Reasons for Rational Disagreement from Dialectics
The Van Inwagen Cases

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This paper investigates faultless disagreements by seeking for success criteria in argumentative situations derived from 'van Inwagen cases'. It argues that van Inwagen's definition of a successful argument implies that success is impossible in faultless disagreements. Analysing gradually more complex argumentative situation types shows that with increasing complexity, disagreement is increasingly more rational because of the evasion techniques available for the party in charge of defence.

KEYWORDS: knockdown arguments, faultless disagreement, peer disagreement, pragma-dialectics, successful arguments, van Inwagen

1. INTRODUCTION

Some debates are rationally irresolvable because in the lack of successful counterarguments, parties are dialectically obliged to keep committed to their respective views (Danka 2018). Following van Inwagen (2006), this paper investigates success criteria in such debates. While in simple cases, the reasons for rational irresolvability are simple, they are even simpler in gradually more complex cases because complexity opens further and further possibilities for rational evasion. This implies that the possibilities of successful rational arguments in fields describable by the 'van Inwagen cases' are very limited.

Van Inwagen defines successful arguments as follows: an "argument is a success if it starts with premises almost no sane, rational person would doubt, and proceeds by logical steps whose validity almost no sane, rational person would dispute, to the conclusion" (van Inwagen 2006, p. 3). Later he considers this first approach too strong because the success of an argument is context-sensitive: it depends on

purposes (e.g. persuasion or raising doubts), the audience (standards of acceptance in their field of expertise) and other circumstances. For these reasons, there is no formal definition for successful argumentation but the best criterion available is pragmatic: an argument is successful if it convinces an expert audience to change their minds on the issue. E.g. if experts believe that *p,* an argument against *p* is successful if after considering the argument carefully, experts either come to believe that *non-p* or they suspend judgments about *p.*

Though there are good reasons that this modified version of van Inwagen's definition should be further weakened (Hanna 2015), for the present purposes, it is sufficient. So let us accept for the rest of this paper that

> **Successful argument_{def}:** An argument for *p* is a success if under ideal circumstances, it alters the doxastic attitudes of an expert audience so that if audience disbelieved *p,* they come to believe *p* (or at least suspend their judgment about *p*), if they suspended judgment about *p,* they come to believe *p,* and if they believed *p,* their credence is strengthened.

A related notion often applied in this paper is '*prima facie* successful argument'. This is an argument that the target audience is expected to find convincing but will nonetheless reject because it would refute their standpoint for which they have even more convincing arguments. How this is exactly done will be explained below by analysing what I shall call as 'van Inwagen cases'.

2. THE VAN INWAGEN CASES

Following van Inwagen (2006), nine types of argumentative situations will be discussed in order to see how parties can react to prima facie successful arguments against their views. The first three are directly derivable from van Inwagen's two examples (by dividing his second case to two), the rest is an extension of his examples. Van Inwagen discusses philosophical debates but as far as I see, there is nothing specifically philosophical in his cases (other than a lack of empirical evidence that is nonetheless applicable to several non-philosophical fields too). Hence, the cases – and the consequences following from them – can be generalised (presumably) to all empirically unsupported debates.

The van Inwagen cases build on the idea of epistemic peers debating while having all relevant evidence shared, approx. the same epistemic capacities, virtues and background knowledge, a similar level of commitment to truth-seeking, etc. If two epistemic peers disagree under these ideal circumstances, their disagreement is called as

'faultless' because neither commits any mistake but still, they disagree. In faultless disagreements, both views are equally well-supported and no new (decisive) evidence can ever emerge. Hence, faultless disagreements are supposed to be irresolvable, and the case types below demonstrate why it is so (in similar cases at least).

Disagreements can be irresolvable on other grounds too. For the present purposes, the most interesting is when peers are not idealised so that they are allowed to commit mistakes but their positions are nonetheless faultless: both are equally well defendable from the epistemic perspective of the peers because they have no epistemic access to decisive evidence on the matter. On the supposition that the principle of bivalence applies to the matter of their disagreement, one of the parties must be right and the other must be wrong. But they cannot ever decide which of them is right, no matter the time and effort they invest into the debate. This is perhaps a more realistic sense of faultless disagreements because peers are not expected to get fully prepared for the debate in advance, but nonetheless, they cannot face with successful counterarguments because of their epistemic access to the matter of their disagreement (i.e., they can evade all *prima facie* successful counterarguments in one way or another).

The (types of) cases below demonstrate that in dialectically less complex cases, avoiding an acknowledgement of a defeat due to facing with a *prima facie* successful argument is relatively easy. But in dialectically more complex cases, an avoidance is even easier because the defendant has more advanced dialectical tools for her avoidance. This has a disjunctive consequence: either the pragmatic definition of success is implausible or the possibilities of successful argumentation in non-empirical fields is very limited. As there is some anecdotal evidence and common experience supporting the latter, I take the consequences of van Inwagen cases to be an argument for that horn.

2.1 The 'equal opponents' case

First let us see if two epistemic peers (i.e., fully equal opponents) disagree over a matter of their shared expertise. By starting the debate, they demonstrate that they do not find any successful argument against their views because if they found any, they would not join the debate. Given that all their evidence and arguments are shared due to their being epistemic peers under ideal circumstances, the opposing party has no successful argument *for* their view too (because it would be a successful argument against the view of their opponent). If their disagreement is faultless, no new evidence can ever emerge. Hence, no successful argument can ever be developed on either side, and the dispute cannot be rationally resolved.

This does of course not imply that in a debate between epistemic peers, no successful argument can emerge. They may not be in a faultless disagreement. Many debates end with an acknowledgement that one or the other party has not considered an argument in advance which is proved to be successful later in the debate. But these debates do not run between ideal parties highly committed to their standpoint. Debating about minor issues, it can even be the case that one or the other party gives up their position following (relatively) weak arguments against their point. It does not imply that a weak argument can be successful in a strict sense. It only implies that the circumstances were not ideal in that debate.

The Equal Opponents Case also applies to argumentative situations in which parties are equally un(der)prepared. Insofar as they do not have an epistemic access to decisive evidence on the matter of their disagreement (as the weaker definition of a faultless disagreement implies), no successful argument can ever emerge that must be rationally accepted by the them. This makes their dispute rationally irresolvable.

2.2 The 'protagonist-antagonist' case

In the second scenario, parties are epistemic peers but they are unequal in dialectical terms: one of them called as the 'proponent' or 'protagonist' defends a standpoint, and the other party called as 'opponent' or 'antagonist' aims at attacking that position. Their dialectical roles are therefore asymmetric or complementary. The burden of proof is on the protagonist, and hence her task is *prima facie* harder than the antagonist's: the former has a great attack surface she must defend, whereas the latter does not need to care about possible implications of her attack, as all she needs to do is hitting the protagonist's position.

Hence, while the protagonist's arguments are successful (in the sense defined above) only if the antagonist comes to believe her views, the antagonist's arguments are successful if the protagonist comes to disbelieve her views *or* suspend her judgment about her original position. But even though raising doubts (the task of the antagonist) is seemingly easier, it still requires a doxastic attitude change in the protagonist. If they are faultlessly prepared, it is impossible for the same reason as above: the protagonist would have not joined the debate if there is a successful argument against her position on their shared basis of evidence. If they are not faultlessly prepared but their positions are faultless from their epistemic perspectives, novel arguments can occur but they cannot be successful. The debate is irresolvable, even though preliminary odds are biased towards the antagonist.

2.3 The judicial case

In the Judicial Case, the goal of the protagonist is to convince a neutral party about the truth of her standpoint, whereas the goal of the antagonist is keeping the jury uncommitted to the protagonist's standpoint (either by keeping them neutral or convincing them to disbelieve the protagonist's standpoint). If the jury consists of epistemic peers/superiors of the protagonist and the antagonist, under ideal circumstances, the protagonist should have to convince the jury to give up their *equally well-grounded* neutrality towards the protagonist's position (or, in the weaker scenario, the parties and the jury have no epistemic access to facts that are decisive regarding the debate). This alone would be an impossible task for the protagonist if the jury considered all relevant evidence and arguments in advance (that is, as before, implied by the ideal circumstances). The antagonist needs to do nothing but recite sceptical arguments about the protagonist's view supporting the neutrality of the jury. Insofar as the jury has still been neutral, presenting arguments that support neutrality is much easier than changing their doxastic attitudes. Given that the protagonist and the antagonist are epistemic peers, the protagonist has no chance to win the debate. All she can do is hopelessly defending her position as long as the jury declares that the debate is over.

Hence, a combination of the Judicial Case with the Protagonist-Antagonist Case always results in a win of the antagonist. But first, this of course makes no difference in the protagonist's doxastic attitudes. Second, judgment suspension does not help in deciding *whether* the protagonist is right and hence as a yes/no question, whether *p* or not remains undecided. Third, the antagonist does not generate a *doxastic attitude change* and hence her argument is not successful in the sense above. The value of her victory is dubious at least.

Combining the Judicial Case with the Equal Opponents Case, both parties are in the same situation: they should have to change the doxastic attitude of a neutral jury which is at least as prepared as the parties. Now the chances get back to equal: under ideal circumstances, the jury will remain unconvinced about both positions, and hence the debate goes endlessly (or stops in an irrational way). In either case, if an alteration in the jury's doxastic attitudes is required for success, the dispute cannot be resolved.

3. IMPROVED VAN INWAGEN CASES

The scenarios above were built on standard van Inwagen cases (with some modifications). Their complexity gradually increases in order to seek for scenarios that are less abstract and ideal on the one hand and

may have some details that help a rational resolution on the other. But as we shall see, increased complexity does not alter van Inwagen's conclusion: a rational resolution of dispute is impossible in these cases because complexity provides further possibilities for the defensive party to evade attacks on their standpoint.

3.1 The 'inapparent conflict' case

In the Inapparent Conflict Case, epistemic peers P_1 and P_2 disagree over *p.* While P_1 holds that *p,* P_2 also represents the (pro)position that *p* but by *p,* she means *q* (where *p* and *q* are slightly different – e.g. two partly conflicting interpretations of a paragraph from a classical philosophy text). Their disagreement is inapparent because their positions equivocate. As far as no direct contradiction arises from their interpretations, their disagreement will remain inapparent. If the difference between their understandings of the same paragraph is slight (and the paragraph is not central in their interpretation of the whole of the text), they could possibly never discover their disagreement. An inapparent disagreement cannot be resolved because the disagreement is not even on the table.

3.2 The 'apparent conflict' case

One may say that the inapparent conflict is not interesting in terms of an epistemology of disagreement precisely because it is inapparent. But its inverse case can be interesting even for them. In the inverse, Apparent Conflict Case, P_1 holds that *p* and P_2 openly holds that *q* (*p* and *q* are, again, slightly different interpretations of the same (complex of) proposition(s)). By *q,* P_2 means *p* (e.g. in a different wording) but this fact is inaccessible to one or both parties. So their disagreement could be said to be superficial, linguistic or terminological only, whereas one or both of them think(s) that their disagreement is substantial. If they lack a linguistic basis for resolution, they cannot even agree in what they disagree. If they could, they would shortly arrive at the acknowledgement that they do not disagree over *p* at all. Therefore, their disagreement is only apparent (but for some reason, its apparency is unrecognisable and hence the problem is irresolvable for them).

What can possibly count as successful arguments in these cases? In the Inapparent Conflict Case, they seem to represent the same position. Hence, they do not even aim to convince one another as they think there is no need for that. In the Apparent Conflict Case, their positions are the same but their arguments are different as they think they defend different positions. If they provided an argument against the other's position that is successful against the other party's point, the

very same argument would be applicable against their own point too. Hence, successful arguments could be provided by self-refutation only (even if self-refutation would be not necessarily recognised by parties).

3.3 The equivocation case

Talking about linguistic misunderstandings, the Equivocation Case comes to the fore. In this scenario, P_2 provides a *prima facie* successful argument that *non-p.* Now P_1, holding that *p,* claims that P_2 in fact argues that *non-q,* where *q* is a substantially different equivocation of *p.* Hence, P_1 reasonably thinks he has nothing to do with P_2's argument as it does not even touch upon her standpoint that *p.* She may argue e.g. that *p* is to be understood at a metalevel, in a different domain of discourse, etc. than the target of P_2's argument. This can be a standard strategy for P_1 to avoid any *prima facie* successful arguments on the basis of some (alleged) linguistic misunderstandings.

The strategy may seem as illegitimate if applied to cases where the other party cannot identify a linguistic misunderstanding (whether there is one or not). But once again, as long as the parties cannot agree on the linguistic grounds of their disagreement, the disagreement between them is even deeper than it seemed when it was taken as a disagreement over a standpoint (rather than what the standpoint really consists in). It does also not matter whether there is a linguistic misunderstanding or not. As far as they cannot come to an agreement about linguistic issues, they cannot even start meaningfully discussing substantive issues and hence their disagreement cannot be overcome. Whether it is an intentional avoidance strategy of P_1 or an involuntary misunderstanding, it is irrelevant if the pragmatic definition of successful arguments is applied. There can be no agreement over a success of an argument if there is no agreement what the argument is about.

3.4 The 'evasion by clarification' case

Let us assume that P_1 and P_2 somehow come to know the linguistic grounds of their (in)apparent disagreement. The most probable strategy they follow is clarifying their respective positions so that misunderstandings can be eliminated. So when P_2 provides a *prima facie* successful argument against *q,* and P_1 identifies this argument as a strawman fallacy, she 'clarifies' that *p* is not equal to *q* or 'refines' what is to be understood by *p* so that it will be no longer equal to *q.* If she succeeds, their apparent disagreement disappears, and the dispute is resolved.

Is this a realistic scenario? They as experts under ideal circumstances would have known most probably that their disagreement was linguistic prior to the arguments presented. A realistic reason why they did not is that p and q are not once-and-for-all fixed propositions but in-progress positions that, because of counterarguments occurring in the debate, can be slightly modified (clarified or refined).

In Strategic Manoeuvring, such 'clarifications' may be taken as derailments (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002): an in-progress modification of a standpoint of the protagonist can be considered as giving up the original debate and starting a new one about a conflict between the new standpoints. But there *can* be legitimate clarifications, even if the protagonist had not even thought her position through, if the content of the modified position is contained by the content of the original.

For example, P_1 replaces a predicate F_1 of her original position p_1 with F_2 in her clarified position p_2 so that the semantic extension of F_2 is a subset of the semantic extension of F_1. Let us assume that the protagonist holds a general claim that $\forall x.\, F(x)$. The antagonist provides an argument by example, $\sim F(a)$. Now the protagonist distinguishes two senses of predicate F so that the domain of x in $F_1(x)$ makes F_1 inapplicable to a. As the antagonist argues that $\sim F(a)$, she must understand $F(x)$ as $F_2(x)$. But $\sim F_2(x)$ is no counterexample for $\forall x. F_1(x)$. This evades P_2's attack.

This may seem to be *ad hoc* but if the protagonist has independent reasons for the distinction, she may legitimately say that he did not exclude a from the domain of x above simply because it was not important for the line of argumentation before, or she did not even think that a might have been seen as relevant for the antagonist because for the protagonist it had been so evident that F is inapplicable to a that it did not seem to be worth mentioning that.

One may remain unconvinced by the argumentation above. Under ideal circumstances, standpoints must be perfectly clarified prior to (the argumentation stage of) the debate. If it had not happened, and the protagonist modified her standpoint in the argumentation stage, she would lose the debate anyway.

Two responses should be considered to this objection. First, a dynamic model (with standpoint modifications by clarification and refinement) necessarily loses the aboriginal omniscience of arguers but in exchange, it implies a more realistic scenario because the debate can finally have serious consequences on the positions of (however idealised) parties. But similar to earlier cases, even if parties can face with novel arguments during the debate but since their positions are supposed to be faultless, these novel arguments cannot be successful.

Whether such faultless cases exist is an issue not to be discussed here; the present question is what to do with them if they exist and someone happens to be in one of them.

Second, dissolving the parties' original disagreement would make nothing with their *newly emerged* disagreement over the modified version of the protagonist's view. From an argumentation theoretical point of view, a closure of the original debate may count as important. But from a dialectical viewpoint, it is more important that the disagreement would remain irresolved. In the original debate or in another, the protagonist *can* legitimately present her modified position, and the debate goes further on, even if $\sim F(a)$ formerly seemed to be a potentially successful argument against $\forall x. F(x)$.

Still, if their disagreement was newly emerged, and hence they had finished their original debate, it could be said that their original dispute was resolved: it would have been shown that the original position of the protagonist (as formulated in that debate) could not be defended further. But this is not necessarily the case. First, the original position possibly could be further defended *even if* its original holder is no more interested in defending her original position because the modified position seems to her preferable to the original, *and* there still remains a conflict between the modified position and some position opposing to the original.

3.5 The 'false dilemma' case

The False Dilemma Case builds on the Apparent Conflict Case but in a manner recognised by one or both parties. Along with the Question-Begging Case to be discussed in the next section, this is one of the most powerful evasion techniques. The motivation behind these techniques is as follows. If from any set of premises, an unacceptable conclusion validly follows, the only thing one needs to do in order to avoid accepting the unacceptable is challenging one (or more) of the premises. This can make debates endless, as far as premises that are unfounded can always be challenged and in empirically unsupported fields, a foundation of premises is always relative to further premises. (Anti-foundationalists may wish to extend this line to empirically supported fields as well but this would go too far from the present issue.)

When P_1 (now as antagonist) presents her *prima facie* successful argument against *p* (that P_2 as the protagonist holds), P_2 replies that P_1's arguments rely on *non-p.* Since *non-p* is inacceptable for P_2 because of the dialectics of the debate, *non-non-p* is to be taken. Now P_2 can follow two different lines: either claiming that from *non-non-p, p* follows, or claiming that *non-p* can be evaded by seeing 'either *p* or *non-p*' as a false dilemma. The former is the Question-Begging Case to be discussed in

the following section. The latter is the False Dilemma Case, when P_2 turns towards a common ground between *p* and *non-p* (let us call it as *q*), and in the rest of the debate, she argues for *non-q.*

Note that this is an antagonist-only strategy: the protagonist is expected to defend her position in all possible dialectical situations (as far as it can be done rationally). The antagonist, in contrast, only must attack the position of the protagonist. So in this case, P_1 as a protagonist must defend her standpoint *non-p* that she is doing by arguing against *p.* Since *p* is not a standpoint the antagonist must defend, she can manoeuvre away, arguing against both *p* and *non-p.* The protagonist cannot do the same (in a reversed situation) because she must keep committed to *p.* She would preferably choose to follow the Question-Begging Case or she would give up the debate about *p.* In the latter case, the protagonist can start a new debate about *q* (taken as a common ground for *p* and *non-p*), becoming an antagonist by arguing against *q.* Hence, the False Dilemma Case can provide the opportunity to the original protagonist to set the burden of proof to her opponent. By (temporally) giving up her position that *p,* she can take an advantage over the original antagonist, and come back to the original problem whether *p* or *non-p* only if the antagonist wins the modified debate about *q.*

3.6 The question-begging case

The protagonist-only alternative of the False Dilemma Case is the Question-Begging Case. P_1 holds that *p.* Let us assume that P_2 provides, on the ground of *q,* a deductively valid, *prima facie* decisive argument that *non-p.* There is hardly ever a better candidate for a successful argument than a deductive proof. Now P_1 starts arguing that *q* begs the question *precisely because* from *q, non-p* deductively follows*.* Insofar as in a deductive argument, all information contained by the conclusion must also be contained by the premises, by accepting the premises, the antagonist *presupposes* that *p* is false. That is, she begs the question.

In order to avoid circularity, the antagonist can formulate her premises as independent clauses that separately do not presuppose the conclusion. But in this case, she just makes the job of the protagonist easier, as the latter will be provided a list of propositions among which only one should be rejected so that the whole of the argument would collapse. Circularity can be avoided by an infinite regress only: as argued above, premises can always be questioned, demanding further syllogisms which support them, and taking premises as conclusions of a further syllogism results in even more premises from which only one should be questioned by the protagonist.

As a consequence, the burden of proof will be reversed, as it is the original antagonist who has to develop further and further defensive arguments in order to show that she avoids circularity in her original attack. The more complex an argumentation, the more probable it is that one or more of the premises can be effectively attacked, and due to the infinite regress, practically all argumentation can be extended to infinite complexity. It depends on the antagonist's capacity to provide more and more argumentation for further and further syllogisms.

Now there are two strategies available for the (once) antagonist: either she endlessly defends that her original counterargument against *p* was not a *petitio principii,* or she counterattacks by demanding further argumentation for one or more premises of the original protagonist's counter-counterattack. In the first case, she is forced to be constantly defensive. In the second case, parties constantly pass the burden of proof back and forth. In either case, successful arguments will never emerge.

4. CONCLUSION

The list of cases could be extended further but some consequences follow from this brief list too. Even if there is perhaps no linear relationship between complexity and dialectical possibilities, but as a general consequence, it can be said that the more complex an argumentative situation, the more dialectical possibilities arguers have in order to avoid the acknowledgement of a defeat. It has also been argued that routes for escape are always available for the losing side by giving up their position and start a new debate with a 'refined' or 'clarified' position or resetting the burden of proof.

One may object that these manoeuvres end up the original debate and hence a disagreement has been dissolved, even if only at the price of meeting another. Hence, a successful argument can be identified after finishing the original debate – namely, the one that has made the losing party giving up the debate. But it is not necessarily the case. The loser of the original debate may only temporarily give up her position because another debate can give her better chances to show that her position is secure in the original debate. She may also give up her original position because due to the confrontation of *pro* and *contra* arguments, she has found a better position that is still in a conflict with the position of the opposing party and she is no longer interested in defending her original position (that could be nonetheless defended from the counterarguments arisen if there were parties interested in doing so). This leaves the disagreement *between the parties* irresolved, and that is central for a pragmatic approach central to van Inwagen's definition of a successful argument. Furthermore, it leaves open the question whether

the original position can be defended further. Hence, no conclusive refutation is provided, even in pragmatic terms.

Finally, it can always be the case that by passing the burden of proof back and forth, results of a later debate lead the parties back to one of the previous debates. A debate, if closed by opening another debate, is not fully closed. Depending on the outcome of the debate(s) following it, it can be possibly reopened anytime. Hence, a final argument in a debate (if followed by further debate(s)) is not a successful argument but a tool for a (possibly) temporal win only. Successful arguments should result in closing all debates relevant for the original because it should make the opposing party be convinced that the successful arguer is right. It seems to be too demanding for them to expect such a decisiveness. But it seems that demanding less would trivialise successful arguments to turning points in the chains of endless debates.

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