Argumentation without Arguments Proper[[1]](#footnote-1)

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I will start by trying to make sense of the exchanges which take place in the comments on a philosophical blog. These exchanges are argumentative in the broad sense that the writers aspire to make their views plausible for the readers, yet they contain few arguments and it is often uncertain whether a particular passage qualifies as an argument. I examine the possibility that this feature is due to a failure of rational discussion but find this explanation wanting. I argue that the comments should be taken as much as attempts to arrive at a plausible account as attempts to resolve the disagreement. I continue by exploring the similarities and differences between attempts to formulate a plausible account – which I will call ’development’ – and attempts to settle a controversy. Finally I recommend that development should be accepted as a special type of argumentation distinct from argumentation which serves the resolution of conflicts.

1. The blog and the comments

I have a philosophical blog intended for a non-academic readership entitled „So what do you think?” (http://namitgondolsz.blog.hu/). The posts in the blog have a standard format. They present a philosophical problem in a simplified form so that it can be understood without background in philosophy. No high-brow philosophical terminology is used, and the examples are taken either from familiar everyday situations or from extreme situations which, however, are easy to comprehend. The posts are short, never exceeding 500 words. They always lead up to a puzzling question which is left for the reader to answer. For instance, we often have an apparently cogent argument leading to a horrendous conclusion; the reader is invited to find fault with the argument or show that the conclusion, after all, is not that horrendous.

Most comments on the posts receive no response, but sometimes they lead to debates. The debates always involve two people only, each explicitly addressing the other. The debates do not continue for long, few of them last as long as five or six rounds, i.e. 10-12 contributions. The comments typically fall into the 100-250 word range, but some are shorter.

When a participant first responds to the post itself, he typically gives an argument. However, when the participants comment on each other something interesting happens, and this is what I shall be discussing: instead of proper arguments we get passages which might be taken as arguments, but *do not have to be*. Let me first make clear that by *argument proper* I mean what is normally called argument in informal logic and argumentation theory, e.g. „a set of claims in which one or more of them – the premises – are put forward so as to offer reasons for another claim, the conclusion” (Govier, 2009, 1). Looking at the sets of claims we find in the comments it is dubious whether they are to be construed as reasons for a claim or serving some other function. They are, as it were, *borderline cases* of arguments.

Here are some examples. The first issue is whether we enjoy freedom of will.

**liberum arbitrium:** Are human beings rational? Is there free will or does our brain simply run an incomprehensibly complex software? The explanation according to which we make our decisions unconsciously and the brain produces a self-justification only after that is spreading. All in all, therefore, we have the illusion that we made ​​the decision, and we can also explain why we decided the way we did, but in fact the decision was made even before the self-justification. In addition, brain scientists have instrumental evidence for this fact.

**Henry Chinaski**: If there is no free will, then we are just prisoners of the illusion of free will. Very interesting inferences follow from this claim. Love, morality, responsibility, ethics, sin and countless other concepts become meaningless. Ultimately, the meaning of life is called into question.

**liberum arbitrium**: Life has no objective meaning, but because this idea would be unbearable, our mind creates subjective meanings. If the meaning of life were called into question, we would not want to live it through, and we would not fulfill our biological predestination. Thus the mind creates goals that we can believe to be the meaning of our lives. We can enhance our personality and culture throughout our lives that we will give to our descendants.

Life makes no sense objectively speaking, but one can find a subjective meaning in it.

Liberum arbitrium begins with a proper argument. Rational deliberation is an illusion; we have scientific evidence to show that reasons are produced only after the decisions have been made. He obviously assumes that rational deliberation and free will are intimately connected, one cannot have one without the other.

Henry Chinaski’s[[2]](#footnote-2) answer is ambiguous. It may be taken as a counterargument running as follows. Liberum arbitrium’s claim implies that morality, etc. does not make sense and life is without meaning. But morality etc. makes sense and life is not meaningless either, so the freedom of will is not an illusion. Henry Chinaski does not actually state the morality etc. makes sense and life is meaningful. He may be taken to be committed to these claim, since we normally take it for granted that life is meaningful, but he does not have to understood in this way.[[3]](#footnote-3) So he may only be expounding the implications of liberum arbitrium’s claim without using these implications to undermine it.

Liberum arbitrium’s response is equally ambiguous. It may be read as a response to Henry Chinaski’s objection employing a dissociative argument scheme (Perelman & Obrechts-Tyteca, 2009), in which case it goes like this. We should distinguish between subjective and objective meaning. As for subjective meaning, the opponent is right: our life is subjectively meaningful. What the denial of free will implies, however, is the lack of objective meaning, and our life is indeed objectively meaningless; hence, the claim does not entail anything false. Notice that he does not state how the distinction between subjective and objective meaning defuses the objection; moreover, he does not indicate that he is answering an objection. Therefore he might be taken as doing something else: accommodating the consequences his partner has pointed out. The challenge he may be responding to is not to defend his claim but to add further details, i.e. to develop a more complex picture. If someone denies that life has meaning, he must come to terms with the fact that most of us find life meaningful. A failure to meet the challenge would show that his position is badly incomplete, it is not complex enough to sustain.

Now let us consider another exchange which is concerned with the trolley-problem (Foot, 1967). The problem is whether it is morally permissible to perform an action which results in the survival of five people who would otherwise die and in the death one person who would otherwise survive in two slightly different situations. In both situations we have a runaway trolley hurtling down the track towards five people. In the first situation you have the choice of pulling a lever and thereby diverting the trolley on another track where it would hit and kill only one person. In the second situation you have the choice of stopping the trolley by pushing a fat man from a footbridge right in front of it. Most people believe that it is permissible to perform the action in the first situation but not in the second. So here is the exchange:

**Hellsangel**: I think this example shows that human beings are generally quite irrational. Obviously, the two situations are logically equivalent, yet most people are not capable of making the same decision in both cases. Their behavior is falling apart along various explanations, and even they cannot even consistently stick to the decision they deemed correct. E.g., they think that in the first case they would pull the lever, but they would remain passive, they would stay on the easy way of the weaklings.

Those who are capable of pulling the lever in the first case are good people. Those who can be active in both cases, well, they will be the successful traders on the stock exchange, generals, CEOs, simply because they know how to master the irrational part of their soul.

**FMR**: “Those who are capable of pulling the lever in the first case are good people. Those who can be active in both cases, well, they will be the successful traders on the stock exchange, generals, CEOs, simply because they know how to master the irrational part of their soul.’”

You have a distorted, prejudiced way of thinking. Those who pull the lever in the first case may have good intentions but possibly may cause a bigger catastrophe e.g., because the train goes off the rails, and more people die because of it. Concerning the successful traders, generals and CEOs: these trades, professions were never regarded synonyms for the concept of the virtuous, ethical, good person, even if it was suggested – falsely – by the Zeitgeist. The traders, generals, and CEOs are mostly narcissistic, megalomaniac, restless people who try to alleviate their inner disharmony mostly at the expense of their environment, with tragic consequences (financially undermining others, bankrupting businesses, bloody death of hundreds of thousands). They could not master the irrational part of their soul, but rather gave it a green light.

**Hellsangel:** "Those who pull the lever in the first case may have good intentions but possibly may cause a bigger catastrophe "

Rational decision does not mean that you always make the correct decision, but that you make the best decision under the circumstances, based on the available information.

Because it might be the case that you say now that from your point of view it does not matter whether ‘one person or five’, for you are only you, but what if it is a battle and it is important how big the casualties are? If your money is at stake and it does matter that you lose five times as much? This is why those being in high positions must be capable of making those decisions, often in a split second.

The others, the kibitzers, can lament sitting in the pub saying that the others are immoral, rotten, narcissistic fuckers. But the thing is that they have a skill the majority of people do not.

Hellsangel advocates an unabashedly utilitarian view. Since the consequences are the same, we should perform the action in both situations. Those who would act only in the first one are irrational. Moreover, it is worth being rational because rationality breeds success.

FMR’s response comes in two parts. He grants that pulling the lever in the first case would testify to good intentions but claims that it would still be wrong,[[4]](#footnote-4) because it could have disastrous consequences. This is certainly an argument.

In the second part he takes issue with Hellsangel’s praise of those who are willing to intervene in the second situations as well. Successful they may be, but they are deeply unethical, suffer from all sorts of defects of character, and the willingness to extol their abilities is just currently fashionable nonsense. The ability to make ‘rational decisions’ and the professions requiring this ability deserve contempt, not praise. This is no argument but laying out an alternative view.

Hellsangel first responds to FMR’s argument: rational decision may not produce the best outcome in the given situation, since our knowledge is limited; it yields the best results only statistically. This may be construed as an argument: Hellsangel takes FMR to be saying that an action which may have disastrous effects is not rational, and denies an implicit premise FMR relies on, a premise asserting the close connection between rational decision and good results.[[5]](#footnote-5) But the same move does not have to be taken a fully-fledged argument. We may understand it in Toulminian terms in this way. FMR’s point may function as a rebuttal and the response as a qualifier (Toulmin, 2003). FMR would then be saying there are exceptions to the rule that rational decision leads to the best outcome, and in response Hellsangel qualifies his claim: rational decision leads to the best outcome in the long run, where „in the long run” serves as a qualifier. Alternatively, this might not even be an argument: it might simply be an explanation of what rational decision involves.

In the second part of his response, starting from „Because it might”, Hellsangel goes on to make plain that there are situations in which being able to make rational decisions fast does matter. There are people, he says, who keep wailing and trashing those with this ability, calling them unethical and narcissistic – he repeats the terms FMR uses, implying that FMR is one of those –, but the fact is simply that they don’t have what it takes. Now this is no argument, it is more like an explanation of the perspective which leads him to judge about the two situations in the way he does.

We witness in these exchanges the following pattern. When a commentator disagrees with an opinion, or has doubts about it, she does not respond with what can be clearly identified as an argument. Sometimes she responds by laying out or elaborating on an alternative view or with a set of claims which is *ambiguous* between an argument and an exposition of an alternative view. This is not exactly what we learned to expect in rational discussion. We would expect one of two kinds of responses. First, an objection, which has roughly this form: you think this, but this is wrong because… and then comes the argument. Second, an alternative view supported by the argument: you think this, but truth is that, because… and here comes the argument. These two patterns are relatively rare in the exchanges. How can we make sense of this?

2. A failure of rational discussion?

We might be tempted to answer that what goes on in the comments is *not rational discussion* at all, or a *low quality rational discussion* at best. Before looking at the merits of this kind of answer, I have to enter a caveat: we must bear in mind that real world exchanges are not easy to classify. The categories we use for classification are ideal types, and reality rarely meets idealization. Real exchanges often have features associated with more than one ideal types, e.g. a heated debate has both elements characteristic of quarrels and elements characteristic of rational discussion. Even if an exchange matches one ideal type far better than any others, it never quite comes up to the ideal, because the participants make moves alien to the sort of exchange.

Granted all this, one might say that the comments are not in the business of rational discussion, but in the business of voicing opinions (which is indeed characteristic of the majority of blogs). If one writes a comment only to mouth his opinion, he can do that without arguing. Is this the best way to understand the pattern we noticed?

We should first notice that the starting point of the debate is nearly always an argued opinion, not just an opinion.[[6]](#footnote-6) Accordingly, if someone does not share the opinion, he has an argument to contend with, and a proper response to an argument gets one involved in rational discussion. If rational discussion fails, it fails because the participants do not answer properly. Is this indeed the case?

It is not. First, the participants respond to each other’s concerns: what they say is relevant for the truth of the claims advanced. Even if the responses are not arguments, they are not very far. Second, rational discussion does not have to start with arguments right away. According to the pragma-dialectical account (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) of the dramaturgy of rational discussion – the best developed account available –, the parties must first complete the opening stage, i.e. to clarify their commitments and agree on the rules of the discussion. So what the disputants are doing in these exchanges is indeed what they should be doing in the early stages of a rational discussion.

This idea, however, immediately gives rise to another explanation of why we have here a failure a rational discussion. The problem is perhaps the discussion somehow *gets stuck in the opening stage*. They parties just keep elaborating on their commitments, making note of what they accept and reject from the other participant’s commitments but never quite advance to the argumentative stage.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sometimes they venture into that stage, but then immediately pull back.[[8]](#footnote-8) In so far as the debate gets stuck in the opening stage, it violates the norm of the ideal procedure and to that extent it counts as a failure.

There are things to be said in favor of this explanation. The questions raised in the posts have many ramifications, there are lots of positions to occupy and lots of arguments to adduce. The issues are also controversial, and the participants are aware of this, so they cannot assume that they agree on most points. If they want to make a serious effort to resolve their disagreements it makes good sense to explore in detail where they stand. Generally speaking, the more complex and controversial the issue is, the more time is needed for stage setting. On the other hand, the conditions are not favorable for carrying out the agenda. Most participants lack the time and the energy to carry on the discussion. One may need to wait long for a response. One may enter too many debates. As a result, the participants lose interest in pursuing the debate, which terminates before they would reach the point where they could present their arguments.

All this is true, but it does not provide an explanation, because it is psychologically unrealistic that the participants commence the debate with the hope of carrying it through but then come to realize that they can’t. The limitations of time, energy and interest are things the participants are well aware of. So why should they undertake to chart their agreements and disagreements carefully if they know they are going to quit before long? Why take the trouble? There must be some other explanation.

3. Developing one’s ideas

The idea considered in the previous section, that these exchanges are not fully rational, stems from a *particular understanding* of their purpose. They are viewed as attempts to resolve a disagreement. In current argumentation theory it is generally accepted that there is an intimate connection between the kind of dialogue which aims at the rational resolution of conflict – a persuasion dialogue, as Walton calls it (1989)[[9]](#footnote-9) – and argument. Arguments, even though they occur in a wide range of dialogues, are primarily devices of persuasion dialogue, and in persuasion dialogues it is mandatory to produce arguments. If the writers of the comments engage in persuasion dialogue, it is their duty to offer arguments proper, and in so far as they fail to do so, they fall short of the ideal of rational discussion.

I think, however, that there is another way of looking at the comments. As a first step, consider the first exchange and suppose that instead of saying what he actually says, Henry Chinaski says this:

OK, suppose you are right, and free will does not exist. What do you think about the meaning of life then?

This is not an objection but a question. It does not actually assert that the nonexistence of free will entails lack of meaning. It certainly implies in the Gricean sense that there is some connection between free will and meaning – otherwise the two sentences would not be connected and Chinaski should indicate that he broaches another topic –, but the nature of the connection is unclear. What is interesting is that if Chinaski said that, liberum arbitrium could reply with the *same words* he actually uses. In this context liberum arbitrium’s response would clearly count as an elaboration of his view, and not as a reply to an objection.

Now consider the second exchange and imagine FMR saying:

In both cases interference may possibly result in more deaths than not doing anything, for instance, if the trolley is full of passengers. Do you accept then that rational decision might have disastrous consequences? Moreover, I absolutely disagree with your enthusiasm for traders, generals and managers. People in these lines of works are notoriously unethical. They are narcissistic …

Hellsangel could respond to this *exactly* as he responds to FMR’s actual words. In this case he would not argue. He would explain his concept of rationality and announce his conviction that usefulness is what matters, and only losers are concerned with ethics.

The actual words conceived as responses to the fictitious moves would respect the logic of the fictitious dialogue. When asked about a closely related question, it is appropriate to elaborate on one’s position. When asked about the content of a concept, it is appropriate to

give an explanation. If one’s partner states his opinion, it is perfectly appropriate to signal disagreement. Moreover, it seems that the whole series of comments could be rewritten in this way. Objections would turn into queries, replies into elaborations, arguments into explanations. Put in the terms of speech act theory we might say that the propositional content of the utterances would remain the same but their illocutionary force would change.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The possibility of this transformation may give us some idea what participants doing if they are not engaged in persuasion dialogue, i.e. their purpose is not to resolve their disagreement. I propose that they are best seen as trying to *arrive at a plausible account* of the matter at hand. Arriving at a plausible account involves both articulating it clearly and gaining new insights, i.e. improving and enriching the initial conception. Entering a dialogue with the purpose of arriving at a plausible account is just as reasonable as entering a dialogue with the purpose of resolving a disagreement. A discussion may help us to a better view for at least two reasons. First, because we are forced to formulate our account more carefully. Second, because others may direct us to questions we have not thought about, may challenge us to consider the consequences, raise difficulties we have not realized.

I will refer to the project of arriving at a plausible account as developing one’s account or *development*, for short. I use this term because it stands both for articulation, i.e. making clearer and improving, i.e. making better. In fact, these two aspects cannot be sharply distinguished. A view cannot be sharply separated from its linguistic formulation, so there is no clear-cut boundary between expressing an idea better and expressing a slightly different, but better idea.

I think the exchanges in the comments are best understood as *falling in between* a persuasion dialogue and a development type dialogue. We clearly observe a confrontation of opinions, which is the starting point of persuasion dialogue, but which is also often present in dialogues aimed at development. We find arguments, but the participants often seem to be merely laying out their opinions. Most importantly, instead of arguments proper we mostly observe borderline cases. This dual character, that the participants may both be taken as arguing and as performing speech acts characteristic of developing views is a mark of the fact that it is not clear what is the stake: to convince or to lay out one’s account in a coherent fashion.

4. Development and persuasion

I turn now to theoretical issues. First I will explore the similarities between persuasion dialogue and development, then I will go on to suggest that development should be recognized as a separate and independent ideal type of argumentative speech.

The account of the characteristics of the arguments in the comments proposed in the previous section was based on the similarity between the moves made in a persuasion dialogue and the moves made in a dialogue aimed at development. The similarities can be multiplied. Failing to address the opponent’s objection in a persuasion dialogue is a fault which may suggest that one’s position is indefensible, whereas failure to answer a request for explanation in a development dialogue may suggest that one has not thought of the issue hard enough and his view, as it stands, is not acceptable. What explains these similarities is that development aims at a plausible account, which has a good chance of getting things right, and a plausible account is one which rests on good arguments and can fend off objections, i.e. which is likely to prove defensible a persuasion dialogue.

This last point may sound trivial. After all, if the chances of success in a persuasion dialogue were wholly independent of plausibility, persuasion dialogue would not be a more prudent way of finding the better view than flipping a coin. The point I want to make is deeper than this: there are *direct connections between plausibility and argumentative defensibility*, i.e. the features which determine plausibility – the *epistemic virtues and vices*, as it were – *constitute starting points for arguments and objections*. Many arguments do not merely indicate that there are epistemic virtues and vices, they show the virtues and vices themselves.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To make the point more tangible, let us consider what makes an account plausible. A *plausible account*

1. should be coherent with the views we accept both in (a) the negative and (b) the positive sense of coherence,
2. should be sufficiently rich.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Let us take these one by one. (1a) The negative sense of coherence is that the account should not be inconsistent with anything else we believe. If an account contradicts views we accept, those may serve as premises for arguments against it. So an account violating (1a) is vulnerable to objections.

(1b) expresses the requirement that the account should not be a hodge-podge of unrelated ideas and should also be connected to the views we had prior to developing the account. The connections which create coherence are *inferential connections*. Let me focus on the inferential connections between the account and the views we had before starting the development. These inferential connections come in two kinds. First, there may be inferences leading from other views we accept to the account in question. Second, the account may provide explanations for what we already believe to be the facts. Both kinds of inferential connection can be, in principle, utilized to argue for the account. In the case of inferential connections leading from the accepted views to the account this is trivial.

When it comes to explanatory connections the situation is not that simple, since the fact that an account explains certain things cannot be automatically turned into an argument for it. The explanatory character provides basis for an argument only if the account in question gives the best explanation; if that is the case, we may give an abductive argument in its favor, an argument resting on an inference to the best explanation. Suppose, however, that the account is not the best explanation, because there is an alternative which is better. If that is so, the existence of a superior rival may give grounds to an argument against the account. Putting the two possibilities together yields the following. If the account is expected to be explanatory, then the degree of its explanatory success can be either used as an argument for it, or as an argument against it. Summarizing (1b), the better an account coheres with our prior views, the more resources we have to produce arguments to support it and the less resources there are to support its rivals.

Turning now to (2), an account is sufficiently rich if it covers the ground it should, if it does not leave the important questions unanswered. Richness is not merely a practical virtue, it is also a feature which contributes to the plausibility of the account because it shows that the coherence is not achieved through steering clear of problems. Gary Gutting puts this point nicely:

The mere fact of developing a claim in some detail may serve to persuade us of its plausibility. Since more detail is likely to lead to problems, particularly when ideas are extended beyond their original domain, the more thoroughly and extensively a claim is developed without encountering problems, the more likely it is to be correct. (Gutting, 2009, 77)

The idea is that we may maintain coherence by carefully limiting the scope of our account to issues we know it can handle. For instance, facing a question we can only answer by relying on assumptions which do not dovetail with our account, we may invent a reason why that is a special case and why we do not need to address it.[[13]](#footnote-13) But coherence achieved by illicit means like this does not testify to the plausibility to the account, or, to put it differently, it secures merely the appearance of plausibility. Sufficient richness expresses the expectation that no such tricks should be employed. What is worth seeing that employing such tricks is similar to manipulating the outcome of a debate by setting up the agenda in biased fashion so that one can present the arguments in favor his view but prevent the opponent from making the best case for a different position. On the other hand, sufficient richness is similar to successful defense of a position in a debate the agenda of which has not been manipulated to assure unfair advantage to one of the parties.

Summing it up, a coherent account is one which has many arguments going for it but few against it, and a sufficiently rich account is one which can be successfully defended without manipulating the agenda of the debate. It is *in virtue of these connections* between epistemic quality and defensibility through arguments that there are *structural similarities* between the moves made in a development dialogue and a persuasion dialogue.

Owing to these similarities the two dialogues often imitate one another: one may be engaged in development and behave as he were engaged in persuasion and the other way round. The first direction is, of course, well-known: one often develops an account in a debate with virtual opponents, saying things like „someone might object, that … however…”. The reverse direction has not received much attention, but it also happens that in a persuasion dialogue one, as it were, switches into the development mode. The reason is that one cannot foresee what the opponent has in store. If the opponent comes up with an objection one did not reckon with, the views one is already committed to may not provide sufficient grounds to answer. Suppose the objection relies on an inference which is valid in the appropriate sense, so one must challenge one of the premises. The views one had already been committed to before the objection was raised may not provide premises to argue for the falsity of the opponent’s premise. One is then forced to search for a new claim one can use as a premise. He puts forward a claim that seems suitable and waits for the opponent’s response. By putting forward the claim, however, he does not automatically commit himself to it, as it is witnessed by the fact that he may not be willing to take great pains to defend it as he would do if it really mattered. He is more like experimenting with it. If it appears to work out, i.e. if the opponent does not point out that it clashes with his prior commitments, only then will he treat as a genuine commitment. He behaves as he were in the business of developing an account even though his purpose is to defend a position.

Let me change now to the second issue. Starting with the previous section I was speaking as if development were an *independent type* of argumentative dialogue, which is different from persuasion dialogue. But is there any reason to distinguish this type of dialogue?

Here is how one may argue that there is not. True as it may well be that developing one’s views sometimes involves something like an internal dialogue, but that is for cognitive science study and not for argumentation studies. Argumentation studies is only concerned with public speech. So let us consider, therefore, someone developing his views publicly in the form of a monologue. We have then two possibilities: he does not say anything that may qualify as argument or he spells out his view by occasionally putting forward sets of claims which can be taken as arguments at least in a broad sense. The former case is clearly irrelevant for argumentation studies, in the latter one we may take him to be engaged in persuasion dialogue with virtual opponents, and analyze his performance with the same conceptual tools we employ in analyzing genuine persuasion dialogues. We may readily acknowledge that he is not really trying to persuade someone and that there is no conflict of opinion to resolve, but that does not render the analytic tools inappropriate: we can still speak of premises, intermediate conclusions, clarifications, and point out various errors like circular reasoning. If someone is simulating persuasive speech, his speech can be analyzed as if it was really produced with the intention to persuade. The point just made carries over to situations in which develops his views in conversation with others: if he does not formulate arguments, his performance is irrelevant, if he does, we may apply the analytic tools we use in reconstructing and criticizing arguments occurring in persuasion dialogues. Either case, argumentation study does not gain anything by distinguishing the category of development, there is no theoretical job for it to do.

Nevertheless, there are both empirical and theoretical reasons to reject this argument. As for *empirical reasons*, I have already provided one example in the analysis of the exchanges in the comments. Lacking the concept of development we cannot make sense of the presence of what I called borderline arguments. We would only have two options, neither of which is promising. We may take the writers as merely putting forward their opinions, but by doing so we would simply ignore the argument-like structures they deliver. Or we may regard them as conducting a genuine persuasion dialogue, but then we cannot fully explain why their arguments have such dubious status.

The *theoretical reasons* consist in pointing out that development has its own *rules* which do not quite agree with that of persuasion dialogue. By rules I mean the standards or prescriptions specifying how one engaging in a certain kind of dialogue should proceed and by reference to which his actual performance can be evaluated and criticized. Even though theorists do not entirely agree on the status of the rules or their precise formulation, the need for such rules is generally acknowledged, especially in connection with the identification of fallacies.[[14]](#footnote-14) I am going to give three examples showing that the rules applying in a situation in which we aim to resolve our disagreements in a rational fashions and the ones applying in a situation in which we endeavor to develop our views are indeed different.[[15]](#footnote-15)

First, what objections and difficulties should one address? In a persuasion dialogue it is one’s duty to respond to the objections which have actually been formulated. It is also advisable to address objections which haven’t been put forward but which are likely to be raised. However, it does not serve the aim of a persuasion dialogue to take up issues which are unlikely to be raised. To bring in such considerations would merely prolong the debate. It would be also be unwise from the point of strategic maneuvering: why offer one’s opponent another target to shoot at? On the other hand, if one is trying to develop his position he needs to give due consideration to all serious worries even if those worries would not occur to anyone but himself. Or consider difficulties which are not genuine. If the opponent in a persuasion dialogue puts forth a very bad argument or a red herring one should respond no matter how ludicrous the argument is. In development, however, one should only be concerned with genuine difficulties.

Second, there is the issue of relevance. Suppose a discussion starts with the issue of Occupy Wall Street, whether the movement has a clear agenda and in what respects it is likely or unlikely to succeed. Should the discussion extend to other Occupy protests? Is that relevant? That depends – but it does not depend on the same things in persuasion and in development. In a persuasion dialogue the participants may agree about relevance or irrelevance and conduct the dialogue accordingly, but if they disagree they have to argue for their choice. One cannot determine the direction of the dialogue unilaterally. If one is engaged in development one does not have to gain the agreement of his partner. He may simply announce what he is interested in and what he is developing a position about.

It is closely connected to the issue of relevance that the clear cases of successful persuasion dialogues and development dialogues unfold differently. The former have a well-defined agenda, the discussion stays focused, each move has a function that is easy to identify. The latter lack that type of tight organization. The topic keeps shifting, new issues are raised before all aspects of the previous ones are thoroughly investigated, and there may not be a definite direction into which the discussion is going. This tendency is present in the exchanges in the comments, but there are better examples, like the debates between Settembrini and Naphta in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. If we construe them as persuasion dialogues, they are clearly unsuccessful. Viewed as instances of development they are resounding success: the characters clearly manage to formulate coherent pictures of many issues.

Third, how should the discussion terminate? The pragma-dialectical rules of critical discussion (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) prescribe that in the concluding stage the participants should take stock of what has happened: which claims have been defended successfully, which ones have been refuted, which ones have been left undecided. Even if these rules are rather demanding and are frequently violated, they have a point. If our aim is the rational resolution of disagreement, we should be clear if or in which questions we have succeeded. Development does not require a similar procedure, because in a development dialogue the partners do not have a common aim in the sense they have one in a persuasion dialogue. In persuasion dialogues both parties aim to settle the differences and they succeed or fail together; in development dialogues success and failure is individual, so there is no point coming to agree about it.

The considerations adduced here in favor of development as an independent type of argumentative dialogue are not meant as decisive. They merely indicate that the concept should not be dismissed as redundant because there is theoretical work it may accomplish. The concept still needs to be worked out, i.e. we must supply a rich description of it which compares to the one we have of persuasion dialogue. If that task were accomplished the, theoretical reasons would become stronger and would also connect to the empirical reasons. A rich description of this type of dialogue would allow us to see in exactly what way it differs from persuasion dialogue, and that would also help to identify the actual exchanges which can best be seen as instantiating the type.

I would like to close with some intuitive considerations – I would not call them call them reasons – why it seems worthwhile to pursue this project. In the last couple of decades argumentation theorists have focused on persuasion dialogue as the kind of context in which argumentation can be studied in its purest form. This has resulted in lots of valuable insights, still the idea of persuasion dialogue does not quite match our experience of those highly intellectual discussions which are detached of practical matters. If we are debating such matters as what the most efficient and affordable heating for a country house is, our intention often agrees with the objective of persuasion dialogue: to resolve the conflict rationally. In serious intellectual discussion this is rarely the case, and I do not mean that we do not wish to win the debate – the egoistic intentions regularly show up in all sorts of debate. What I am thinking of is that we do not regard reaching consensus as particularly important. What we really want is to getting a clearer picture of the issue.[[16]](#footnote-16) Think of starting a debate in spite of being certain that we will not come to an agreement. This happens in the humanities and also in everyday intellectual discussions all the time. Or think of finding a debate most useful or even exhilarating in spite of failing to move an inch closer to the resolution. Why is this satisfaction if the debate failed as a persuasion dialogue? The idea of development matches much better the purposes we have in intellectual debates.

One may try to put aside these considerations by pointing out that the purpose of participants and the purpose of the debate may differ. True as this is, there must be limits to this difference. One who is not driven by ulterior motives does not normally enter a debate the purpose of which is not at least one of his own purposes. So why should one enter a persuasion dialogue if he is not interested in persuasion?

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1. The research leading to this paper was supported by Hungarian Scientific Research Fund grant no. 109456. The comments cited have been translated by Orsolya Reich. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the name of the literary alter ego of Charles Bukowski in some of his novels. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. His next response is as follows:

   Is culture then the set of the things by which we divert our attention from the fact that life has no meaning? Has our life only got biological meaning like a bacterium? How disappointing!

   Disappointing does not mean untenable, so he might be simply contemplating these deeply disturbing consequences without rejecting hem. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. FMR makes that clear earlier: “In both case I vote for passivity, i.e. non-interference. In other words: for fatalism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If it is not the rational character of decisions with potentially disastrous consequences which FMR challenges but their moral value, then one cannot respond by saying that these are still rational. This is why Hellsangel cannot be taken to understand FMR to be arguing that decisions with potentially disastrous consequences are morally wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It follows from the character of the posts that it should be so. The posts end with an open question the correct answer to which cannot be recognized at first sight, because there is no well-defined criterion of correctness, as opposed to e.g. chess puzzles. A simple answer, therefore, will not do. Moreover, what the answer is supplemented with must have the force of argument, rather than a mere explanation. An explanation would be appropriate if the reader accepted that the answer is right but would not understand why. But the writer of the comment has no reason believe that the readers will accept his answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is not the same point Krabbe (2007) warns about it. Krabbe is worried about a theoretical issue, namely that the opening stage is characterized in a way that it practically takes over the job of the argumentative stage. I assume here that this problem has been solved. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of course, the opening and the argumentative stages are stages in the logical and not the temporal order; they are defined as consecutive stages only in the ideal model of how we should go about resolving our disagreements in rational fashion. In real world exchanges the participants rarely know in advance which of their commitments matter for the resolution of the dispute, so they cannot put all their cards on the table right at the beginning. As a result, the give and take of arguments is often suspended for a while so that the participants can clarify the commitments their new arguments involve. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Theorists describe this type of dialogue differently, e.g. the pragma-dialecticians’ critical discussion is not quite the same as Walton’s persuasion dialogue. I am interested in common core of these characterizations. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The possibility of this transformation is not completely trivial. All propositional contents do not suit all illocutionary acts, e.g. certain things can be promised but cannot be ordered. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Not all arguments. For example, an appeal to expert opinion shows merely that the account is plausible but does not display the features which make it plausible. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Explaining plausibility by these features is what epistemologists call the coherentist view about justification. I do not want to endorse coherentism *tout court*, I only hold it the right view about the aspects of justification which can be expressed verbally. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is roughly what Popper (1959) calls *ad hoc* hypothesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For instance, offering to meet halfway is fully legitimate in a negotiating a price, but it is a fallacy in critical discussion; e.g. if one historian of economy says that inflation was 10% in a given period, and the other says 14%, one cannot offer agreeing on 12%. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Blair (1998) makes a related point: many of the pragma-dialectical rules do not apply in cases when the audience is not present, so cannot respond at once, and might not even be identified. His target, however, is different: he attacks the dialogue model of argumentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dana Phillips (2008) also objects to indentifying a productive debate with one which leads to agreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)