Be reasonable! Ways to react to cases of presumed unreason

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Are we living in an age of unreason? And what to do about it? Can we combat unreason? We discuss situations in which one may presume to be confronted with unreasonable behavior by an interlocutor: fallacies, changing rules of the game, shifting to some other type of dialogue, and abandonment of reasonable dialogue. We recommend ways that could be helpful to obtain a return to reason. These possibilities lead us to a moderately optimistic conclusion.

KEYWORDS: Abandonment of reasonable dialogue, Dialogue shift, Fallacy, Game-change, Optimism

1. INTRODUCTION

The times seem to be changing. And it does not look like a change for the better, at least not to those who value reasonable argumentation as a means for peaceful conflict resolution. It seems that amidst the contemporary plethora of persuasive messages the use of reason is losing ground. Yet, it is nothing new to being confronted with attempts at persuasion from all sides. Forty years ago, Johnson and Blair wrote:

> "As citizens we are constantly being offered persuasive rhetoric from a multitude of directions [...]. The teachers' union, the school board, the city council, irate taxpayers, all are trying to gain your support for higher salaries, lower salaries; a strike, back-to-work legislation; city core redevelopment, rezoning for a suburban shopping mall, bikeathons want you to bike, telethons want you to phone in a pledge. […] Groups and individuals incessantly vie for your

> adherence to their way of seeing things, for your acceptance of their view of what is true, important or worth doing." (Johnson and Blair 1983 [1977], p. viii)

In such circumstances, it wouldn't be a good idea to give in to all these claims and therefore it becomes urgent to distinguish good arguments from bad arguments and to resist the latter. That is, we need to be capable of logical self-defense. To get the necessary skills, courses in informal logic, critical thinking, and argumentation theory can be helpful.

But the present situation seems harder to tackle than that described by Johnson and Blair: we seem nowadays to be bombarded by an indiscriminate avalanche of persuasive rubbish, not just fallacious arguments or inserted non-arguments but anything that is pseudo or fake: fake news, bullshit, crackpot theories, alternative facts, blunt inconsistencies and outright lies, seasoned by a sauce of mistrust and hatred. Unreason is ubiquitous, and we seem to get used to that as well; the observation is already old hat.

So are we really living in an age of unreason? What does that mean? Whither argumentation? Will it soon be 'game over' for any reasonable approach to our differences of opinion? Or can techniques of logical self-defense be bolstered so as to resist the avalanche?

Our paper is meant as a modest attempt to reflect on such issues. In Section 2 we discuss the concept of an age of unreason and defend the view that pessimism about the use of reason in our times is unwarranted. In Section 3 we resist the view that there is a struggle between two parties: the reasonable and the unreasonable. In Section 4 we describe several characteristic types of situation in which one may perceive a lack of reasonable behavior of one's interlocutor and recommend certain ways of how to deal with these. Section 5 presents a moderately optimistic conclusion.

2. DO WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF UNREASON?

Donald Trump's style of communication and argument is often perceived as exemplifying the heights of unreason. Here it looks as if all argumentation has been replaced by manipulation. In an article of little more than three pages Lakoff and Duran show how Trump uses language to frame and win debates and how he manipulates the press so as to inculcate his worldview. "Trump knows the press has a strong instinct to repeat his most outrageous claims, and this allows him to put the press to work as a marketing agency for his ideas." (Lakoff and Duran 2018, p. 1)

Some of his linguistic manipulation techniques are:

> - Weaponizing words (Hilary is always "crooked", unwelcome news "fake news", a threatening investigation "a witch-hunt")
> - Weaponized stereotypes ("...defaming entire groups of people as liars, rapists, terrorists...")
> - Weasel words ("...to avoid taking responsibility for a claim": "Maybe", "I don't know", "We'll see")
> - Hyperbole ("great", "terrific", "the best/worst ever", "a disaster")
> - Use of "winning" and "losing" ("Those who win deserve to win; those who lose deserve to lose")
> - Use of "America first" ("America is better than other countries, as shown by its wealth and power.") (Lakoff and Duran 2018, p. 2)

Trump's style is quite typical of those phenomena that make people believe that we have entered the age of unreason. We do not deny that that these phenomena exist or that they can be upsetting. It is also upsetting that in public controversies people are gradually getting accustomed to being confronted with excessively unreasonable contributions. But even in these disturbing circumstances reasonable argument has not completely disappeared. Sometimes Trump gives us an argument. For instance, when he announced the US retraction from the Paris Climate Accord, he argued at the end of his speech as follows:

> **Example 1.** Time to exit the Paris Accord
> "The Paris Accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risks, and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world. It is time to exit the Paris Accord – (applause) – and time to pursue a new deal that protects the environment, our companies, our citizens, and our country." (The White House 2017, p. 7)

Now, one may criticize this argument on various accounts, but it can't be denied that here we have an argument, and that Trump gave us at least five reasons (discussed earlier in the speech) why the Paris Accord would not be acceptable for the US.

Other examples of apparent unreason can be found in publications of European populist parties. Here also, we find that beside manipulation and bullshit, there are also arguments. Take, for instance, the German party *Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany] (AfD). A meticulous argumentation analysis by David Lanius of their 2017 election platform reveals plenty of unreason: appeals to popular sentiments, prejudice, false or simplified statements, etc. Nevertheless, according to Lanius there are also many arguments:

> "... the argumentation of the AfD is easy to grasp and can simply be put into a logically valid form." (Lanius 2017, p. 29; our translation)

Given that the presence of lies, bullshit, appeal to popular sentiments does not exclude the presence of also some prima facie reasonable arguments, one may wonder whether unreason has really taken over. One may also doubt whether earlier ages fared much better than the present one. Is there any phenomenon that characterizes the supposed age of unreason and that did not occur in earlier times? If one wants to seriously investigate this question (which we won't), another question arises: When did the age of unreason start? In a paper on the terms "fake news" and "post-truth," Joshua Habgood-Coote raises a similar question: When did the post-truth era start? After mentioning some options, going as far back as the Watergate scandal, he concludes:

> "Most popular authors connect the era to the 2016 election, gesturing toward historical roots without providing any clarity about when it is supposed to have started [...]. The plethora of potential starting points suggests that 'post-truth [era]' has no clear extension. Everyone agrees that we are living in it, but no-one knows when it is supposed to have started." (Habgood-Coote 2018, p. 10)

The same holds for the age of unreason, of which the post-truth era would be an aspect. The consequence is that the term "age of unreason" would be too vague to play a serious role in a philosophical discussion. Also, the idea of a golden age of norms and reason to which we could and should return is pure mythology. "There was never a golden age: the epistemic norms of democracy have never been realised in practice." (Habgood-Coote 2018, p. 24).

But even so, the phenomena leading to the impression that there is more and more unreason are to be taken seriously. While all kinds of unreason, from slightly biased use of language to clear-cut bullshit and outright lies, may have been around through the ages, they also have always deserved to meet with criticism and opposition. Moreover, there may presently be an intensification of the symptoms of unreason due to technological innovations in communication technology. So there is enough reason for being on the alert.

Now should we be optimistic or pessimistic? Past experience shows that unreason has often been dealt with adequately. So why wouldn't we be able do so in the future? On the other hand, there have also been many failures. So why wouldn't that happen again? We may opt for either optimism or pessimism or some mixture of both. These

observations may suffice to establish that it is at least a decent option to choose for a moderate optimism, and to continue the development of tools aimed at enhancing the use of reasonable argumentative exchanges in public life. Having reached this conclusion, it seems we could end the paper here. However there is more to say about what to do when confronted with unreason.

3. CAN WE COMBAT UNREASON?

The crucial question about unreasonable words or actions is: how should one react to them? Must we combine forces in a war on unreason? This martial metaphor may be used to strengthen our option for optimism: we are not alone in the struggle. In fact, many have decried the unreason of our times. But, even if, for the occasion, we condone the martial jargon, it may be asked – before we rush to battle: Who is the enemy? Is there really an opposing party of unreason that we, representing the party of reason, must combat?

Let us consider more precisely what is implied in assessing a statement, argument, or action as unreasonable. One cannot do so without, at the same time, assessing oneself as reasonable and possessing a sufficient amount of common sense to make the assessments. That everyone thinks of him- or herself as sufficiently provided with common sense is a well-known point made by Descartes at the very start of his *Discourse on the Method* (Descartes 1637). But actually, it is never excluded that in dismissing something as unreasonable we are ourselves missing the point and that what we perceive as unreason has a hidden rationality, as well as that what we see as our common sense points of view cover in reality our own pits of unreason. To admit that one could be wrong we see as a necessary component of a reasonable attitude. This does not mean that this fallibilistic insight need always come to expression. Rather it plays a role in the background and underlies one's willingness to change one's point of view if one becomes convinced of having been wrong.

For instance, you may be convinced that populist parties represent the pits of unreason. But, as Lanius has shown for the AfD, they also present arguments and so it would be reasonable to agree with them where these arguments are convincing. Similarly for Brexiteers and other populists. This doesn't mean that you join them; it may even be far removed from that. But it does mean, that in many cases, the combat metaphor is inappropriate. It suffices to oppose your interlocutors on those issues where you disagree with them.

In the case of Trump a combat metaphor seems out of place as well. Although he sells us a lot of bullshit (Kristiansen and Kaussler 2018), sometimes he really argues (above we gave an example of this).

So it could be reasonable to let him convince you on some points. At other points you may strongly oppose him.

The same holds for adherents of conspiracy theories and other crackpot views. After all there are also real conspiracies and views that were once considered outlandish have later gained acceptance. The appropriate mode for a reasonable opposition will not be to go into combat against such theories collectively but to judge each theory on its merits.

It seems than that to use a martial metaphor like "combating unreason" would be inappropriate or at least unnecessary (cf. Cohen 1995, Govier 1999, Ch. 4 and 14) and perhaps itself leading to a kind of unreason. Going around and blaming others for presenting "fake news" or "committing this or that fallacy" or "bullshitting" might create more heat than light, unless such claims are carefully underpinned. They could amount to no more than an unfair blaming strategy (Van Laar and Krabbe 2016). Certainly, it would be wrong to conceive of humanity as divided in two parties: the reasonable "us" and the unreasonable "they." Everyone is sometimes reasonable and sometimes not. The whole combat metaphor, with its unnecessary military flavor, had better be dropped.

But what then can we do when we honestly perceive ourselves to be confronted by unreason?

4. WAYS TO REACT TO CASES OF PRESUMED UNREASON

What to do? It all depends on context! But let us discuss four characteristic types of situation that may occur in direct dialogical interaction, and see what the options are when you aim to support your side of a disagreement yet at the same time change the conversational setting so as to move towards overall reasonableness.

4.1 Dealing with isolated fallacies

You and your interlocutor are involved in a *persuasion dialogue*. That is, you both exchange arguments and critical considerations, within a dialogue that counts as a shared attempt to resolve your disagreements on the merits of both sides. The conversational contributions of your interlocutor provide no reason whatsoever to suppose that he or she wants to quit the persuasion dialogue. But then you notice that your interlocutor commits a fallacy by violating, willingly or unwillingly, a norm that is part of the very idea of resolving disagreements on the merits.

For instance, it could be that your interlocutor presents a fallacy, such as a Straw Man Fallacy, or a Fallacy of Loaded Terms. Very unfair.

Following the pragma-dialectical analysis of these fallacies, the interlocutor either violates the Rule for Critical Discussion according to which any critical response should genuinely relate to the commitments of the other party rather than to some distorted or fictitious version of it (Straw Man Fallacy), or the Rule for Critical Discussion according to which a defense should not falsely pretend to be based on shared starting points (Fallacy of Loaded Terms, as we think it can be understood within the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies). What can you do if you want to support your side but also to redirect the course of dialogue into a more proper direction?

Acting reasonably, in our dialogical framework, implies that one is acting in such a way that the outcome of the dialogue will do full justice to the reasons available to the participants. When you assume that your interlocutor commits a fallacy, you are prima facie committed to ensure that this alleged norm violation does not impair the quality of the dialogue's outcome. As said, it all depends. Possibly, in your assessment there's no need to discuss the fallacy, as it will probably have no effect whatsoever, say because it concerns a minor issue, or because the addressees (you yourself or the attending audience) will not be led astray by it.

But then, possibly, leaving the fallacy untouched may have a distorting effect, in which case it needs to be defused. Otherwise, when one leaves the fallacy untouched, the fallacy may bias the outcome, or one may convey (inadvertently) the message that future fallacies will be left unchallenged as well. As we are not dealing, for now, with a setting in which the interlocutor systematically tries to exploit fallacies, but rather with a setting in which a presumably isolated, but noteworthy, fallacy occurs, we recommend to raise a point of order (Hamblin 1970) by identifying the contribution at hand, and by assessing it as a breach of an important norm for argumentative exchanges. Initiating such a *metadialogue* (Krabbe 2003) can be done in a blunt, insensitive, and arrogant manner – so that the fallacy charge puts the required spirit of cooperation at risk. But this is an issue of presentation and style, since there are also ways to express a fallacy charge with elegance, respect, and modesty. Thus, our recommendation would be that, if you need to bring up a charge of fallacy, you will do so in a rhetorically efficient way, so as to increase the likelihood that you and your interlocutor will come to agree either that the contribution was indeed fallacious or that, on the contrary, your fallacy charge cannot be sustained. After having made the necessary retractions, both of you should then return to the *ground level dialogue* as soon as possible.

Example 2. *Very high levels of intelligence*
"[Trump:] "I don't see" the devastating climate change effects warned about in the report. "One of the problems [is] that a lot of people like myself, we have very high levels of intelligence, but we're not necessarily such believers" [...]. "You look at our air and our water and it's right now at a record clean." The 1,600-page National Climate Assessment, issued by the Trump administration, details the climate and economic impacts U.S. residents will see if drastic action is not taken to address climate change." (Hayes 2018)

Trump can be seen as violating the pragma-dialectical Relevance Rule for critical discussion according to which one should advance argumentation relevant to one's standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 192) – because he appeals rather to his high level of intelligence than to substantial evidence or relevant expertise (a tactics known as the Ethical Fallacy or the *argumentum ad verecundiam*). Hayes's response can well be understood as criticizing Trump's inadmissible appeal to his personal qualities, but he does so in quite a detached and subtle manner by pointing to the contrast between Trump's personal estimation of the extent of climate change, and that of the National Climate Assessment's estimation issued by Trump's own administration. Hayes's approach seems adequate for dealing with occasional fallacies, but one may wonder how well it works in the case of Trump.

4.2 *Dealing with alternative views on rules*

Another way in which the contributions of your interlocutor may strike you as unreasonable, is when you notice that he tries to change the rules of game, or the way you presumed the rules were to be understood in the context at hand, and thereby to modify for the occasion the very idea of resolving disagreements on the merits (yet without going so far as to abandon the idea of obtaining a resolution by argumentation altogether).

For example, your interlocutor may flesh out "relevant to" in the Relevance Rule differently than you do. Or he may dismiss what you presumed to constitute a prima facie reliable kind of source of information – the press, climate science – as overall biased and untrustworthy, so that his specification of "appropriate argument scheme," a key concept in the Argument Scheme Rule,[1] differs from what could be expected when commencing the dialogue.

1 According to the Argument Scheme Rule, standpoints may be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation not presented as based on formally

We recommend taking issue with your interlocutor on his views on the rules of the game, and to try to sort out collectively at a metalevel to what extent these are acceptable for both of you, and to do so even when your interlocutor, in a domineering manner, tries to present his views of the rules as *obviously* called for in the present context, rather than *as a proposal* to be discussed. Each proponent of a thesis who wants to propose an interpretation of the procedural rules must make sure that the addressee (the opponent) accepts that interpretation, given that argumentation can only be rationally convincing when starting from the (substantial and procedural) concessions of the addressee. But note that it may not be in the interest of reason if the addressee just clings to the rules as she has presumed and liked them. Such conservatism only counts as reasonable if it is or could be successfully defended in a metadialogue about the proponent's proposed interpretation. Acting reasonably also means acting according to a defensible dialogical procedure. Reason cannot be a monolith, and proposed procedural adaptations can sometimes withstand critical testing in an open-minded inquiry or a cooperative persuasion dialogue.

> **Example 3.** *Big political agenda*
> "WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID "Look, scientists also have a political agenda."
>
> Asked about scientists who say hurricanes and other extreme weather events are worsening, Mr. Trump replied, "You'd have to show me the scientists because they have a very big political agenda."
>
> THE FACTS
> **Scientists dispute that.**
> No doubt climate change has become politicized. And climate skeptics Sunday night cheered Mr. Trump's remark. But scientists took umbrage at the notion that their research has an agenda. Here are three in their own words:
>
> Katharine Hayhoe, climate scientist, Texas Tech University: "A thermometer isn't Democrat or Republican. It doesn't give us a different answer depending on how we vote."
>
> Andrew Dessler, climate scientist, Texas A&M University: "At its heart, this is just a wacky conspiracy theory," he wrote. "It's important to realize that there's never been a conspiracy by a

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conclusive reasoning, only if the defense does take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are correctly applied (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 194).

> huge field of science. And this would have to be an extremely massive conspiracy, considering the thousands of scientists working on this. On the other hand, there have been many examples (cigarettes, anyone?) where political advocates have tried to cast doubt on science that is extremely solid. That's what's going on here."
>
> Donald Wuebbles, climate scientist, University of Illinois: "No scientists have political agendas. That's just an excuse."" (Friedman 2018)

The response by Hayhoe, though not incorrect, is weak since it is not very responsive to any considerations that might motivate an abandonment of appeals to the expertise of climate scientists. The response by Wuebbles might even be seen as scientific stonewalling. The response by Dessler misfires since it seems that Trump develops his stance without committing himself to there being any conspiracy by scientists – climate scientists might collectively have been led astray due to wrong incentives and social biases rather than by deliberate scheming. Yet, Dessler's response might be easily modified so as to provide a reasonable and convincing argument against the very idea that in general climate scientists are too politically driven to be taken seriously, and thereby in support of the prima facie reliability of arguments from expert opinion, also in the field of climate science.

4.3 *Dealing with shifts to other dialogue types*

Suppose you are, or thought you were, involved in a persuasion dialogue, but you start to doubt whether your interlocutor isn't trying to shift to some other type of dialogue. Such a shift away from a persuasion dialogue may be a *licit*, rather than an *illicit*, shift (Walton and Krabbe 1995, pp. 100-116), provided that the interlocutor does not conceal her attempt to shift but instead invites you to accept a proposal to turn to another type of dialogue, and thus in no way suggests that he succeeded in convincing you of his standpoint in the persuasion dialogue.

The parties may decide to postpone their persuasion dialogue but first turn to another type of dialogue in order to profit from the results of the latter, so that this other dialogue will be functionally embedded in the persuasion dialogue. For example, your interlocutor may catch you up on the news within an *information seeking dialogue*, before returning to the critical probing of the persuasion dialogue. Or, the two of you may try to find the correct answer to an open (undisputed) question within an *inquiry* – "what's the expected sea level rising by 2040?" – or to decide on a practical issue within a *deliberation dialogue* – "when will we set the deadline for the next National Climate

Assessment?" – before resuming the argumentative exchange. Further, you may try to come to a compromise agreement on some disputed issue in a *negotiation dialogue* before taking up the persuasion dialogue: "If you accept my definition of *green* then I'd be willing to accept your definition of *economically competitive*."

It is even possible, we think, that the parties licitly shift to an *eristic dialogue* – the kind of dialogue, such as a polemic altercation or a quarrel, which starts from a conflict and aims at no more than a reshaped relationship, such as a reshuffled intellectual or emotional hierarchy. Such a common dialogical goal still provides its participants with, admittedly minimal, norms for evaluating their contributions. Typically, one is allowed here to be quite impolite, to exploit rhetorical tricks, and to exert some emotional pressure. But within limits, beyond which contributions count as unseemly intimidation, harassment, or coercion. One requirement for eristic dialogue is that it be consensual, and that there is still some minimal level of mutual trust and cooperation. It is difficult to keep eristic dialogue under control, and clearly, it borders on unreason.

We recommend that you and your interlocutor take some time out to discuss in what type of dialogue you want to proceed. If, for instance, your interlocutor wants to negotiate, you may either agree or insist on first trying persuasion dialogue. You may be lenient, for example, when a climate skeptic teases you:

> **Example 4.** *A big fat dose of global warming*
> [Trump twitters:] "It's really cold outside, they are calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming!" (Cillizza 2017)

This ridicules the opposition and would be no good in a serious persuasion dialogue,[2] yet it can also be seen as shifting towards an eristic dialogue. It would be a waste of time to deal with this as something that needs serious refutation. Better to see it as a joke and respond in kind, or else to refuse to go along in that direction and insist on the importance of seriously discussing the issue of global heating.

4.4 *Dealing with abandonment of reasonable dialogue*

You begin to believe, or you even perceive, that your interlocutor is not, or no longer, committed to reason, because of a continual use of fallacies, bullshitting, and outright lies, in such a way that you cannot even interpret your interlocutor's behavior as an attempt to make a licit

[2] See on 'lost in the laugh,' Fearnside and Holther (1959).

shift to eristic dialogue. Therefore you are in doubt about the possibility of any serious dialogue with this interlocutor.

One option is to initiate a metadialogue about the nature of the interlocutor's previous more reasonable contributions (if any), and convince him or her to adopt or return to a kind of exchange in which you collaborate towards a reasonable outcome of some specific kind (a somewhat different kind of metadialogue than that in Krabbe 2003). Such a response fits the golden standard, yet chances are slim that it will make your interlocutor adopt or return to a more reasonable attitude. What is more, it requires an analytic approach, which may annoy members of your audience who perceive your expostulation as tiresome and pedantic.

A second option to be taken seriously is to retort in kind, so as to give the interlocutor an incentive to adopt, or to return to, a more reasonable attitude, in which case you follow suit (van Laar and Krabbe 2016; see also Jacobs 2009). You can use such a tit-for-tat strategy to communicate the message that it is expedient for your interlocutor to return to a reasonable dialogue – in which case you only *seem* simply to retort in kind, whereas, on another level, you really try to commence a metadialogue. However that may be, if, to your regret, your interlocutor decides to retaliate the battle is on and the dialogue off.

Thirdly, one may, more or less ostensibly, ignore the interlocutor's withdrawal from reasonable dialogue, and act as if the two of you are still engaged in a reasonable exchange. You can explain to your interlocutor at what points you remain unconvinced, and what faults he commits in the dialectic, yet without provoking him by labeling his behavior as exemplifying unreason. In this way, you may entice him to follow your good example, or you may at least put across your message to an audience of onlookers. Of course, you could fail to be persuasive after all, and onlookers might mistake your tolerance as a failure to stand your ground.

5. CONCLUSION

There is reason for a moderate optimism, which may encourage us to further investigate the merits of various critical reactions to cases of presumed unreason. But in this we should avoid to fall prey to the pitfall of considering our difficulties with presumed unreason as so unprecedented and exceptional that these would justify "the reasonable us" to enter into a combat using all and any means to beat "the unreasonable they". Instead, we listed a number of situations in which one may come to suspect that the interlocutor is unreasonable, to some degree. For each of these situations we discussed at least one way to respond to the interlocutor that is critical and promotes an exchange of

reasons. But then, in line with our adherence to the idea that reasonable dialogue is inquisitive, and that one's own contributions should never be immune from criticism, it is no surprise that we have been unable to find any response that can be expected to settle the matter and to do away with unreason in general. In sum, when unreason seems ubiquitous, reasonable discussion may not be a panacea, but will still be a pertinent asset, worthwhile to be studied in dialectical argumentation theory.

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