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# The Problem of Retraction in Critical Discussion

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ABSTRACT. In many contexts a retraction of commitment is frowned upon. For instance, it is not appreciated, generally. if one withdraws a promise or denies an earlier statement. Critical discussion, too, can easily be disrupted by retractions, if these occur too frequently and at critical points. But on the other hand, the very goal of critical discussion - resolution of a dispute - involves a retraction, either of doubt, or of some expressed point of view. A person who never retracts, not even under pressure of cogent arguments, would hardly qualify as a reasonable discussant. Also, inconsistencies in one's position, once they have been pointed out, must be dealt with by some kind of retraction. The problem of retraction is to find a suitable model of dialogue that allows retractions where they seem reasonable, or even required, and rules them out (or puts sanctions upon them) whenever they would become disruptive of a well-organized process of dialogue.

The present paper tries to point to a solution based on the following principles: (1) Retraction rules determine what retractions are permissible, and (2) if permissible what the consequences of retraction are. (3) Retraction rules vary according to the type of dialogue and (4) according to the type of commitment retracted. For instance, assertions and mere concession need to be distinguished, as well as light-side and dark-side commitments. (5) To account for our contradictory intuitions on the issue of retractions, one may best resort to a complex type of dialogue in which different retraction rules hold for different parts.

The paper explains, summarizes, and expands upon the discussion of retraction in *Commitment in Dialogue* (1995) by Douglas Walton and the present author.*

## 1. THE PROBLEM

In many contexts a retraction of commitment is frowned upon. Most clearly so in the context of a promise.  For instance, suppose your partner asks you to be at home at 6.00 p.m., since the Joneses are coming for dinner. Suppose you assure your partner that you will be there in time, but then, at a later stage, decide to withdraw this commitment. You call to announce that, probably, you will turn up not before 10.00 p.m. If you are not offering some serious reason for being late, this behavior might expose you to some severely critical questioning, to say the least.

The binding character of promises is shared by all speech acts. Most conspicuously, so-called "commissives" bind the speaker to some type of future behavior. But other speech acts share this feature to some extent. Once a speech act has been performed, there is this consequence that some future behavior by the speaker will be more in line with it than other behavior would be. For instance, after a question (a directive) a remark that shows a clear lack of interest in the answer would be somewhat out of order:

(1)         - Which vegetable would you like?
            - Endive, please.

- I don't care: here's some rutabaga.

Critical discussion (that is the type of discussion where each side is supposed to try seriously to convince the other, sometimes called "persuasion dialogue") is no exception. Generally, your interlocutor will not appreciate your reneging on commitment to a statement you are supposed to have made at some earlier stage of dialogue, especially when this very statement was going to play a central role in his strategy of discussion. A retraction, then, may be hotly debated:

(2)          - You said so yourself!
             - No, I never said so.
             - Yes, you did.
             - No, I did not.

Even when there is no debate about what has been said, retraction may be problematic. It's hardly fun when your interlocutor first admits some premise, but then, after you have stated your argument and drawn your conclusion, sees fit to return to questioning the premise:

(3)          - You admit that he is trustworthy?
             - Yes.
             - So we must accept his statement.
             - Perhaps he is not really trustworthy.

It is easy to see that in critical discussion wanton and irregular retractions have detrimental effects on an ordered and efficient course of dialogue. It is true that in real life an occasional retraction of some statement might be condoned without serious effects upon the course of dialogue, but frequent retractions and retractions of statements that, for one reason or other, are deemed vital to the argument can be utterly disruptive. This holds, even if each participant's commitments are adequately registered by some score keeping device: the problem of retraction is not that of a denial of the factual utterance of some statement, but that of a participant's permanently changing those commitments his adversary thought he could count upon and needs to build a case.

This difficulty is reflected in some theoretical models of dialogue. For instance, in models of dialogue such as Hamblin's *Why-Because system with questions* (1970: 265) the problematic situation arises that both participants can perpetually retract commitments, using locutions of the type *No commitment S,T,...X.*

But on the other hand, retraction is an essential part of reasonable and critical discussion. Remember that critical discussion starts from an initial state of controversy, a dispute, and aims at a resolution of the dispute, i.e., at ending it by reaching agreement through due argumentative process (see Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992: 34). In the most elementary type of dispute (op. cit.: 17, 18), one participant, whom I shall designate as "Proponent", is committed to a thesis and the other one, the "Opponent", is committed to a position of doubt with respect to this thesis (but not to its denial). Now, any successful dialogue must end with one of

these parties changing its attitude: either the Proponent will give up his commitment to the thesis or the Opponent will give up doubt. So each successful critical discussion ends with (at least) one retraction of commitment. This retraction is supposed to be conforming to, and not against, the rules of dialogue.

Resolution of a dispute can be reached in a fairly brief stretch of dialogue:

(4)    - Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
       - Olga:     Why?
       - Peter:    Well, maybe not.

This dialogue may not be very penetrating or informative, but if it is permissible to give in at some point in the dialectical process, why would it have to be excluded that a participant gives in right at the start? If such a move is permissible, it seems that the present dialogue is a successful one: an agreement has been reached by a "due process of argument". Although no argument has been presented at all, the dialogue as an argumentative process may still be labeled as "correct", since no argument is required when the Proponent retracts his point of view upon the first critical question. Similarly, the Opponent may retract her doubt upon hearing the Proponent's first argument. The stretch of dialogue is only slightly longer:

(5)    - Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
       - Olga:     Why?
       - Peter:    The almanac says so.
       - Olga:     OK. We may count on it.

Again, Olga's retraction of doubt seems to constitute a perfectly permissible move in dialogue. She is convinced by an argument and, consequently, changes her position. Thus the original dispute vanishes, and the dialogue has been successful.

So one reason to admit retractions into normative models of critical discussions is that retractions are needed to bring critical discussions to a successful conclusion. A second reason is that these models will be more realistic, i.e., closer to actual argumentative practice, if the participants are allowed to change their minds once in a while. This is an advantage, for even normative models must have some descriptive accuracy in order to be applicable.

A third reason is that normative accuracy, too, requires some room for retraction. An ideal discussant will be prepared to retract a statement if he is unable to defend it, and certainly if he is confronted with cogent arguments for the opposite point of view. Indeed, a person who never retracts a statement, not even under pressure of cogent arguments, would hardly qualify as a reasonable discussant.

Finally, inconsistencies in one's position, once they have been pointed out, must be dealt with by some retraction. For instance, in Hamblin's *Why-Because system with questions* a locution *Resolve S* must be followed by *No commitment S* or by *No commitment —S,* where *—S* stands for the negation of *S*. Thus, a participant committed to both *S* and *—S* will have to retract one of them as soon as he is confronted with a locution *Resolve S* (1970: 266). The following dialogue illustrates this type of situation:

| (6) | - Q: | Do you ever answer a question? |
| | - R: | No, I never answer a question. |
| | - Q: | Is that your answer to my question? |
| | - R: | Yes, it is. |
| | - Q: | So you did answer a question, did you not? |
| | - R: | Yes, it seems so. |
| | - Q: | But you said you never did! |
| | - R: | Well, sometimes. |

In sum, for a number of reasons it seems advisable to permit at least some retractions.

The problem of retraction in critical discussion, then, is to find a model of dialogue (a model both rigorously formulated and relevant for the evaluation of actual discourse) that strikes a balance, allowing retractions whenever they would be required or would be at least unobjectionable, but ruling them out (or putting sanctions upon them) whenever they would be disruptive of a well-organized process of dialogue. The problem can also be formulated in terms of fallacy theory: when is retraction a fallacy?

## 2. INGREDIENTS FOR A SOLUTION

The problem of retraction was a main theme of *Commitment in Dialogue* (Walton & Krabbe 1995). From this work one may distil a number of requirements that must be complied with in order to have a satisfactory implementation of retraction in a model of dialogue. Of course, one cannot prove that these requirements are absolutely necessary: the vagueness of the idea of a "satisfactory implementation" prevents this. But the upshot of our investigation was that in constructing a model of dialogue the following observations should be taken into consideration:

(i) Among the rules of dialogue there must be a number of retraction rules that determine, in each dialogical situation, which retractions are permissible. These rules may be formulated in many different ways. For instance, within one setup retractions could be forbidden, unless...; within another they could be allowed, unless...

(ii) If a retraction is permissible the rules should stipulate what, exactly, are the consequences of the retraction. There are some immediate consequences such as the removal of the retracted element from one's commitment set. But there may also be further consequences: for instance, a retraction may entail further retractions.

(iii) There are many different types of dialogue, critical discussion or persuasion dialogue being just one of them. One would not expect dialogues of all these types to go by the same rules for retraction. Indeed, the diversity of types of dialogues may constitute one source for the divergence between our intuitions about the permissibility of retraction, one intuition being appropriate for one type, and another for another. Retraction rules may be relatively permissive in a deliberation

dialogue, but rather tough in an inquiry. Retraction rules in a negotiation dialogue will be different from those in critical discussion, and so on. So, clearly, there must be different stipulations for different types of dialogue.

(iv) The same holds for different subtypes of critical discussion (persuasion dialogue). One may distinguish a more permissive type of critical discussion from a more rigorous one. Both are centered on the resolution of disputes, but the permissive type is more oriented towards an exploration of what really matters to each of the participants, and tries to reach a resolution of what is usually a complex dispute through an investigation of what are the deeper and perhaps hidden ("dark-side"), but truly held, commitments of each participant; the rigorous type, on the other hand, focusses on one particular issue and works towards a resolution on the basis of clearly expressed commitments. Retraction rules should take into account the type of persuasion dialogue in which they are to function. Generally, permissive dialogues can be soft on retraction, whereas more rigorous ones may need to stick to stricter rules.

(v) Even within one type of dialogue, there is a need for distinct retraction rules for each different type of commitment that occurs within dialogues of that type. Thus, different types of commitment may constitute another source for the diversity of our intuitions about retraction. For instance, retraction of commitment to an utterance of doubt will be subject to other rules than retraction of a statement. Among statements, *assertions* are to be distinguished from *mere concessions.* Every assertion is a concession, but not the other way around. Assertions are those statements which their utterer is to defend in dialogue, if asked to do so. But a mere concession does not entail such a burden of proof: there is no (not even a conditional) obligation to defend a mere concession. The typical content of a commitment to a concession is that their utterer is prepared to let the other side make use of this concession in an argument. Since commitment to an assertion and commitment to a mere concession are so different in content, one may expect that their retractions will be regulated by quite different rules. It should even be possible to retract a particular statement as an assertion without changing its status as a concession.

(vi) Another distinction between types of commitment is that between light-side and dark-side commitments. Light-side commitments are those commitments that are overtly incurred by speech acts within the dialogue; dark-side commitments are those whose existence can only be surmised from the subject's general background or behavior, including utterances not made within the dialogue; these may at times remain hidden even for the subject him- or herself. A side benefit of critical discussion is an increased awareness by each participant of his or her deeper, often dark-side, commitments (the maieutic effect). As stated above, dialogues of the permissive subtype are those in which one works toward a resolution of the dispute through an investigation of these deeper commitments, i.e., by trying to bring them to light. Clearly, dark-side commitments are so different from stated assertions and concessions that they need to have their own retraction rules. But how can one retract a commitment of which one is not aware? These retraction rules can apply only after the dark-side commitment has been brought to light. One possible rule for such unearthed dark-side commitments would be that their

retraction is simply ruled out, at least for moves within the very dialogue in which they were brought to light. Thus one's veiled, dark-side commitments would provide a source for fixed, irretractable commitments within the dialogue.

(vii) One way to take into account our divergent intuitions about retraction is to have a number of different models of dialogue for different types and situations. Another way would be to construct a model for a complex type of dialogue, in which dialogues of various types are embedded. Thus, in Walton and Krabbe (1995: 163-6) one finds a complex model for critical discussion (persuasion dialogue) admitting dialogues that encompass both a permissive principal dialogue (a Hamblin-type dialogue; Hamblin, 1970) and rigorous subdialogues (Lorenzen-type dialogues; Lorenzen and Lorenz, 1978; Barth and Krabbe 1982). Hence, the model provides occasions to be soft on retraction as well as occasions to be strict on them.

(viii) Even with the more permissive type of persuasion dialogue not anything goes. Since wanton retraction would be disruptive, it is advisable, in model construction, to make retraction just a bit costly. As was noted above, one might stipulate that retractions lead to certain further retractions. The next section will discuss some retraction rules related to types of commitment, and the consequences of retraction for an arguer's position.


## 3. A SURVEY OF COMMITMENT TYPES AND CONSTRAINTS ON RETRACTION

What constitutes a commitment of a specific type can only be made precise in the context of a complete model of dialogue. These notions do not depend solely on the commitment rules and retraction rules pertaining to each specific type of commitment, but on the total constellation of dialogue rules in the model. For instance, to understand the notion of a certain type of commitment associated with a burden of proof, one has to know what counts as a burden of proof, and hence what the rules for fulfilling a burden of proof are in the dialogue model in question. The following survey of types of commitment, therefore, cannot be but sketchy and of a preliminary character. Moreover, the classification will be restricted to light-side, propositional (statemental) commitments.


### 3.1. *Assertions*

A first question in classifying a particular commitment to an uttered proposition would be: is the commitment accountable? That is, can it, by the rules of dialogue, be the object of a challenge, so that the participant upon being challenged will have to argue for upholding the proposition? If so, let us say that this commitment carries a burden of proof and call it an *assertion,* if not let us call it a *(mere) concession.*

Assertions are, in principle, retractable. Sometimes a retraction is even required or forced. Dialogue (6) illustrated how a retraction of an assertion ("I never answer a question") can be required in order to deal with an inconsistency. Here the assertion constituted R's initial thesis in the dialogue. Consequently, as far as this dialogue with this initial thesis goes, the dispute was resolved by this retraction: Q

has won and R has lost. This connection between retraction and the resolution of a dispute is quite typical, but it need not in all cases be a forced retraction. Forced retraction of an assertion is typical for the end of a completed rigorous (Lorenzen-type) persuasion dialogue won by the Opponent. (The Opponent wins whenever the Proponent's means of defense are exhausted.) But, as dialogue (4) shows, retraction of an initial thesis need not always be of that type. Whether forced or not, retraction of an initial thesis always has the serious repercussion that (part of) the dialogue is lost.

If an assertion is not an initial thesis, it must be a reason (premise) functioning in some argument. Unless we are dealing with a completely rigorous type of dialogue, reasons may be retracted. One may come to see that one's reasons are no good and then retract them. This would not constitute a fallacy but a part of sound dialogue; however, such a retraction will not be without repercussions:

(7)    Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
        Olga:     Why?
        Peter:    According to John the almanac says so.
        Olga:     What good is the almanac?
        Peter:    Well, perhaps not much, but look at these weather reports.
        Olga:     And John, is he to be trusted?

Peter's initial thesis in this example is: "The fine skating weather is holding" ($p$). Upon Olga's challenge he offers an argument. The explicit reason can be rendered as: "John says that the almanac says that the fine skating weather is holding" ($q$). The implicit reasons are: "What John says is right" ($r$) and "What the almanac says is right" ($s$). Olga then challenges $s$. Peter realizes that he has no good reason to maintain $s$ and therefore retracts this reason and offers another (the weather reports: $t$). finally Olga challenges $r$. But this seems little to the point now that Peter has substituted his original argument by another one in which $r$ does not function. Dialogue (7) displays the following profile of dialogue:[1]

(8)    P:    $p$
        O:    Why($p$)?
        P:    $q$[&$r$&$s$: therefore $p$]
        O:    Why($s$)?
        P:    No commitment($s$); $t$[therefore $p$]
        O:    Why($r$)?

The problem about $O$'s last challenge is that it seems irrelevant now that $P$ has withdrawn commitment to $s$. The only function $r$ had in the dialogue was as a link in an argument for $p$, but now that another link in this argument, $s$, has been withdrawn, the argument cannot work anyhow. So there is no point in further discussing $r$. To prevent irrelevance in dialogue one may therefore stipulate that $P$, by his locution *No commitment($s$)*, retracts not only the statement $s$, but the whole argument of which $s$ constitutes a part. Consequently, $P$ loses commitment to $q$ and $r$ as well (but not to

*p*). Another consequence will be that *O*'s last challenge may be looked upon as a fallacy of Straw Man.

Retraction of reasons, then, is possible in principle, but will generally lead to a retraction of some other reasons as well. Among these are reasons that, collaterally with and linked[2] to the originally retracted reason, function in one elementary argument (premises\conclusion constellation); further, any reasons that may have been put forward to support the originally retracted reason. (Only the former type of retraction occurred in example (7) and in profile (8).) One can easily imagine that in a more involved case retraction of these other reasons will again lead to an retraction of reasons, and so on. This leads to a recursive rule of retraction that takes care of what has been called *internal stability adjustment* ("internal" refers to one's own arguments; Walton&Krabbe 1995: 147-9; 152, Rule 11.3).

To sum up, retraction of an assertion is permissible, whether this concerns an initial thesis or a reason. But, generally, retraction of an assertion will lead to certain repercussions; even in a dialogue of a permissive type. Finally, it seems plausible that a retraction of an assertion can not be challenged and needs no defense (at least not within the same dialogue). The arguer who retracts part of his argument is giving in to his opponent and need not argue why he is giving in: retraction of assertions is not accountable.


### 3.2. *Concessions*

Let us now have a look at mere concessions, that is concessions that are not also assertions. For the sake of convenience, they will be simply denoted as "concessions", letting the "mere" to be understood. The first thing to say about them is that they are not accountable:

(9)     Peter:     The fine skating weather is holding.
        Olga:      Why?
        Peter:     Would you agree that the almanac is right?
        Olga:      Yes.
        Peter:     Why do you think so?

Peter's challenge is obviously beside the point. Olga conceded that the almanac is right, she did not assert this. It may be just something she accepts on trust, and she need have no evidence or proof beyond Peter's asking to agree on this. Why she is willing to accept this proposition, is not an issue in a dialogue in which it has been accepted. The profile of dialogue in this case looks as follows:

(10)     *P:*       *p*
         *O:*       *Why(p)?*
         *P:*       *Do you concede(q)?*
         *O:*       *Concession(q)*
         *P:*       *Why(q)?*

*P*'s move constitutes a subtle type of the Straw Man fallacy. The issue is not that *O* has never stated the proposition *q,* but that she has never asserted this proposition and therefore can not be held to fulfill a burden of proof on account of it.

The main question, however, is whether concessions are retractable. The answer must be that some are (in permissive dialogues and in appropriate circumstances) and some are not. Concessions that are, in principle, retractable will be called "mutable concessions"; those that are, in principle, not retractable will be called "fixed concessions".

As to mutable concessions, a further question is in order: is their retraction accountable or not? That is, may one, according to the rules of dialogue, ask for a justification of a retraction of a mutable concession? Again the answer is that with some mutable concessions it would be appropriate to ask for a justification of one's opponent's retraction, whereas with others this is not the case. Those mutable concessions that permit only accountable retractions will be called "presumptions", whereas those that in appropriate circumstances permit of nonaccountable retraction will be called "free concessions".

### 3.2.1. *Presumptions*

According to Walton (1992: 58), a "presumption is lodged in place as a commitment of both parties in the dialogue, until such time that evidence comes in or is brought forward that is sufficient to refute it." That is, retraction of a presumption (in Walton's sense) is accountable. Here the converse is stipulated to hold as well: each concession such that its retraction is accountable counts as a presumption.[3] In the following dialogue it is supposed that a general presumption in favor of the trustworthiness of the almanac is operative:[4]

(11)     Wilma:    The fine skating weather is holding.
         Bruce:    Why?
         Wilma:    The almanac says so.
         Bruce:    So what?
         Wilma:    You usually trust the almanac. Why not in this case?

The profile of this dialogue, given below, clearly interprets Wilma's last move as a challenge of Bruce's challenging of her implicit premise (*r:* What the almanac says is right):

(12)     *W:*      *p*
         *B:*      *Why(p)?*
         *W:*      *q[&r: therefore p]*
         *B:*      *Concession(q). Why(r)?*
         *W:*      *Why(Why(r)?)?*

(Notice that Bruce's "So what?" expresses not only that he criticizes the connection between the reason (*q*) stated by Wilma and Wilma's initial thesis (*p*), but also that

he concedes the stated reason as a proposition by itself.) After *W*'s last challenge, it is up to *B* to justify his challenging of the presumption *r.* Hence there has been a role reversal, for in the ensuing subdialogue it is *B,* not *W,* on whom falls the burden of proof (cf. Walton 1992: 60).

Presumptions, then, are not easy to retract. But retractable they are, and, since such retractions usually bear witness to an unexpected development, retractions of presumptions often constitute interesting parts of dialogue.


### 3.2.2. *Fixed Concessions*

Principles and axioms are much harder to retract than are presumptions. They are fixed concessions. A proposition will be called an "axiom" of a dialogue if it is a mutually agreed concession that is moreover agreed to be operative throughout that dialogue. It is a constraint on the dialogue. A participant who retracts commitment to one of the dialogue's axioms thereby abandons this very dialogue. This is not to claim that there are any undebatable issues or "natural axioms". What is an axiom of one dialogue may be a discussable item in another. Thus, certain principles of medicine may function as axioms in a medical dialogue, but could be discussed in a philosophical or metaphysical dialogue.

Other fixed concessions will be called "principles". These are fixed within the course of dialogue. As we saw in Section 2 (vi), one's dark-side commitments provide a source from which one's interlocutor may try to elicit new principles that provide a basis for further argument. The following dialogue shows how Peter succeeds in letting Olga admit the principle of trustworthiness of the almanac:

(13)    Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
        Olga:     Why?
        Peter:    The almanac says so.
        Olga:     So what?
        Peter:    Come on! You always said you trusted the almanac
                  completely. Your whole position implies this. You
                  can't deny it.
        Olga:     OK. I really adore the almanac. What exactly did it
                  say?

The context suggested by this example need not be such that the almanac's trustworthiness functions as an axiom that cannot be denied at all in the dialogue. Peter's own commitment to the proposition that the almanac is trustworthy may be superficial and introduced for the sake of argument. On the other hand, Peter has reason to infer that Olga is actually deeply committed to this proposition on her dark-side. Once this has been pointed out, Olga, as an honest discussant, immediately concedes this commitment. Thus, the proposition that the almanac is trustworthy comes to be lodged on Olga's light-side. This concession is even harder to retract than a presumption, since retraction by Olga would tamper with her own deeply held commitments. One way to go about this, is to say that if Olga changes such principal

commitments, she closes off the present dialogue (and perhaps starts a new one). That is, each participant's dark-side commitment set may be construed as a constraint upon the dialogue. A dark-side commitment brought to light will, on this stipulation, function as an irretractable principle for the rest of the dialogue.

In the profile of dialogue that schematizes example (13), *P*'s eliciting of a concession from *O*'s store of dark-side commitments is summarized by one formal move: *Do you seriously question(r)?*:

(14)     *P:*       *p*
           *O:*       *Why(p)?*
           *P:*       *q[&r: therefore p]*
           *O:*       *Concession(q). Why(r)?*
           *P:*       *Do you seriously question(r)?*
           *O:*       *Concession(r). Why(q)?*

At the end of (14) *r* is firmly lodged in *O*'s commitment store as a fixed light-side concession (a principle). The earlier move by which *O* conceded *q,* however, did not have this effect of establishing *q* as a principle. Presumably, *q* is just a free concession, since in *O*'s last move *q* is challenged and, therefore, *O* appears to retract commitment to *q.* Or would this retraction have to be called "fallacious"? This matter will be taken up in the next subsection.

### 3.2.3. *Free Concessions*

Free concessions were defined as concessions that in appropriate circumstances permit of nonaccountable retraction. In the following dialogue, as in example (13), Olga concedes that "the almanac says so". (We saw that this is implied by "So what?") But then, later on, she retracts this commitment and, implicitly, challenges this very proposition:

(15)     Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
           Olga:     Why?
           Peter:    The almanac says so.
           Olga:     So what?
           Peter:    John says the almanac can't be wrong about this.
           Olga:     Perhaps it isn't in the almanac.

In the profile of dialogue the retraction is implied by the move *Why(q)?*:

(16)     *P:*       *p*
           *O:*       *Why(p)?*
           *P:*       *q[&r: therefore p]*
           *O:*       *Concession(q). Why(r)?*
           *P:*       *r' [therefore r]*
           *O:*       *Why(q)?*

Both in profile (14) and in profile (16), *O*'s behavior may raise some eyebrows. First she concedes the explicit premise (*q*) of *P*'s argument and concentrates on criticism of the implicit premise (*r*). Once the implicit premise has been successfully established (in (14)) or defended (in (16)), she swings around again to the explicit premise. Can this be condoned in good critical discussion? This seems to depend on how rigorous a discussion it is supposed to be. In the more rigorous types this kind of behavior is out of question, whereas in the more permissive types we might want to give some leeway for changing one's mind. After all, *q* was freely conceded, so why could it not be freely withdrawn? So retraction rules here seem to depend upon the type of dialogue (rigorous versus permissive). Anyhow, accountability of retraction is not the issue. If we want to permit retraction of freely conceded propositions, it would be quite fruitless to make their retraction accountable, since this would only sidetrack the discussion about the initial thesis.

But even in permissive types of critical discussion, it would be inadvisable to let participants retract any kind of concession ad lib and without repercussions. For this would make concessions practically meaningless. How can we guarantee that concessions will be somewhat sticky?

Some help can be expected from the dialogical rule that whatever a participant asserts, he also concedes (Walton&Krabbe 1995: 138, nr. 10). The contrapositive of this rule implies that a retraction of commitment to a proposition as a concession, where the same proposition happens to function also as an assertion, entails a retraction of that proposition as an assertion. Therefore, there are at least some concessions (not *mere* concessions) whose retraction will require an internal stability adjustment (see Section 3.1, above). To that extent, such concessions are indeed a bit sticky. The following dialogue, in which both parties take on a burden of proof, displays this feature:[5]

(17)    Wilma:    The fine skating weather is holding.
        Bruce:    No, we're gonna have a storm.
        Wilma:    But the almanac announces a good skating season.
        Bruce:    It also announces a storm.
        Wilma:    Why would the almanac be any good?
        Bruce:    If not, why do you think the good skating weather is holding?
        Wilma:    Look at these weather reports.

In the profile below, Bruce's last move is interpreted as urging on Wilma to effect an internal stability adjustment (*ISA*), or else to concede the propostion that the almanac is trustworthy (*r*):

(18)    *W:*    $p$
        *B:*    $s$ *[therefore] not-p*
        *W:*    $q_1$*[&r: therefore p]*
        *B:*    *Concession($q_1$). $q_2$[&r: therefore s]*
        *W:*    *Why(r)?*

> B:     *Effect ISA or else concede(r)!*
> W:     *No commitment(r). t [therefore p]*

By her second move in the dialogue $W$ incurs commitment to $r$ as an assertion, since $r$ is an implicit premise in her argument for $p$. Therefore, $W$ gets also committed to $r$ as a concession. Next, $B$ uses this concession in an argument for $s$ (and through $s$, for *not-p*). $W$ then challenges $r$. This implies a withdrawal of commitment to $r$ as a concession. $B$ points out that withdrawal of commitment to $r$ as a concession entails withdrawal of commitment to $r$ as an assertion and will, by the required internal stability adjustment, lead to more retractions (in fact, only to retraction of $q_1$).

Anyhow, the effect will be that $W$'s own argument for $p$ is destroyed. Nevertheless, $W$ refuses to reinstate $r$ as a concession. She then provides another argument for $p$. To sum up, in this dialogue, retraction of a freely introduced concession such as $r$ is permitted, and is not accountable, but retraction has certain repercussions that may make one think twice before effecting it.

Another recursive rule of retraction that may help to make commitments stick is the rule for *external stability adjustment* ("external" refers to the other party's arguments; Walton&Krabbe 1995: 147-8; 152, Rule 11.1). The idea is that a discussant who concedes all premises of an argument (including the implicit premises) must also concede the conclusion (Op. cit.: 138, nr. 11). Consequently, a participant confronted with an argument who wishes to withold or retract commitment to the conclusion of the argument must withold or retract commitment to at least one premise. Since this premise may again have been supported by argument, and so on, this will lead to a recursive procedure of retraction.

But why would this make commitment sticky? What makes it unattractive for a participant to carry on with all these retractions? The answer is that a retractor, as he is making his choices on what to retract, may run into one of those cases, already treated above, where retraction is accountable or even ruled out: presumptions, axioms, principles or assertions that, once retracted, by internal stability adjustment, will damage the retractor's own arguments.

That retractions entail retractions in order to maintain external stability is illustrated by Olga's last move in the following dialogue:

(19)    Peter:    The fine skating weather is holding.
        Olga:     Why?
        Peter:    The almanac says so.
        Olga:     How come?
        Peter:    That's what John told me.
        Olga:     I see.
        Peter:    So you agree that the fine skating weather is holding?
        Olga:     Well, that depends. Did the almanac really say so?
                  What exactly did John say?

The profile of this dialogue below shows how Peter, upon challenge, supports the explicit premise in his first argument ($q$) by introducing a further reason ($s$); thus a more complicated argument structure is built up during the dialogue:

(20)     P:      p
         O:      Why(p)?
         P:      q[&r: therefore p]
         O:      Why(q)?
         P:      s[&r': therefore q]
         O:      Concession(s).
         P:      Do you concede(p)?
         O;      No commitment(p). Why(q)? Why(s)?

In her last move O witholds commitment to p. By the retraction rule of external stability adjustment she must, therefore, withold or retract commitment to one of the premises of P's argument supporting p. O selects q for this (she could also have selected r). In the next step of the adjustment O must select either s or r'. She then decides to retract commitment to s.  Whether O can get away with this, depends on the status of s. If we suppose that no fallacy has been committed, s must be retractable. Nevertheless, s might be a presumption or an assertion used somewhere else in the dialogue by O to make some point. So retraction of s may have its cost.


## 4. ON HOW TO RUN WITH THE HARE AND HUNT WITH THE HOUNDS

On the one hand retraction seems to be something to be avoided or ruled out in serious critical discussion. On the other hand retraction seems something that must be condoned, and in circumstances even something to be expected or required: changing one's mind might even be declared to constitute the essence of critical discussion. The first section expanded on these contrary intuitions. By now, we have seen that the admissibility of retraction may depend upon the type of dialogue (permissive versus rigorous) and upon the type of commitment. But in order to really run with the hare of permissiveness and hunt with the rigorous hounds, one would want to see these types of dialogue and types of commitment embedded in one encompassing type of dialogue.

        As was stated in Section 2 (vii) above, one way to go about this is to embed rigorous dialogues into a framework consisting of an encompassing permissive dialogue (Walton&Krabbe 1995: Section 4.5, 163-6). The encompassing permissive dialogue will be relatively soft on retraction, but even within this part of dialogue retraction could be ruled out in some cases (axioms, principles fixed by a link to dark-side commitments) or restrained by accountability (presumptions) or repercussions (given the retraction rules of internal and external stability adjustment). In the rigorous parts there will be no retractions (beyond those needed to close them off). The idea to have retraction-free parts is not gratuitous, for these rigorous parts have a function in the overall dialogue and contribute to the ultimate goal of resolution of the dispute.

        The way they function is as follows. Suppose that a discussant (X) refuses to concede a proposition (p) that according to the other discussant (Y) is clearly implied

by the first discussant's (*X*'s) position. This is a threat to the process of resolution, for both parties seem to have arrived at a stalemate. For such cases, it is now stipulated that *Y* may demand that the issue shall be debated in an embedded rigorous dialogue. If *Y* wins this rigorous part, *X* will have to concede the point (otherwise, if *Y* loses the rigorous dialogue, the permissive dialogue will continue where it left off). But of course, it would not do to allow *X* to immediately retract commitment to *p* upon returning to the permissive part of the dialogue. This new commitment must be sticky. If *X* wants to retract commitment to *p* after having lost a rigorous dialogue in which *X* tried to withold commitment to *p*, *X* should at least retract commitment to one of the initial concessions of the rigorous dialogue, i.e. one of the propositions that were part of *X*'s position when the rigorous dialogue started and were used by *Y* to win the rigorous part. Rigorous dialogues, therefore, provide yet another means to create sticky commitments within the general context of a permissive and maieutic type of dialogue.

## NOTES

\*     This paper was presented at the May 1999 conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), "Argumentation at the Century's Turn", at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. The paper, together with a comment by Chris Reed, will be published on a CD-ROM, edited by Hans V. Hansen, Christopher W. Tindale, and Sacha Raposo, containing the proceedings of the 1999 OSSA-conference.

1.     A profile of dialogue displays in a semiabstract way some general features of a number of possible delevelopments of moves and countermoves in dialogues starting from the same initial situation. Though the profiles in this paper do each contain only one possible development, profiles generally exhibit a treelike structure. Profiles of dialogue were used by Walton in his analysis of the fallacy of Many Questions (Walton 1989: 68-9, 1989a: 37-8). For other applications of the notion of "profile of dialogue", see: Krabbe 1992, 1995, 1995a, 1996, 1999; Walton 1996, 1999.

2.     A comment by Chris Reed (see Note \*) convinced me that the rule for *internal stability adjustment,* as it is formulated here and in Walton&Krabbe (1995), fails to take account of convergent structures of argumentation. The rule, as far as the retraction of collateral reasons goes, must therefore be understood to apply to linked argumentation structures only.

3.     The notions of "presumption" and "burden of proof" were analyzed by Walton (e.g.: 1992: Ch. 2, 1993, 1996: Ch. 7, 1996a: Ch. 2). Walton stresses the way a presumption is introduced into the dialogue (by a speech act of presumption). At present we are  more interested in the way a presumption may be withdrawn from the dialogue. It may have been introduced by a speech act of presumption in Walton's sense, or it may have been agreed upon in the opening stage of the critical discussion, or this critical discussion may belong to a field in which the presumption generally holds.

4.  Since both discussants take on a burden of proof within the course of this dialogue, neither of them is the unique Proponent or the unique Opponent. For this reason, a new cast of characters makes its appearance.
5.  See the preceding note for the reason to have "Wilma" and "Bruce" instead of "Peter" and "Olga".

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