

> [I]t is not the internal reasoning processes and inner convictions of those involved in resolving a difference of opinion that are of primary importance to argumentation theory, but the positions these people express or project in their speech acts. Instead of concentrating on the psychological dispositions of the language users involved in the resolution process, we concentrate primarily on their *commitments*, as they are externalized in, or can be externalized from, the discourse or text. (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 54; cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, pp. 4–7; van Eemeren et al. 1993, pp. 11–12; van Eemeren et al. 1996, pp. 276–77, where the same position is stated in stronger terms)

The thesis (II) of the *independence of belief and commitment* is implicit in the above description, but is stated explicitly elsewhere, as for instance when van Eemeren et al. (1993, p. 12) claim:

> What people argue over is not so much the actual positions of the parties but the positions that the parties can be held to have expressed… And the reasons (motives) people may have for holding a belief are not always the same as the reasons (grounds) they will offer and accept in defense of a claim.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst recognize the gap that their position allows between the verbal behavior (speech acts) of disputants and their actual mental attitudes. This problem is addressed by the sincerity condition placed on speech acts (2004, pp. 75–80) which is presented as a felicity condition for the successful performance of speech acts. This condition is designed to function as a kind of glue between an arguer's verbal commitments and her mental attitudes.[16]

In seeking to close the gap between belief and commitment, the sincerity requirement concedes the fundamental thesis of this paper that the psychological dimension of belief is important to the study of argument. Yet, it attempts to do so in such a way as to maintain the adequacy of an exclusively commitment-based approach to the study of argument: theories need not be concerned with beliefs because beliefs, not being public, are the responsibility of arguers.

Having conceded the importance of mental attitudes to the study of argument, the question then becomes is commitment plus sincerity the right way to incorporate beliefs into theories of argument? Part of the answer to this question notes that the

---

[16] In its present formulation the sincerity condition works by asserting the entitlement of interlocutors to hold arguers accountable for their commitments. "The honesty [i.e., sincerity] principle implies that everyone may be held responsible for assuming the obligations linked to the speech act that he or she has performed" (2004, p. 77). In its early formulation, sincerity conditions for the speech act of argumentation were explicitly formulated in terms of the beliefs of arguers. For example, the first sincerity condition for a 'happy' performance of the illocutionary act complex of argumentation is that the subject believes that her opinion is acceptable (1984, p. 44).

study of sincere commitments no easier than the study of belief. While commitments are externalizable, sincerity is not. The sincerity condition places an additional responsibility on arguers but it does not give the theorist any additional resources to ensure that these responsibilities are being met. Thus, it would seem as though little is gained with the substitution of sincere commitment for belief. A second part of the answer notes that recognizing the importance of belief to argumentation calls into question whether the study of argument is properly focused solely on speech acts. Argumentation which is designed to effectively resolve differences of opinion should focus on the future behavior of arguers and the determinants of that behavior. Yet, the question of whether a speech act made at the conclusion of a critical discussion is a reliable indicator of an arguer's future behavior is an empirical question which has yet to be answered by Pragma-Dialecticians and other commitment-oriented theorists.

Concerning the *resolution* thesis (III): it might seem as though the principle of externalization is sufficient to establish Pragma-Dialectics's endorsement of the claim that the resolution of a difference of opinion occurs when there is agreement at the level of the disputants' commitments to the claim at issue. Yet, the full picture is more complex. First, while agreement is a necessary condition for the resolution of a difference of opinion (2004, p. 61), the aim of a critical discussion is not to maximize agreement but to determine the acceptability of a claim at issue (2004, p. 188). Further, the concluding stage of argumentation is commonly described in terms of acceptance rather than commitment. For example, the early PD theory postulated that argumentation is intended to convince a listener of the acceptability of an opinion (1984, p. 47). The question here becomes, does Pragma-Dialectics understand acceptance as mental acceptance or as merely verbal acceptance? While there is some evidence to suggest that PD attempts to internalize acceptance,[17] it is clear that acceptance as it is operationalized in PD is not a mental attitude. Instead, on the Pragma-Dialectical theory, acceptance is a perlocutionary effect of a speech act which amounts to agreement with a stated opinion (1984, p. 69). Acceptance, then, is not inherently mental or psychological, and it is removed from an arguer's actual beliefs by the mental state of inner conviction, or being convinced (1984, p. 70). This picture identifies acceptance with the notion of verbal acceptance described above.

In the final analysis then, Pragma-Dialectics fully adheres to the principle of externalization which limits the study of argumentation to those aspects of an arguer's position which are made explicit. Because of this, the study of argumentation is completely commitment-based, and no empirical attempt is made to establish a link between an arguer's verbal commitments and her beliefs or mental attitudes. Thus, PD endorses the *resolution* thesis (III) that differences of opinion are properly resolved at the level of commitment rather than belief.

---

[17] For example, van Eemeren and Grootendorst write "The perlocutionary act *convince* can only succeed if the listener actually subscribes to the attitude attributed to him by the speaker or at least if he wishes to tie himself down to the attitude" (1984, p. 50).

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to address a problem which I see as affecting many commitment-based theories of argumentation which hold three jointly problematic theses concerning (I) the goal and (III) the resolution of the argumentative process combined with (II) the claim that belief and commitment are independent of one another. I have tried to make the case that models of argument which hope to be effective in resolving differences of opinion must take belief into account.

The case for the importance of belief rests on two key ideas. First, a necessary element of a successful resolution of an argumentative discussion is that the resolution is effective. To be effective the resolution of an argumentative discussion must be binding on its participants. The purpose of argumentation is not fulfilled if arguers are not bound by the results of argumentative discussions. That is, a difference of opinion has not been resolved successfully unless the participants act on the results of the discussion in the right sorts of ways—even if the resolution was reached in accordance with all of the procedural rules governing the argumentative discussion itself.

Second is the idea that to be effective argumentative commitments must be binding and enforceable, and typically must extend beyond the argumentative dialogue itself. To capture this idea it might be useful to speak of the *jurisdiction of argumentation*. Roughly I mean by this the domain over which the results of argumentation are binding; that is the domain over which argumentative rules have normative force or can act as norms. Thus we have the general thesis that argumentative commitments are binding only within the jurisdiction of argumentation.

Since there can be cases where a person is obliged to do something and yet no one is in a position to require them to do so, the domain over which the results of argumentation are binding might be different from the domain over which the results are enforceable (socially, legally, or otherwise). This difference might be marked with the ideas of the *theoretical* jurisdiction of argumentation and the *practical* jurisdiction of argumentation. This difference is important because often the *effective* jurisdiction of argumentation is only the domain over which its results can be enforced.

At minimum, the jurisdiction of argumentation seems to be the argumentative dialogue itself. To whatever extent the obligations of arguers are founded solely in a set of dialogue rules, argumentative obligations seem only to be limits on future dialogue moves. Moreover this is the only sense of argumentative obligation which seems to be modeled within, and supported by, many commitment-based, dialogic theories of argument. Yet, effective resolutions of differences of opinion typically require that obligations incurred in argumentation be binding well beyond the end of the dialogue.

Some fields of argument in society come with external enforcement mechanisms which extend the effective domain of argumentation well beyond the argumentative situation itself. For example, the jurisdiction of legal argumentation (argument that results in the judgement of a court) is enforced by a vast professional law-enforcement community. Yet, the results of legal argumentation are typically binding only over the specific parties involved in the legal dispute.[18] Similarly, the juris-

---

[18] Judgments of the court can be binding in a different way upon the decisions of future courts insofar as they act as precedents.

diction of legislative argumentation (argument that results in the passing of some piece of legislation) is virtually equipollent throughout society and on all members of society. But, even it has limits. First, its jurisdiction typically ends at the political borders of the society, and further its results may be ruled void by the results of other types of argumentation within that society (e.g., the results of argumentation occurring in the Supreme Court). Other types of external enforcement mechanisms might be found cases of the following sort: in public political argumentation a combination of involved citizens, other politicians, non-governmental organizations, and the media act to hold politicians accountable for what they say; in scientific and academic argumentation a community of knowledge producers and consumers monitor developments in their discipline and can participate in that development by publicly challenging other participants who do not appear to be meeting their obligations.

Yet much everyday argumentation typically does not occur in highly institutionalized contexts like these. Instead, much argumentation occurs between voluntary participants, who are able to quit the argumentative process when they chose, and who must enforce whatever argumentative norms and obligations can be brought to apply on each other (and themselves) as best as they are able. This situation has led some theorists (e.g., Goodwin 2007) to take a *design* approach to the foundation of argumentative norms in an attempt to understand how everyday arguers attempt to get their interlocutors to commit to a set of norms to which they can hold each other accountable. Perhaps more important still is to find a set of norms to which arguers will hold themselves accountable. Following most everyday exchanges external, social enforcement mechanisms are almost entirely absent. This means that arguers must enforce argumentative norms upon themselves. In these situations, if argumentation is to effectively resolve differences of opinion, the jurisdiction of argumentation must include the arguer's own belief-system which forms the basis for her actions.

The central problem for commitment-based models is that, while we may be responsible for our commitments, we act on the basis of our beliefs. Of course, many of the reasons that commitment-based theories sought to avoid beliefs are well-founded. Beliefs are notoriously slippery: they can be unarticulated or even unconscious, and even when we do know what they are we may not have very good insight into why we have them. (Note the obstacles this poses for the sincerity plus commitment approach.) Further, many of the techniques proposed by commitment-based theories for dealing with these problems are also well-founded. Points of agreement and disagreement are most easily detected when they are articulated. The best way to be rational about our beliefs is to have them out in the open so that we can reason with and argue about them. On the other hand, effective resolution of disagreements entails appropriate modification of future behavior and it is not at all clear that an arguer's speech acts alone are reliable indicators of what that behavior will be. To properly anticipate an agent's behavior, we must have knowledge of their beliefs and not merely their commitments. What is genuinely at stake in an argumentative exchange is not merely what an arguer says, but what she thinks and what she does.

References

Barth, E. M., & Krabbe, E. C. W. (1982). *From axiom to dialogue: A philosophical study of logic and argumentation*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Cohen, L. J. (1992). *An essay on belief and acceptance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davidson, D. (1980). Actions, reasons and causes. In D. Davidson (Ed.), *Essays on actions and events* (pp. 3–20). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Engel, P. (1998). Believing, holding true, and accepting. *Philosophical Explorations, 2*, 141–151.

Engel, P. (2000). Introduction: The varieties of belief and acceptance. In P. Engel (Ed.), *Believing and accepting* (pp. 1–30). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Foley, R. (2001). *Intellectual trust in oneself and others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Geach, P. T. (1957). *Mental acts: Their content and their objects*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Goodwin, J. (2007). Argument has no function. *Informal Logic, 27*, 69–90.

Hamblin, C. C. (1970). *Fallacies*. Newport News, VA: Vale Press (orig. pub. Methuen.)

Hume, D. (1975). *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lorenzen, P. (1960). Logic und Agon. In *Atti del XII Congresso Internazionale di Filosofia (Venezia, 12–18 Settembre 1958), IV: Logica, lionguaggio e communicazione* (pp. 187–194). Florence: Sansoni.

Paglieri, F., & Castelfranchi C. (2006). Belief and acceptance in argumentation: Towards an epistemological taxonomy of the uses of argument. In F. H. van Eemeren, et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Argumentation*, forthcoming. Amsterdam: SicSat.

Pinto, R. C. (2001). Generalizing the notion of argument. In H. V. Hansen (Ed.), *Argument, inference and dialectic* (pp. 10–20). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Pinto, R. C. (2003). The uses of argument in communicative contexts. In J. Anthony Blair, et al. (Eds.), *Informal Logic @ 25: Proceedings of the Windsor Conference*. Windsor, Ontario: OSSA.

Ramsey, F. (1931). *The foundations of mathematics and other logical essays*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Searle, J. (1979). *Intentionality: An essay in the philosophy of mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stalnaker, R. (1984). *Inquiry*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (1984). *Speech acts in argumentative discourse*. Dordrecht: Foris.

van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R., Jackson, S., & Jacobs, S. (1993). *Reconstructing argumentative discourse*. Tuscalosa, AB: University of Alabama Press.

van Eemeren, F. H., et. al. (1996). *Fundamentals of argumentation theory: A handbook of historical backgrounds and contemporary developments*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Walton, D., & Krabbe, E. C. W. (1995). *Commitment in dialogue: Basic concepts of interpersonal reasoning*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Woodfield, A. (2000). Commitments defined with the help of public concepts. In P. Engel (Ed.), *Believing and accepting* (pp. 221–242). Dordrecht: Kluwer.