

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Let's Talk: Emotion And The Pragma-Dialectic Model



1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to continue my programme of making space within the major argumentative theories for human emotion (Gilbert 1997, 1997a, 2001, 2002). I believe that there is, in fact, no argument, no disagreement, perhaps even no communication without at least a minimal emotional component. At the least, writers such as Damasio (1994) see emotion in the form of preference, choice and concern as necessary conditions for caring enough to take up a position. Still, it is not an essential hypothesis of this programme that there exist no argumentative interactions that are devoid of emotion. Moreover, there may be ideal critical discussions as envisaged in the Pragma-Dialectic (PD) model that are wholly rational and disinterested. It is sufficient for my concerns that the vast majority of human dissensual communications contain at least a modest element of emotional commitment.

While the fact that emotion plays some role in most argumentative interactions is sufficient to make its study important, the real key is that in many such interactions the role played by emotions is crucial. Emotional attachment explains why we hold on to a position that is clearly untenable, or defend a view that is indefensible. But even when such extremes are not at issue, the understanding of why a position appeals to a proponent is often part and parcel of the reasons for the its maintenance. Moreover, in a significant number of arguments, the real issues are not those discursive matters initially raised, but rather the feelings of the proponent who raised them. In the majority, however, there is an integration between the emotional and logical, an intermixing that is frequently so thorough that separation is difficult if not impossible. (This, of course, supposes that such a separation is philosophically comprehensible in the first place).

As human communicators we are attuned to the emotional communications being transmitted by our dispute partners. We are aware of and constantly process messages for their sincerity, truth, and the feelings, such as anger, love and fear,

embedded in them. These aspects of a message, whether explicit or implicit, frequently direct or inform our subsequent moves within the interaction. Understanding what someone means or intends, whether referring to logical or emotional content is always a matter of interpretation and processing (Gilbert, 2002). Language, as Wittgenstein showed us, is rarely so simple as to be incapable of misinterpretation; no message is so straightforward as to be impossible to misunderstand. More, it is often necessary to be familiar with the language and social customs of particular sub groups in order to be able to truly follow the implicit meanings and references in their communications (Willard, 1989).

I have argued elsewhere (2001) that the Pragma-Dialectic model is susceptible to reinterpretation in emotional terms provided certain changes are made. This is not a question of “adding emotion and stirring,” but of using the core model as a guideline for the enterprise of guiding and understanding emotional communication. Toward this end I examined the four foundations of Pragma-Dialectics and demonstrated how the pillars of externalization, functionalization, and socialization can be straightforwardly amended to apply to emotional content. It is only the foundation of dialectification that requires major change. This was accomplished by the introduction of the notion of “Emotionalization,” and the *Principle of Pragmatic Emotionalization* [PPE] (op. cit.). The heart of the matter as expressed in the PPE is that we sometimes identify a dissonance between a logical discursive message and the emotional content or context of that same message. The classic example is the dispute partner who says, angrily, “I’m not angry.” We all know which aspect of the communication will have greater sway; no sensible communicator familiar with the language and culture would ignore the underlying inconsistency between the words and the message.

In what follows I want to examine another aspect of the PD programme in order to further investigate the impact of the inclusion of emotional aspects of a disagreement. In particular, I will map the stages of a dispute into the emotional arena. Toward this end I will focus on the descriptions offered in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* [RSA], (Eemeren, et al, 1993,) as I believe the recommendation and strictures there are among the most liberal provided. In turn the stages of confrontation, opening, argumentation, and resolution shall be discussed.

2. Confrontation

It is very interesting that the ways we recognize disagreement frequently involve non-discursive messages. Often a look or the tone of a comment are the clearest signals that a partner is not in accord or not wholly in accord. What is interesting in the emotional arena is that when the disagreement is not explicit, there are two separate options. The first is to acknowledge the emotional message and inquire as to the disagreement, and the second is to ignore the non-discursive component and follow the discursive. In the latter case you are usually offered a verbal agreement or assent, but the concomitant emotional message differs. That is, the literal message is agreement, but the implicit message is not. In Example (1) the words signal assent, but the way they are offered and the intonation indicate the agreement is forced or superficial.

1. Emma shrugs, grimaces, looks away, and says, "Sure, whatever you want."

Now, without the non-discursive signals, we might take Emma as agreeing to whatever was at stake, but given those cues she is, we can assume, not enthralled with the conclusion to which she is assenting. The proponent now has two choices. First, he can inquire as to whether or not Emma really agrees or is just being nice or avoiding the issue, etc. On the other hand, he might simply take her "at her word" and say, "Great, thanks." In other words, the implicit disagreement can be acknowledged or ignored. If it is ignored, then the confrontation stage of this sub-argument does not get started. If it is acknowledged, then a further discussion will ensue.

What is interesting is that there is a striking similarity between the emotional and logical situations. If someone produces an utterance with which I disagree, then I must make the choice as to whether or not I will pursue the disagreement. Sometimes it is not worth it: insufficiently important, a dead horse, or I am just not in the mood. But the logical, discursive does require that move to pursue as much as any other. Consider example (2).

2. Jean-Paul says, "Take the Laurier bridge, it's faster this time of day."

I may well disagree with Jean-Paul, but decide not to follow through on that disagreement for any number of reasons. So, when I answer, "Sure," I keep my tone even to avoid further discussion. That is, I am careful not to signal a non-discursive disagreement as we well know that emotional reactions can as easily instigate a confrontation as any method. The difference, and it is significant, is that in some instances the emotional message at odds with the logical message can be ignored, *because the logical is explicit*. That is, when Emma says that it's

all right, I can take that as sincere even though I am perfectly aware that it is not. This leads us to a suggestion that in good emotional argumentation, such signals would not be ignored. As it is, most arguers are perfectly aware that one ignore the emotional level at one's peril.

3. The Opening Stage

The opening stage of an emotional argument is very important because it is at that point that the emotional level of the argumentation is laid out, at least for that part of the argument. The question for the opening stage in an emotional argument is just how emotional it is going to be. Are we going to talk about the emotions we are experiencing? Are we going to explore the emotional aspects of the logical issues? Are we going to express our emotions, discuss them, investigate their impact? These are all ways in which we can proceed.

Confusion and difficulties can enter a discussion when there are different assumptions being made about the level of emotional input and its centrality to the subject. In fact, a great number of arguments that go awry do so because of differing expectations regarding what is being discussed. When the differing expectations concern the emotional versus the logical subject matter, the results can be severe. This is compounded by the fact that we are, ourselves, not always clear just what we expect or want.

Sometimes the emotional temperature of a discussion can change, even suddenly. In this case it is best if the opening stage is re-negotiated. But that may not happen, in no small part, because we are conditioned to ignore the emotional aspects, to pretend they are not there or are peripheral to the real activity of the discussion. In reality our feelings are crucial in explaining how and why we do things, what decisions we make and why we hold the beliefs we do (Vide, for example, Damasio, 1994). What is needed is just more direct emphasis on the emotional level and its importance. We do sometimes assert that, we do or do not want to "get emotional." Statements such as the following address the matter and may lead to a re-negotiation of the opening stage.

3. Let's not get emotional
4. You're getting too emotional.
5. What's wrong with getting emotional?

These, and others like them, can act as catalysts for an opening stage negotiation. One of the most important points in considering emotion in argumentation is to be prepared to re-negotiate the opening stage so that the degree of emotional

communication can be established and set to the satisfaction of all parties. Doing so increases the likelihood that the partners to the disagreement are in accord as to the degree of emotional information that is being exchanged, and, importantly, the extent to which the emotional issues are the actual subject matter of the discussion.

4. The Argumentation Stage

Needless to say, the argumentation stage is at the heart of the Pragma-Dialectic programme insofar as it is in that stage where the actual persuasive and argumentative acts take place. This is as true of emotional argumentation as it is of logical arguments. There is a common view of emotional argumentation that involves raw emotional expression, usually anger, spewed forth in uncontrolled and frequently damaging ways. Such quarrels do occur, and can even have positive consequences (cf. Walton, 1992). However, the best emotional arguments deal less confrontationally with the feelings we have about the issue at hand *and* about the person with whom we are communicating. The difficulty is that many avenues of inquiry that touch upon emotional aspects of a position are traditionally excluded from discussion. There are two reasons behind this thinking. The first is that emotional interaction will get out of hand and deteriorate the quality of the argument. The second is that emotional considerations are irrelevant to standpoints.

The idea that any argument occurs without emotional content or an emotional aspect is hard to fathom. This means that the majority of arguments do contain emotion and do, at the same time, proceed within reasonable parameters of civility. What is needed is an exhaustive examination of the rules for proceeding within an emotional milieu *while at the same time* focusing on a mutually acknowledged standpoint. There has been a fair amount of discussion of this objective from the point of view of specifically relational arguments, mostly within psychology, but more is needed from the point of view of Argumentation Theory. That is to say, we acknowledge that arguments contain an emotional element, and we also acknowledge that the emotional aspects can become more central as the argument progresses. Beginning from this, it follows that in (virtually) all arguments we need to be able to manage the emotional temperature as well as discuss and argue about the emotional components. Rules for the handling and use of emotions in argumentation are required, and this includes rules that go beyond the relational arena into the argumentative realm (This is the next major objective of my own research).

Some emotional arguments go beyond the ability of the protagonists to work out the details. Such *intractable* arguments are discussed in the ongoing work of Friemann (2002) and require, he argues, third party intervention. He is correct, insofar as emotional arguments can become entrenched and responses become automatic in various ways. In such instances professional assistance in the form of therapists, mediators, or other experts are properly called for.

It is not only emotional argumentation that can go awry, logical arguments can go wrong as well. Irrelevancies, faulty information, loss of topic, and bad logic can lead perfectly non-emotional people into errors and blind alleys. There is nothing about being logical that makes an argument a good one. Beginning from wrong or evil first principles, one can continue in a perfectly logical way to dreadful results. Often it is just the emotional input that is needed to humanize the argumentative process. So the answer is quite straightforward: Yes, emotional arguments can get out of hand, and when they do it can be unpleasant, but any argument in any communication mode can go awry, and there is nothing special about the logical discursive form that privileges it.

Emotional considerations are relevant to standpoints. Why someone holds a position, what goals are involved, what their objectives are, are all aspects of a position that can be considered in order to reach agreement and concord. As I have argued extensively (1996, 1997), goals are crucial to a good dispute because they allow us to explore alternative answers, solve problems, and examine positions in a rich way. Exploring motivation is not an instance of the genetic fallacy, but a way in which avenues of communication can be opened for mutual benefit. In fact, when arguments do not proceed well, examination of the goals and needs and desires of one's partner can lead to an opening up of possibilities previously not considered. Far from being irrelevant to the standpoints at issue, emotions can be the most central items considered.

5. Resolution

One of the difficulties we face with emotional argumentation is deciding just when an argument with strong emotional content is over. Moreover, when an argument is strongly emotional, the idea of determining which of the initial standpoints has been successful may not appropriately apply. This can be seen to pose difficulties for using the Pragma-Dialectic model, (vide Gilbert, 2000), unless a fairly liberal interpretation of the notion of "resolution-centred system" is used. Fortunately, there is warrant for this in RSA where such a system is described as one where

“there is no other judge than the participants themselves” (25). One can argue that the resolution of an emotional argument that does not stand on clear standpoints cannot meet the requirement that “the settlement is one recognized by both parties as correct, justified, and rational” (25). But I believe that, if this requirement is taken to mean that an emotional argument cannot, ipso facto, be “correct, justified, and rational,” then the very question is begged. I also believe that the inclusion of emotional arguments as possibly resolved or conjointly settled, does not do disservice to the thrust of the Pragma-Dialectic programme.

When we apply Argumentation Theory, in whatever form, to actual argumentation, then various concepts we would like to be clear necessarily become fuzzy. One such concept is resolution, and especially in the context of agreement, the idea becomes less clear. As I have argued elsewhere (Gilbert, 1995) the concept of agreement is one that has many subtle meanings and shades of emphasis. In the conservative interpretation of PD, resolution occurs when either you or I withdraw opposition to a standpoint. In the liberal interpretation, it seems we can end up with a third alternative so long as we both agree completely with the result. It is this latter interpretation that is important to the resolution of emotional arguments. Furthermore, “settlement” in RSA is something that is imposed from the outside as opposed to the joint agreement of a resolution.

The resolution of an emotional argument, it is important to remember, might occur as a sub argument within a larger process. Furthermore, it may or may not end that larger process. Consider two examples.

6. Ralph and Tony are arguing about how the examples need to be changed for the Esperanto edition of their book. Ralph suddenly looks upset.

Tony: What’s wrong.

Ralph: You’re not paying attention.

Tony: Of course I am.

Ralph: No, you’re not listening to my points at all.

Tony: But I am, you just said, ...

Ralph: Well, all right then, but it looked as if you weren’t paying attention.

In (6) there is an emotional aside that must be dealt with before the main discussion can get back on track. Ralph’s feeling that Tony was not paying attention prevented the central standpoints from being discussed.

In the following, the central standpoint becomes irrelevant once the underlying

emotional issue arises.

7. Karen and Artie have been arguing about the new work assignments. Artie has been claiming that Charles is not sufficiently experienced to take up the assignment Karen has given him.

"Frankly," Karen says, "you're not making a lot of sense. Do you really think he's incompetent."

"No, I wouldn't say that. Do you really think he can do my job?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then why," Artie says, "have you given him the assignments I was hoping for?"

"Why? Because you've been killing yourself, and you're too important for me to let you burn out, that's why!"

"Burning myself out?"

"Exactly. You've been looking exhausted, and..."

"Oh, hell, Karen, I thought you weren't happy with my work."

"Not happy... That's crazy."

"Well, in that case..."

The question of resolution in this example is interesting. The original standpoint concerned the competence of Charles, but the real issue pertained to Artie's notion of how Karen thought of him. Once this *emotional* issue was resolved, the superficial logical issue disappeared. So, yes, the original standpoint was resolved insofar as Artie came to agree with Karen, but the real resolution was for the sub-argument concerning why the assignments were made the way they were. So long as we are not tied to the original standpoint in some sort of fixed way, then the resolution is acceptable. That is, both parties have come to agree that a particular standpoint is acceptable (There is another issue here about the nature of standpoints and positions, and whether they can be isolated in simple discursive terms. See Gilbert 1997, 2000).

6. Conclusions

The stages of argument are intended, I believe, to act as a heuristic device for the analysis of arguments. The fact is that argumentation is a process that involves the starting, ending, cessation and re-commencement of a number of sub-arguments, some of which may be in different modes from the original starting standpoint. Sometimes one of the sub-arguments can become more central and crucial to the matters at hand than the initial issue. The sub-argument may be an emotional one that is what is "really" going on, or it might be a logical matter,

e.g., a “fact.” In the former case we might be dealing with hurt feelings, a sense of neglect, or any one of a million emotional issues that arise daily in human interactions. In the latter case, a disagreement might be founded on a false belief, and once that is cleared up, the path to agreement and resolution is simple.

Once we stop thinking of arguing about emotions as inherently different from arguing about anything else, the path to understanding them, creating models and moving forward becomes manageable. Emotional arguments, like all other arguments come in various styles, and degrees of complexity and difficulty. Our attraction to dealing with the “concrete” makes it seem as if words are easier to understand than expressions of emotion, but, in reality, we invariably trust of emotional instincts over discursive encounters (Gilbert, 2002). That is why it is no uncommon for an emotional argument to rear itself at any stage of an argumentative interaction, and when it does we will do best if we are prepared for it.

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