A Systematic Theory of Argumentation

The pragma-dialectical approach

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In *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*, two of the leading figures in argumentation theory, Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, present a view of argumentation as a means of resolving differences of opinion by testing the acceptability of the disputed positions. Their model of a "critical discussion" serves as a theoretical tool for analyzing, evaluating, and producing argumentative discourse. In this approach, pragmatic and dialectical insights are combined by conceiving a critical discussion as a methodological exchange of speech acts between two parties.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst develop a method for the reconstruction of argumentative discourse that takes into account all aspects that are relevant to a critical assessment. They explicate a set of rules for the conduct of a critical discussion and propose a practical code of behavior for discussants who want to resolve their differences in a reasonable way.

A Systematic Theory of Argumentation is a major contribution to the study of argumentation and will be of particular value to professionals and graduate students in speech communication, informal logic, rhetoric, critical thinking, linguistics, and philosophy.

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Until his death in 2000, Rob Grootendorst was Professor of Dutch Speech Communication at the University of Amsterdam.

To Jet Greebe

A Systematic Theory
of Argumentation

The pragma-dialectical approach

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Contents

Preface

A Systematic Theory of Argumentation gives an overview of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse that Rob Grootendorst and I [Frans H. van Eemeren] jointly developed over the past thirty years. It provides a sketch of our contribution to the study of argumentation by describing our approach to a number of issues that are crucial to the development of a comprehensive theory of argumentation. In the process, insights that we have achieved are explained. This book – our latest and last one – serves as a final report of our work together. Rob's early death in 2000 put an untimely end to our great collaboration.

Rob and I co-authored a variety of studies, textbooks, and more-popular books about argumentation in Dutch. Most of our theoretical work was also published in English, but our scholarly contributions are scattered over a great number of articles and other publications. That is why we thought it useful to give a general overview of our ideas. *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation* is aimed at making the main thrust of our views about argumentation more easily accessible to our fellow students of argumentation. The book, which is dedicated to Jet Greebe, Rob's widow, is meant to be a modest monument to Rob. I hope that it will help us all to commemorate Rob as the inspired argumentation scholar he always was.

I am grateful to the great many friends in the international community of argumentation scholars who have given me their support in completing the manuscript for this book. In particular, I would like

Introduction

Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint.

This general definition of the term *argumentation* differs – because of the use of some technical jargon – from the way in which the meaning of the word "argumentation" would be described in everyday language.[1] Although the definition is certainly in line with the way in which the word argumentation is used in ordinary usage, the meaning of the technical term *argumentation* is more precise, based on a conceptual analysis of the theoretical notion of argumentation. The definition that is given is stipulative in the sense that it introduces a specific, and to some extent new, convention of language use contrived to enable students of argumentation to deal with this concept in an adequate way. In this technical definition, the "process-product" ambiguity of the word "argumentation" is maintained: The term *argumentation* refers at the same time to the process of arguing ("I am about to complete my argumentation") and to its product ("This argumentation is not sound").

A number of theoretically important aspects of the notion of argumentation are explicitly mentioned in the definition: In principle,

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[1] For an elucidation of this definition, See van Eemeren et al. (1996: 1–5).

argumentation is a *verbal* activity, which takes place by means of language use,[2] a *social* activity, which is as a rule directed at other people,[3] and a *rational* activity, which is generally based on intellectual considerations.[4] Another important characteristic of argumentation is that it always pertains to a specific point of view, or *standpoint*, with regard to a certain issue. The speaker or writer defends this standpoint, by means of the argumentation, to a listener or reader who doubts its acceptability or has a different standpoint. The argumentation is aimed at *convincing the listener or reader of the acceptability of the standpoint.*

An argumentation consists of one or more expressions in which a *constellation of propositions* is expressed.[5] In the case of a positive standpoint ("It is the case that . . ."), the argumentation is used to *justify* the proposition expressed in the standpoint; in the case of a negative standpoint ("It is not the case that . . ."), the argumentation is used to *refute* it. The expressions that are part of the argumentation jointly constitute a complex speech act aimed at convincing a *reasonable critic.* When someone advances argumentation, that person makes an implicit appeal to reasonableness: He or she tacitly assumes that the listener or reader will act as a reasonable critic when evaluating the argumentation. Otherwise, there would be no point in advancing argumentation.[6]

Argumentation theorists are interested in the oral and written production of argumentation and the analysis and the evaluation of argumentative discourse. The problems they are primarily concerned with can be indicated by distinguishing some central problem areas

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[2] This part of the definition agrees with most ordinary manifestations of argumentation. In practice, argumentation can also be partly, or even wholly, non-verbal (see, e.g., Groarke 2002). As will be clear from its meta-theoretical principles explained in Chapter 3 of this volume, this is not adverse to our pragma-dialectical approach as long as the (constellation of propositions constituting the) argumentation is externalizable.

[3] Even seemingly "monological" argumentation as used in self-deliberation can be considered social because it is part of a "dialogue intérieur."

[4] Of course, this does not mean that emotions have no role to play in argumentation. Not only can they be the *causa* of arguments, but they can also be used as arguments, rightly or wrongly.

[5] See Searle (1969: 29–33) for the distinction between the *proposition* ("propositional content") involved in a speech act and its *communicative* ("illocutionary") *force.*

[6] The assumption of some form of "reasonable critic" is inherent in the idea that there is a second party who needs to be convinced and that it makes sense to make the effort to convince this party by way of argumentation. Cf. Gilbert (1997).

in the study of argumentation: "unexpressed elements in argumentative discourse," "argumentation structures," "argument schemes," and "fallacies."

It is important to realize right away that verbal expressions are not "by nature" standpoints, arguments, or other kinds of units of language use that are interesting to argumentation theorists. They only become so when they occur in a context where they fulfill a specific function in the communication process. Then these utterances are, in a specific way, instrumental in achieving a certain goal. For instance, an oral or written expression is a standpoint if it expresses a certain positive or negative position with respect to a proposition, thereby making it plain what the speaker or writer stands for. And a series of utterances constitutes an argumentation only if these expressions are jointly used in an attempt to justify or refute a proposition, meaning that they can be seen as a concerted effort to defend a standpoint in such a way that the other party is convinced of its acceptability.

In some cases, an argumentation centers on elements that are only implicitly represented in the text and can thus be regarded as "unexpressed." This applies in particular to *unexpressed premises.*[7] In ordinary argumentation, there is usually a premise of the reasoning underlying the argumentation that is left implicit. Most of the time, it can easily be detected. In some cases, however, it is much more difficult to determine exactly which unexpressed premise the arguer is committed to. A logical analysis that is exclusively based on the formal validity criterion is then not decisive. It does not make clear in actual practice which obligations the speaker or writer, as a rational agent, is committed to in certain cases. This also requires a pragmatic analysis that makes use of contextual information and background knowledge.[8]

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[7] Terms that are usually virtually synonymous with *unexpressed premise* are *implicit*, *hidden*, *tacit*, and *suppressed premise* (or *assumption*).

[8] Taken literally, an argument in which a premise has been left unexpressed is invalid. The premise that is logically required to remedy the invalidity normally goes against the norms for rational language use because of its lack of informative content. When the unexpressed premise is made explicit, it should therefore be checked to see whether there is pragmatic information available that makes it possible to complete the argument in a more sensible way. Instead of leaving it at stating the "logical minimum" required to make the argument valid, a pragma-dialectical analysis of unexpressed premises is aimed at establishing the "pragmatic optimum."

Argumentation for or against a standpoint can be simple, as in "single argumentation," which consists of only one explicit reason for or against the standpoint. But the argumentation can also have a more complex *argumentation structure*, depending on the way in which the defense of the standpoint has been organized in view of (anticipated) doubts or criticism. In an argumentation with a more complex structure, several reasons are put forward for or against the same standpoint. These reasons can be alternative defenses of the standpoint that are unrelated, as in "multiple argumentation," but they can also be interdependent, so that there is a "parallel chain" of mutually reinforcing reasons, as in "coordinative argumentation," or a "serial chain" of reasons that support each other, as in "subordinative argumentation."[9] A problem in the analysis of complex argumentation is that the literal presentation often makes insufficiently clear whether the argumentation is multiple, coordinatively compound, subordinatively compound, or some combination of these possibilities. In these cases, too, all kinds of contextual and other pragmatic factors need to be taken into account in the analysis.

Argumentation theorists are also interested in the "internal organization" of each individual single argumentation. To analyze the defense mechanism employed in single argumentation, they refer to justificatory principles that are covered by the concept of an *argument scheme*.[10] Argument schemes pertain to the kind of relationship between the explicit premise and the standpoint that is established in the argumentation in order to promote a transfer of acceptability from the explicit premise to the standpoint. Argument schemes are more or less conventionalized ways of achieving this transfer. We distinguish between three main categories of argument schemes: "causal argumentation," "symptomatic argumentation" (or "sign argumentation"), and "argumentation based on a comparison."[11] In most cases, some interpretative effort is required to identify the argument scheme

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[9] Other terms used to distinguish between the various argumentation structures include *convergent* (for *independent* or *multiple*) argumentation, *linked* (for *dependent* or *coordinative*) argumentation, and *serial* (for *subordinative*) argumentation.

[10] Argument schemes are, just like logical argument forms such as *modus ponens*, abstract frames that allow for an infinite number of substitution instances.

[11] See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992: 94–102). For an inventory of a great variety of different kinds of argument schemes, see Kienpointner (1992).

that is being employed and to discover the *topos* on which the argumentation rests. Then, again, pragmatic knowledge must be brought to bear.

Another problem area argumentation theorists are especially interested in is that of the *fallacies*. One of the main objections to the logico-centric approach to the fallacies that was dominant until recently is that fallacies were merely viewed as invalid arguments that seemed valid, so that a great many familiar imperfections in argumentative discourse fell outside the scope of the definition.[12] When the old definition is dropped and the notion of a fallacy is taken in a much broader sense – for example, as a wrong discussion move – the communicative and interactional context in which the fallacies occur needs to be taken into account in the analysis. This means that beside logical insight, pragmatic insight should be used.

The current state of the art in the study of argumentation is characterized by the co-existence of a variety of approaches. These approaches differ considerably in conceptualization, scope, and degree of theoretical refinement.[13] So far, none of these approaches has resulted in a generally accepted theory that deals satisfactorily with the four problem areas mentioned earlier.[14] In this book, we shall make clear what *our* approach to argumentation amounts to, and show that it creates a theoretical basis for solving the problems. We shall do so by putting the various problem areas within the integrating perspective of *critical discussion.*

In Chapter 2, we present a coherent overview of the various components of our research program. In Chapter 3, we sketch the model of a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion that is the conceptual focal point of our theorizing. In Chapter 4, we discuss the important problem of determining the relevance of the different parts of an argumentative text or discussion – a problem arising in

[12] This state of affairs in the study of the fallacies, which is characteristic of the "standard approach" to the fallacies in the 1950s and 1960s, was earlier fundamentally criticized by Hamblin (1970).

[13] For a survey of the most prominent theoretical approaches in the study of argumentation, see van Eemeren et al. (1996).

[14] For an overview of the state of the art in the theorizing in these and other crucial problem areas in the study of argumentation, see van Eemeren (ed. 2001).

every pragmatic approach to argumentative discourse. In Chapter 5, we explain how the analysis of argumentative discourse can be viewed as a methodical reconstruction of the text or discussion concerned. This reconstruction is motivated theoretically by the ideal model of a critical discussion and supported empirically by knowledge of argumentative reality. In Chapter 6, we describe the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure consisting of rules for the conduct of a critical discussion. Starting from these rules, we treat the fallacies in Chapter 7 as discussion moves that obstruct or hamper the resolution of a difference of opinion. Finally, in Chapter 8, we translate the main insights contained in the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure into ten basic requirements that together form a code of conduct for reasonable discussants.

Chapter 2, "The Realm of Argumentation Studies," charts the various estates of the study of argumentation. We explain that in our opinion, argumentation theory is part of "normative pragmatics" – that is, that argumentative discourse as a phenomenon of ordinary language use is viewed from a critical perspective. This vision can be implemented in the study of argumentation by making a clear distinction between philosophical, theoretical, analytical, empirical, and practical research. We indicate what the consequences of making these distinctions are for our research program. As an illustration, we contrast our pragma-dialectical approach in each of the five components of the program with a different approach.

Chapter 3, "A Model of a Critical Discussion," begins by disclosing the classical roots of the study of argumentation. This is followed by the observation that the historical development has gradually led to the present ideological division within argumentation theory into two approaches, which can be characterized as "new rhetorics" and "new dialectics." After an exposition of the meta-theoretical points of departure of the pragma-dialectical approach, we describe the dialectical stages that can be distinguished in the process of resolving a difference of opinion and the types of pragmatic moves that need to be made in the resolution process.

Chapter 4, "Relevance," begins with a characterization of the main approaches to relevance favored in research concerning the interpretation and analysis of oral and written discourse. Next, we explain the pragma-dialectical notion of relevance. This notion serves as the point

of departure for explaining how the step can be made from the interpretation of argumentative texts and discussions to their analysis. In this endeavor, we make use of an integration of Searlean insight regarding language use as the performance of different kinds of speech acts and Gricean insight regarding the rational principles underlying a regular conduct of verbal discourse. After putting pragmatic notions such as "adjacency pair" and "argumentative repair" within an analytic perspective, we return to the problems of determining relevance.

Chapter 5, "Analysis as Reconstruction," mentions a number of complications that we are bound to encounter when dealing with argumentative reality in analyzing a text or discussion. Four transformations that are carried out in analytic reconstruction are discussed. We explain how such a reconstruction can be justified, and conclude with a discussion about drawing up analytic an overview in which all aspects of an argumentative text or discussion that are relevant to a critical evaluation are dealt with.

Chapter 6, "Rules for a Critical Discussion," opens with a discussion of the notion of reasonableness. This is followed by a treatment of the concepts of reasonableness that, due to the works of Toulmin and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, have become predominant in the study of argumentation. We explain our choice of a dialectical conception of reasonableness and give an overview of the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure. In explaining this procedure, we discuss the right to challenge, the obligation to defend, the allocation of the burden of proof, the division of the discussion roles, agreements concerning the rules of discussion and the point of departure, the attacking and defending of standpoints, the "intersubjective identification procedure," the "intersubjective testing procedure," the "intersubjective explicitization procedure," the "intersubjective inference procedure," the conclusive attack and defense of standpoints, the optimal use of the right to attack, the optimal use of the right to defend, the orderly conduct of the discussion, and the rights and obligations with respect to the performance of what we call "language use declaratives."

Chapter 7, "Fallacies," starts with a brief survey of the various theories about fallacies that have been proposed over the years. Then, fallacies are connected with the ideal model of a critical discussion, and the relationship between the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure and the analysis of fallacies is indicated. Following on from

this, we discuss violations of the rules for the "confrontation stage," the "opening stage," the "argumentation stage," and the "concluding stage" of a critical discussion. To illustrate our position, we give an analysis of two prominent and well-known fallacies: *begging the question* ("circular reasoning" or *petitio principii*) and the *argumentum ad hominem.* After we have pointed out that there is an important connection between fallacies and implicit language use, we discuss the problems involved in the identification of fallacies.

Chapter 8, "A Code of Conduct for Reasonable Discussants," provides ten basic requirements, or "commandments," for conducting a critical discussion. Each of them is briefly explained. Finally, an outline is given of the characteristics of a reasonable discussion attitude. It is explained that the reasonableness of an argumentative text or discussion depends not only on the degree to which the procedural rules for a critical discussion are observed, but also on the satisfaction of certain preconditions regarding the participants' states of mind and the political, social, and cultural reality in which their discussion takes place.

The Realm of Argumentation Studies

Argumentation theory as normative pragmatics

In order to get a clear idea of the different components of our approach to argumentative discourse, it is useful to start by having a closer look at the realm of the study of argumentation and offering a bird's-eye view of its various estates. In depicting these estates, and explaining their mutual relations, we not only do justice to the ecological diversity of the realm, but we also provide a systematic characterization of the crucial sub-divisions of the study of argumentation (van Eemeren 1987a).

We think that a fully fledged argumentation theory should combine insights acquired through rather different kinds of research. It is, in our view, the task of argumentation theorists to establish a well-considered link between, on the one hand, insights as they are expressed in normative models such as those of formal logic, and, on the other hand, insights derived from empirical descriptions as provided by discourse analysts that are primarily socially or linguistically oriented. The accomplishment of this task may run up against opposition on both sides. Perhaps out of fear of metaphysics or of "psychologizing," present-day logicians tend to concentrate exclusively on formalized arguments that lack any direct relation with how argumentation is conducted in practice.[1] Among social scientists and linguists,

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[1] Of course, there are exceptions, but then the question immediately arises as to whether we are dealing with "modern" logic. The "natural logic" of Grize (1996) and his

however, the view is still widely held that observations on argumentation (or other phenomena) are only of interest to science if they are based on empirical research – some social scientists are in practice even opposed to any theoretical reflection prior to the collection of data.

The desired combination of insights derived from normative idealizations with insights emerging from empirical descriptions can best be achieved by regarding the study of argumentation as a branch of – what we call – *normative pragmatics.* In *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions*, we tried to make clear what this means by giving a theoretical definition of argumentation, fully in line with the definition we presented at the beginning of Chapter 1, in which argumentation is viewed as a "complex speech act" aimed at justifying or refuting a proposition and getting a reasonable critic to accept the standpoint involved as a result (1984: 18).[2] The descriptive aspect of this definition lies in the concept of argumentation as a speech act that has similar pragmatic properties as other speech acts. The normative aspect is represented in the reference to a reasonable critic, which adds a critical dimension to the definition. This combination should enable us to transcend the limitations of a purely normative or a purely descriptive approach to argumentation.[3]

A fully fledged theory of argumentation integrates these two approaches, which, although they start out from different premises, are in fact complementary. In the descriptive approach, which starts out from argumentative practice, the epistemic, moral, and practical challenges provided by "real life" are often motivating occasions to get theorizing about argumentation off the ground. The normative approach sets out from considerations regarding the norms of reasonableness that good argumentation must satisfy. However, normative rules and procedures, devised in a reflective Valhalla, where the peculiarities of

associates, drawing their inspiration from Piaget, should probably rather be classified as belonging to psychology. It should be noted that Peirce, Dewey, and Quine are among the philosophers who much earlier raised interesting heterodox ideas about logic.

[2] See our definition of argumentation in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 18) based on an earlier Dutch publication. The definition of argumentation given in Chapter 1 of this volume is more general than this theoretical definition.

[3] The general problem facing us here is that in (the philosophy of) science, unjustified dilemmas are constantly created, such as the dichotomy between empiricism and rationalism and that between realism and idealism.

argumentative practice can be discounted, can only have practical relevance if they do justice to the characteristics and properties inherent in discursive reality. This means that the normative and descriptive approaches to argumentation should be fine-tuned to one another. Such a systematic integration calls for a research program that promotes an interdisciplinary cooperation uniting the two approaches. A research program that promotes the development of argumentation theory must give both observation and standardization their due. It must ensure that there is, where necessary, a systematic interaction between the different kinds of research, which makes it possible, right from the start, to link the approach that starts out from "real," "objective," "material" reality with the approach that sets out from "ideal," "transcendent," "abstract" models.

In order to achieve a systematic interaction between insight in argumentative reality and insight based on an ideal of sound argumentation, argumentation theory has to establish methodical links between the research results achieved in various disciplines. The findings based on experience that have been made by linguistics in the study of interpretative processes, for instance, should be integrated as fully as possible with propositions made in logic for constructing a rational system of rules for a critical exchange of ideas.[4] By thus promoting the creation of a well-motivated theoretical framework for argumentative discourse, we comply constructively with the demands of those philosophers of science who assign argumentation a decisive role in scientific practice.[5] Against this background, we now attempt to sketch the "topography" of argumentation studies. Visiting the main estates of the realm, we distinguish between five different constituents of the study of argumentation, each of which forms a necessary component of a complete research program.

The philosophical estate

A simple case of argumentation leads us into the estate of philosophy, which functions as a Chambre de Réflexion for argumentation

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[4] Prominent studies of the first kind are Jackson (1992), Jackson and Jacobs (1982), Jacobs (1987, 1989), and Jacobs and Jackson (1982, 1983); an important study of the second kind is Barth and Krabbe (1982).

[5] See, e.g., de Groot (1984).

theorists. Imagine a man, Mr. Argumentation, who is called to order by an extremely wise man – say, a rabbi – for always disagreeing with his wife. "Why do you never agree with your wife?" the rabbi asks. "How could I?" Mr. Argumentation replies: "She is never right."

Instead of concerning themselves with the question of who is right or wrong, or what exactly is true or untrue, argumentation theorists concern themselves with the way in which acceptability claims, such as claims to being right or truth claims, are (or should be) supported or attacked. For example, Mr. Argumentation's standpoint, encapsulated in a rhetorical question that he cannot agree with his wife, is such a claim to acceptability. Argumentation theorists study defenses of a claim or "standpoint."[6] The "She is never right" example shows that there is nothing unusual about *arguments for* or *arguments against* a certain proposition, as the parts of a justification or refutation are commonly called. Where there is a will, there is usually an argument. As Woody Allen observed, some people can see a pretext for argumentation in everything.

Our definition of argumentation already indicates that argumentation is about producing effects: The performance of the complex speech act of argumentation aims to convince a reasonable critic of a certain standpoint. It is the task of argumentation theorists to investigate the force of conviction of argumentation that is adduced in the verbal interaction between language users. By the way, that this is not the only interesting aspect of argumentation can be learned from a comment by the writer E.M. Forster: "Arguments to me are only fascinating when they are of the nature of gestures, and illustrate the people who produce them."[7]

In order to emphasize that research on argumentation concentrates on the ways in which argumentation is deployed to produce the effect of acceptance on the part of a reasonable critic, it may be worthwhile to clarify our definition of argumentation by defining the position of our rabbi more precisely as that of a rational critic who judges reasonably. This gives us a general starting point that can also be used to explain the different perspectives that are adopted by argumentation theorists. They all want to indicate what it means when the rabbi

[6] For a pragma-dialectical definition of a standpoint, see Houtlosser (2002: 171).
[7] See Furbank (1977: 77).

"acts reasonably," but there can be considerable differences between the positions they adopt right from the start, depending on the philosophical angle from which they approach this problem.[8]

Perhaps the philosophical estate can best be described as a partly impenetrable wilderness. Still, it would be shortsighted to abandon the necessary philosophical contemplation purely for fear of not finding a solution. "Fundamental" philosophical reflection is essential because the crucial issues of the discipline are at stake. No consistent scientific practices are possible without well-conceived philosophical principles. Those principles directly affect the nature of theory-formation. They are expressed not only in the selection of the themes that are in need of theorizing, but also in the way in which the research is undertaken and how the research findings are used in practice. This is why it is important that argumentation theory be practiced from a perspective that is philosophically justifiable.[9]

    The "She is never right" example can show us how the adoption of different philosophical positions regarding rationality and reasonableness influences the way in which the acceptability of argumentation is evaluated. The rabbi asks himself: "When should I, as a rational critic who judges reasonably, regard an argumentation as acceptable?" In raising this question, the rabbi uses a concept that is crucial for argumentation theory: "acceptability." We shall indicate that the choice of a particular philosophical view of reasonableness can have important consequences for how the concept of acceptability is understood.[10]

    Following Toulmin's *Knowing and Acting* (1976), three views of reasonableness can be distinguished: a "geometrical," an "anthropological," and a "critical" perspective. If our rabbi were to choose a geometrical perspective, he would wonder whether the argument, "I cannot agree with her. [After all], she is never right," is a substitution instance

[8] Compare, e.g., Willard (1983), Wenzel (1987), and Govier (1987, 1999).
[9] The philosophical reflection ranges over diverse questions, and divergent positions can be taken, which may vary from strict positivism to a much less strict hermeneutic position.
[10] The choice of a particular perspective on reasonableness is often accompanied by the selection of a series of premises of an epistemological, ideological, didactic, or sometimes purely practical nature. As Barth (1974) makes clear, the negative consequences of the eclectic insertion of preconceived ideas should not be underestimated.