

DISSOCIATION IN ARGUMENTATIVE DISCUSSIONS: A PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE

M. Agnès van Rees

Dordrecht: Springer, 2009. Pp. xv, 1-146. ISBN 978-1-4020-9149-0 (print) ISBN 978-1-4020-9150-6 on-line), Hardback US\$ 129.00.

The goal of *Dissociation in Argumentative Discussions*, by M. Agnès van Rees of the University of Amsterdam, is to provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis of *dissociation* from the Pragma-Dialectical perspective. Given the vast scholarly literature devoted to the topic of metaphor as the primary figure of speech that brings together previously distinct ideas, it is surprising that the topic of dissociation, a key technique for breaking apart previously unified ideas, has never received book-length treatment. For that reason, the book is a welcome addition to the impressive series of works being issued as the *Argumentation Library* edited by Frans H. van Eemeren and others.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I provides a thorough explication of dissociation as described by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric*, originally published in 1958 as *La Nouvelle Rhétorique: Traité de l'Argumentation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France). Dissociation describes an arguer's effort to break up a previously unified idea into two concepts; one that will be positively valued by the target audience, and one that will be negatively valued. This effort is accomplished linguistically through the deployment (explicitly or implicitly) of what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call "philosophical pairs" such as real/apparent, knowledge/opinion, and so forth. Dissociation almost always intervenes to disrupt prior understanding. To cite an example used by van Rees, "Socrates" in Plato's *Gorgias* argues that rhetoric may *appear* to be an art, but is not *really*.

Van Rees does not discuss previous accounts of dissociation that can be found in the writings of Rémy du Gourmont or Kenneth Burke, but otherwise provides a thorough description of dissociation and identifies the linguistic features or "textual indicators" of dissociation in terms of speech-act theory. Readers previously unfamiliar with dissociation will be struck by the variety of examples adduced by van Rees from philosophy, legal arguments, politics, science, and everyday conversation.

Part II of the book provides an in-depth description of how dissociation is performed in argumentative discussion. The description is drawn from the vocabulary and model of Pragma-Dialectics as developed by F.H. van Eemeren and R. Grootendorst

and their colleagues. Thus, dissociation is described as it emerges in the confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding stages of argumentative discussions. Readers with no previous knowledge of Pragma-Dialectics will have no difficulty following the analysis in these chapters, including the helpful schematic depictions of various arguments. Furthermore, the value of the critical questions raised by van Rees in the analysis of dissociative argumentative interactions can stand on its own and are interesting even if one is not a devotee of Pragma-Dialectics.

Part III is titled “The Strengths and Weaknesses of Dissociation.” This portion of the book is arguably more limited in how it evaluates dissociative arguments due to van Rees’s fidelity to Pragma-Dialectics. The norms of Pragma-Dialectics are self-consciously idealistic and rationalistic; that is, what counts as a “dialectically viable” argument depends on a series of rules that are admittedly rarely observed in practice. As van Rees acknowledges, Pragma-Dialectics is a means of evaluating argumentative discourse in “light of the normative ideal of rational resolution of conflicts of opinion” (93). The norms are primarily *procedural* rather than *formal*, so “dialectical reasonability” does not imply a backdoor way of smuggling in the precepts of formal logic that most argumentation scholars have shrugged off over the past 50 years as unhelpful for the analysis of real-world argumentation.

At the same time, the utility of a Pragma-Dialectic description depends on the degree to which individual readers share the theoretical and normative commitments of Pragma-Dialectics. When van Rees contrasts her approach to analyzing dissociation to others’ approaches (including my own), some argumentation critics (at least in the U.S.) will bristle at her claim that argument scholars cannot make judgments about “the truth of assertions” or “assume the role of moral arbiter” (96). In this portion of the book more than any other, the differences among different approaches to argumentation taken in the U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands feel conspicuous.

Part III includes a chapter analyzing the rhetorical persuasiveness of dissociation that describes some of the factors that lead to the success or failure of attempts at dissociation with specific audiences. The book concludes with an extended discussion of former U.S. President Bill Clinton’s use of dissociation to defend against charges of perjury in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The example is interesting as well as useful to illustrate the framework laid out throughout the book, and it includes an assessment of the dialectical and rhetorical effects of Clinton’s efforts.

In sum, argumentation scholars who find the Pragma-Dialectical perspective useful certainly will want to read this book.

Furthermore, scholars interested in dissociation as a technique along with the argumentative features of definitional disputes will

find van Rees's analysis useful, particularly given its status as the only book-length treatment thus far of its subject.

I end by noting that the book would have benefited from another round of copyediting, as there are typographical errors, the manner of citing Internet sources is inconsistent, and the use of "he" as a generic pronoun is unnecessary. A number of quotations used to illustrate dissociation are translated from Dutch by the author, but the fact they are translations rather than quoted in the original language is not acknowledged.

Lastly, the \$129 price tag is absurdly expensive. Research scholars should check if their university provides free online access to Springer.com publications, as I found I could download the entire book for free through my university library.

Edward Schiappa

University of Minnesota