Informal Logic

Argumentation in Complex Communication: Managing Disagreement in a Polylogue by Marcin Lewiński and Mark Aakhus

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Cet article passe en revue l'ouvrage de Marcin Lewinski et Mark Aakhus, Argumentation in Complex Communication (Oxford 2022).

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Review

Argumentation in Complex Communication: Managing Disagreement in a Polylogue

By Marcin Lewiński and Mark Aakhus

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Abstract: This article reviews Marcin Lewinski and Mark Aakhus's *Argumentation in Complex Communication* (Oxford 2022).

Résumé: Cet article passe en revue l'ouvrage de Marcin Lewinski et Mark Aakhus, Argumentation in Complex Communication (Oxford 2022).

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Marcin Lewiński and Mark Aakhus's new book is a corrective to a theoretical default in argumentation theory, the dyadic model for critical discussion. Lewiński and Aakhus seek to supplement argumentation theory with a framework that can properly analyze, evaluate, and describe *polylogues*, many-on-many argumentative encounters. The traditional model, they argue, is both ill-suited and positively *harmful* when it comes to thinking about polylogues. On the one hand, it is ill-suited because applying a model that emerged from and is suitable for one-on-one interactions to polylogues would be much like trying to fit a camel through a needle's eye. On the other hand, it is positively harmful since its influence on the

discipline of argumentation theory leads theorists to the (false) belief that dyadic features of dialogue are intrinsic to all reasoning and communication. For Lewiński and Aakhus, primacy is properly attributed to polylogue, not dyadically-modeled dialogue.

The primary target of criticism in Lewiński and Aakhus's book is theory in the grip of what they call *The Dyadic Reduction.*

Argumentation scholars, past and present, are characteristically lured by the serendipitous parallelism between the dyadic order of logic with its two basic truth values (truth vs. falsity) and the supposedly dyadic order of conversation with its two basic roles […] This leads them to believe that if in the analysis reasoning and communication are inextricably linked […] then it also has to be a dyadic analysis, something we emphatically challenge. (2022, p. 34)

Two themes are emergent here. First, Lewiński and Aakhus think that argumentation and reasoning are interwoven. The second claim is more familiar: the model of dyadic analysis does not properly capture many-on-many argumentative exchanges. One strategy for motivating the latter claim is pointing to argumentative exchanges between various players in emerging forms of media as a paradigmatic example of polylogue. Online discussion boards, with many voices and perspectives critically exchanging, is a striking example of the need for keeping track of a variety of reasons and their dialectical force with particular (but not all) opposition. The first and less familiar (but more ambitious) claim is importantly connected to their argument for the primacy of polylogue, by which they mean that most argumentative encounters are polylogues. If polylogue is the natural state of communication, they reason, then reasoning is polyadic.

Lewiński and Aakhus argue that polylogue is the natural state of argumentative encounters, and they infer that a theory of argumentation ought to give priority to interaction because it is by virtue of interaction that reasons are produced. Compare this approach with argument dyadism, which superimposes always two-sides to reasons on argumentative encounters. At this point, it's easy to see why they find contrastivism as a theory of reasons appealing. We are philosophers, so we will focus our critical attention on the philosophically most robust ideas here: reasons contrastivism. We will show that

though there is much to recommend the contrastivist approach, there are high costs also for argumentation theorists.

Contrastivism is the theory that reasons are *triadic* – there is a reason, what it supports, and what it eliminates (the contrast class) (Aikin 2006; 2021a; Sinnott-Armstrong 2008; Snedegar 2015). In essence, contrastivism represents our reasons as how one plots a path through multiple-choice questions, in that our reasons not only point to our final answers, but do so by also eliminating the standing alternatives. Moreover, the theory, with the background of contrast classes, can explain how evidence in one circumstance can fail in another. Consider the following:

> **Lunchtime drink**: Arnold and Alyssa meet for lunch, and Arnold arrives to find Alyssa with a tall iced glass, with light brown liquid, a lemon wedge, and a straw. Given the lunch drink options are water, cola, hot tea, and iced tea, Arnold has very good reason to think Alyssa is having iced tea.

The reason why Arnold's evidence doesn't just point to iced tea dyadically (as opposed to triadically) is that it eliminates the alternatives. We can see this if we change the circumstances by moving lunch to boozier climes, with Long Island Iced Tea on the menu (a drink of mostly hard liquor and absolutely no tea, but it looks uncannily like iced tea) (Aikin and Talisse 2019). Here, the same evidence is insufficient to say that Alyssa is having iced tea, because the way the drink looks does not eliminate the alcoholic alternative.

This theory of reasons is very useful for epistemologists, since it allows us to explain context-sensitivity of reasons in a principled fashion. Further, it is useful for rhetoricians and dialogue theorists since the alternatives identified by the contrast classes can be provided by what the various views in conflict are and what their respective objections come to.

The reason why contrastivism is useful for the polylogical approach in particular is that there can be many different contrast classes of alternatives, depending on who one's audience or dialectical opponent is. Polylogues have multiple sides, and the exchanges are not reducible to dyadic conversational relations. So, there is a *fortuitous fit* between contrastivism about reasons and the polylogical approach – not only can variance of contrast classes track the variety

of dialectical options, but it can explain why the same argument can be good with one audience but bad with another. This observation is what prompts Lewiński and Aakhus to argue that:

[T]he fundamental normative condition of a polylogue is: *Make a relevant expansion of a disagreement space.* Good polylogues are … argumentative discussions whereby all relevant alternatives have been satisfactorily explored and debated. Hindering this first process is the first "polylogical fallacy" (2022 p. 177).

This is to say, the broader and more representative the contrast is of the wider debate and argumentative options, the stronger the argument. And further, one should not artificially restrict one's contrast classes to fit the kind of evidence one has. When one has reasons that address a particular range of alternatives, one may proceed with them, but if this is done avoiding answering another range of otherwise unanswered questions, one has committed a particular kind of false dilemma, but one over dialectical options that one has "curated" for one's preferred reasons. Thereby, one commits a particular "fallacy of argumentation by virtue of violating a rule of contrastive exploration of the disagreement space: all players in a polylogue should be free to advance … their … positions" (184). Not following this rule is a fallacy, but one best seen from the perspective of polylogue. Lewiński and Aakhus conclude that "the polylogical perspective lets us see that what seems to be a perfectly reasonable, di-logue, can be strategically truncated and thus highly spurious, polyglogue" (192). In this regard, we think that Aakhus and Lewinski have moved a good deal of the discussion forward in bringing useful theoretical tools to bear on evaluating polylogical argumentation.

There are, we believe, costs to the approach they take, and with contrastivism in particular. Contrastivism, for all its benefits, has unhappy theoretical consequences, which may complicate Aakhus and Lewinski's project.

The first puzzle is with identifying the appropriate parameters for relevant contrast classes. That interlocutors have conflicting views seems a place to start, but in cases where they merely have questions or propose wild alternatives, do those always undercut reasons on the table? Consider the following case:

> **Late home:** Colin is late arriving home, and in getting ready for bed, he wakes Marjorie. She sees Colin brushing his teeth and sees the clock at 2am. She's justified in believing he came home late.

The relevant alternatives in this case could be that Marjorie was awoken late by the cat, early by the cat (anyone with a cat knows this), awoken early by Colin, or late. Her evidence favors the last option. But if Colin, the next morning adds a fifth option, things are complicated. *What if Marjorie dreamed it?* Just like the **Lunchtime drink** case, the evidence in **Late home** now does not eliminate the new expanded contrast class, but it seems that this gives Colin way too much power to divert attention to his late nights. Does the simple pushback of an interlocutor along indiscernable lines automatically invalidate the quality of evidence or an argument? This seems to make contrastivism a theory of exceedingly fragile reasons (Baumann 2008; Aikin 2021b).

The second puzzle is that of what might be called *lucky lemmas*. Contrastivism is the view that evidence for and against a standpoint comes together as a package – that is what the triadism of the reason comes to. But this approach seems implausible in some cases. Consider the following question:

> **Capitol of Yukon:** Is the capitol of the Yukon Territories in Canada named *New York City, Amsterdam, São Paolo,* or *Whitehorse*?

We expect that, unless our readers are Canadians, there will be few with positive reason to pick *Whitehorse*, but reasons against the other three options. The problem of lucky lemmas is that it seems that only *negative* reasons can't be turned into *positive* reason for what's left, unless there's independent reason to think that the options given is a good range to choose from. Our non-Canadian readers would do well to double-check that the *right answer* is *Whitehorse*, instead of the *least obviously wrong* one. That seems, then, a considerably weaker endorsement of the reason, and in the case of polylogues, the quality of one's dialectical options should not thereby determine the quality of one's reasons (Becker 2009). Just because the eliminated options are terrible, one's positive reasons are not thereby made better. This, however, would be the unhappy consequence of a

contrastivist theory of critical discussion. We think that some contributing, perhaps external reasons to the contrasts, must fix those bounds.

We have offered two puzzles here for the contrastivist approach to polylogues, and though we think that they are significant challenges, we also think the progress this book makes on the issues of multiple-perspective critical discussions is considerable. As a tool of interpretation of polylogical reason-exchanges, we think that reasons-contrastivism is a fecund approach, but as a theory of reasoning *qua* reasoning, there is still ground to cover. In this regard, *Argumentation in Complex Communication* has made significant progress, but there is more theoretical ground to cover and there are more critical questions to answer. This book is an admirable achievement.

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