

Defining Reasonableness Online:

A Case Study of an Internet Forum about the Creation / Evolution Controversy

1. Introduction

Worldviews are communicated to the public on a regular daily base. In the public sphere, conventional media like television and newspaper report, question, confirm, analyze, exploit, ridicule, impose and debate our own and other's worldviews, shaping our knowledge and opinions about them. While Goodnight 25 years ago rightly speculated, "the public forum inevitably limits participation to representative spokespersons" (1982, 219), today the limits on participation in the public sphere are heavily challenged by modern communication technology. The Internet allows ordinary citizens to get up from their sofas and have their say in public discourse that shapes their worldviews. They are able to partake in the public sphere from the private domain of their study or living room. This tremendous extension toward the private sphere with its fleeting, arbitrary rules (Goodnight, 1982) invites a reassessment of the quality of the public sphere.

In this paper I will contribute to this reassessment with a case study of an Internet forum devoted to the debate of the occidental worldviews of 'creationism' and 'evolutionism'. I will make use of the extended pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation that supports integrated analysis and evaluation of the dialectical and rhetorical aspects of argumentative discourse (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992 & 2004; Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1998 & 2001). In section 2 I set forth this integrated theory and elaborate on the rhetorical construct of strategic maneuvering. In section 3 I discuss how diverging starting points can aggravate discussions across separate fields of argumentation; a pertinent issue for deliberation between different

worldviews. In section 4 I analyze forum excerpts that illustrate how creationist and evolutionist discussants negotiate their widely separate grounds for deliberation under the supervision of forum moderators. In section 5 of this paper I reflect on the analysis from the stance of discourse design developed by Aakhus and Jackson (2004) and discuss the implications for online communication of worldviews. Finally, in section 6 I put forward the conclusions of this case study.

2. Pragma-Dialectics and Strategic Maneuvering

The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation employs an ideal model of a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion, prescribing a Popper-inspired critical testing of argumentative speech acts. The model depicts the ideal critical discussion as one in which compliance with 1) a stage-guided dialectical procedure and 2) ten prohibitive rules retains argumentative reasonableness. The participants in such a discussion maximize chances for resolving their difference of opinion on the merits of the good argument by following the four dialectical discussion stages and avoiding unreasonable moves as prohibited by the ten rules. The argumentation analyst utilizes this model to track down and identify any deviations from the ideal in actual polemic discussions. The actual discussant commits a fallacy if she violates any of the ten rules. For example, would she be as bold to personally attack her interlocutor (by verbal, or any other means), then the *argumentum ad hominem* fallacy would be identified as a violation of rule one, the Freedom Rule (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004):

*Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints
or from calling standpoints into question.*

In a critical discussion, making personal accusations or calling names is a sure way to disqualify your opponent as a discussion partner and to hamper optimal dispute resolution.

Thus, the ideal model of a critical discussion epitomizes argumentative discourse in which participants strive to reasonably resolve a difference of opinion. They follow the prescribed procedure and observe the rules, which does not guarantee resolution of their disagreement, but which does exclude its obstruction. The model embodies the normative approach which is indispensable for proper evaluation of argumentative soundness, and which also makes it difficult to escape the implication that actual practice, by definition, deviates from ideal theory. Indeed, the critical discussion as a structural empirical phenomenon has not yet been substantiated.

People break rules, discussants commit fallacies. This empirical fact not only upholds the need for a comprehensive analytical model for discussion, it also poses the quandary of why fallacies are committed in the first place. If these ten rules indeed promote effective dispute resolution, then why break them? The general expectation here is that in practice, discussants are not solely after resolution proper, but also after resolving the difference *in their advantage* (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1998 & 2001).

When people engage in a critical discussion, they set themselves to the task of establishing a balance between the formal expectation of reasonableness and their personal incentive for reaching a favorable outcome. Thus, they negotiate dialectical and rhetorical objectives. The dialectical objective defines the limitations of reasonableness; within these borders the rhetorical objective seeks to exploit possibilities for the discussant to ‘win’ the discussion. The tension between the two

objectives induces strategic maneuvering, a concept that makes pragma-dialectical analysis more comprehensive in theory and more justified in practice.

Strategic maneuvers take on many different forms, ranging from very slight and subtle, as in using politeness to increase an opponent's willingness to accept an arguer's views; to very bold and audacious, as when a rape convict would redefine his act of crime as an act of love. Strategic maneuvers are analytically identified in three different categories: adapting to *audience demand*, selecting from the *topical potential* in the discussion, and exploiting *presentational devices* (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2001). In any argumentative speech act some aspect of strategic maneuvering is always present and operates in the dynamic of dialogical interplay between protagonist and antagonist in a critical discussion.

Each of the four stages in the critical discussion constitutes a specific dialectical aim that relates to the rhetorical aim of potential strategic maneuvers in that stage (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2001). In the *confrontation stage*, the dialectical aim is to identify and define the disagreement in terms of (a) standpoint(s); in the *opening stage*, discussants strive to define the discussion's point of departure in terms of shared starting points; in the *argumentation stage*, the dialectical objective is to put forward and critically test arguments for and against standpoints; finally, in the *concluding stage*, discussants try to agree on the (un)acceptability of the disputed standpoints (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).

These are the goals that discussants should meet per dialectical stage to resolve a dispute and which they will try to attain to their own best interest when maneuvering strategically. For instance, in the *argumentation stage*, one would try to put forward argumentation that will likely lead to the acceptance of *one's own standpoint*. One common way to realize this is to select from the *topical potential* only those

justificatory arguments that are prone to be immune to critical doubt. As an illustration, a pro-choice adherent in the abortion debate would decide to put forward arguments promoting women's rights in favor of arguments claiming that pro-choice legislation would bring down the number of unwanted births of mentally challenged children. Both types of argument are part of the debate's topical potential, as both could justify pro-choice laws, however, the latter is presumably not as resistant to criticism as the former as it reflects an ethically questionable attitude towards the mentally challenged.

In this illustration, the pro-choice adherent probably made a good choice in selecting her type of argument; this strategic maneuver is not only potentially effective in completing the *argumentation stage* in her favor, it is also very supportive in producing reasonable arguments in a pragma-dialectical sense. Strategic maneuvering occurs on the sliding scale between reasonable argument and fallacy. The degree of discordance between the negotiated dialectical and rhetorical aims is decisive for the reasonableness of the strategic maneuver. A compromise between the conflicting objectives does not necessarily produce a fallacy, but as the opposing forces become increasingly incompatible, strategic maneuvers threaten to derail from the line of reasonable argument (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005). Such a derailment is a fallacy, identified by the violation of a discussion rule¹.

3. Fields of Argumentation and Disparate Starting Points

Argumentative discourse is embedded in a constitutive cultural context that stretches far beyond the immediate polemical context and determines the very foundations of

¹ Delineations between sound and derailed strategic maneuvers in specific cases can and should be made in more detail than only by reference to the violated discussion rule. Soundness conditions for a strategic maneuver can be constructed on the basis of the dialectical or critical aims of the discussion stage in which the maneuver occurs, and the rhetorical or persuasive aims the specific argument type serves in this context. Such has been endeavored for the *argument from authority* (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003) and for *accusations of inconsistency* (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005).

argumentative conduct. The cultural context sets the stage for discussion in terms of content, accepted presuppositions, procedure, standards of manner and rationality, etcetera. It provides arguers with the necessary common grounds to ultimately arrive at agreement over disputed issues. While a shared cultural backdrop is clearly conducive to reasonableness in argumentation; discordance in culturally determined assumptions could seriously hamper effective dispute resolution.

Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993) recognize this potential problem. Their analysis of a confrontation between two fundamentalist Christian preachers and the student body of a college campus reveals the consequences of two parties entering discussion with widely disparate presuppositions. When the preachers visit campuses, interactions between the students and preachers usually become hostile. The preachers, who are there to witness in the name of the Bible and condemn behavior that deviates from a Christian ideal, accuse students of fornication and drug-abuse. The students' response is to heckle and ridicule, as they cheer and applaud at the preachers' outrageous portrayals of campus life and return the accusations of ungodly behavior. Typically, the episode finally breaks down into a mutual exchange of unreasonable moves that irrevocably shuts down any remote possibility for unison in viewpoints.

The analysis of Van Eemeren et al. (1993; see also Jacobs, 1983) that explains the breakdown in communication involves an understanding of the incommensurable predispositions held by the two parties as a divergence in starting points caused by a difference in their respective fields of argumentation. The starting points are the material and procedural assumptions the parties base their argumentation on, drawing from their respective fields of argumentation, which, following Toulmin, embrace the aforementioned cultural context of discourse. Van Eemeren et al. conclude: "Given as

starting points divergent perspectives as extreme as those studied here, progress in resolving differences of opinion may prove to be impossible for all practical purposes” (1993, 167).

Indeed, according to the pragma-dialectical theory (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004), parties cannot engage in a critical discussion if they fail to establish common grounds through shared starting points. The ideal model of a critical discussion prescribes that after discussants have defined their difference of opinion in the confrontation stage, they set out on the opening stage wherein they negotiate the ‘rules and roles’ in the discussion. Much of this negotiation often remains implicit since many times rules can be taken for granted. For instance, certain procedural rules exist, such as burden of proof, that often need no negotiation. The same goes for substantial rules, for example that many interlocutors take as a common starting point that women and men deserve equal rights. For interlocutors coming from the same argumentative field, the opening stage might involve no more than a single utterance like, “Well, this is what I think and I will tell you why”. They stick to a very minimal opening stage, relying on the tacit existence of a sufficient basis for meaningful discussion (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, 59-60).

However, minimizing the opening stage could be grounded in a faulty assumption of shared starting points resulting in failures in critically testing arguments in the argumentation stage. In the witnessing and heckling episode described above, the two parties never reached agreement over the authority of the Bible; the preachers held it as an undeniable material starting point, while the students refused to universally concede to it. In theory, this should not be a problem, as long as one of the discussants explicitly calls into question the concerned starting point, upon which a *meta-discussion* would follow, aimed to take away disagreement over the starting point

(Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, 143). “[S]uch a meta-discussion should be conducted *before* or *after* the original discussion of the initial standpoint: A discussant who confuses a meta-discussion with the original discussion will probably (intentionally or not) produce the undesired effect that *both* discussions get into difficulties” (ibidem, 168). But the preachers and students in the example never reached anything close to such a sharply delineated meta-discussion. Both sides steadfastly continued to argue along their own lines of reasonableness, disregarding the difference in respective fields of argumentation and thus both producing unreasonable moves in the eyes of the other. They neglected the opening stage, reached no tacit agreement over starting points and failed completely in their attempt to entertain the argumentation stage.

The example of Van Eemeren et al. (1993) appears to support the idea that people who approach a disagreement from separate fields of argumentation will have difficulty establishing a viable set of starting points and will therefore fail to engage in an actual critical discussion. The verity of this expectation would have drastic implications for the present-day discursive practice of communicating worldviews. As dominant systems of belief sustain a tremendous expansion of debate through modern communication technologies, the great divides would only be amplified and further polarized. Following the ‘hypothesis of field-incommensurability’, the increased rate and intensity of confrontation would invoke a proliferation of unreasonable discourse between adherents of diverging worldviews. So how does public discourse change as it negotiates worldviews through widely disseminating communication media? What consequences for the quality of discussion are carried by advanced communication technologies that should facilitate debate between people coming from radically diverging fields of argumentation?

To further explore these questions, I set out to analyze the debate between two great competing occidental worldviews, ‘evolutionism’ and ‘creationism’, carried out through a modern digitalized medium, the Internet forum. The specific forum in question can be found at www.evcforum.net and offers open access to anyone with an Internet connection and e-mail address.

4. The EvC Forum

Running the queries “creation evolution forum”, “creation evolution debate”, “creation evolution discussion” in Google all yield this forum as the number-one hit, including the description: “*EvC Forum: Creation versus Evolution. Multi-Forum Discussion Board dedicated to developing a better understanding of the issues on both sides of the debate*”. The other query results following this top position are also predominantly links to debate forums devoted to the topic, but they all explicitly advocate one side of the controversy. This selection, among the other alternatives, seemed most likely to yield an instantiation of public discourse unbiased by a strong pull to either technical scientific discourse or private religious debate, hence invite confrontations between advocates of both sides of the debate.

The forum’s homepage (“*EvC Forum; Understanding through knowledge and discussion*”) gives access to a Reference library, with links to information sources related to the controversy and there is a link to an overview page where all hosted forums are topically categorized. All posted threads are open for perusal to unregistered users, but replying or posting on the forum requires registration. Registration only requires a nickname and an e-mail address. New members are directed to the forum guidelines:

“Forum Guidelines

1. Follow all moderator requests.

2. Please stay on topic for a thread. Open a new thread for new topics.
3. When introducing a new topic, please keep the message narrowly focused. Do not include more than a few points.
4. Points should be supported with evidence and/or reasoned argumentation. Address rebuttals through the introduction of additional evidence or by enlarging upon the argument. Do not repeat previous points without further elaboration. Avoid bare assertions.
5. Bare links with no supporting discussion should be avoided. Make the argument in your own words and use links as supporting references.
6. Avoid lengthy cut-n-pastes. Introduce the point in your own words and provide a link to your source as a reference. If your source is not on-line you may contact the Site Administrator to have it made available on-line.
7. Never include material not your own without attribution to the original source.
8. Avoid any form of misrepresentation.
9. Do not participate as more than one ID. You may change your user ID by going to your Profile Page and creating a new alias.
10. Always treat other members with respect. Argue the position, not the person. Avoid abusive, harassing and invasive behavior. Avoid needling, hectoring and goading tactics.” (<http://www.evcforum.net/cgi-bin/PresentHTML.cgi?action=html&file=ForumRules.html&title=Forum+Guidelines>)

The forum currently counts 3473 active members, of which 13 have moderator qualification. The moderators all have alternate aliases without moderator qualification, with which they participate as regular members in the debate. The two aliases are distinct and belong recognizably to the same person; for example, member “Phat” uses moderator-alias “AdminPhat”. Moderators frequently engage in discussions about violations, as they justify their decisions for suspension of certain members. For this discussion a separate forum exists, where in just over four years time members and moderators posted more than 2700 messages, discussing rationales for moderation procedures. These meta-discussions are good sources of information about how the forum is designed and used. In the following analysis I will draw both from the meta-discussions and from the actual debate to explore the discussants’ management of divergent starting points in the online discussion.

Analysis

In one dominant discussion that frequently surfaces in the forum on moderation procedures, members and moderators debate about possible interpretations of the

forum guidelines. An interesting topic about “scientific standards” for debate reveals the different debating norms that creationists and evolutionists take to be appropriate. The discussion was heated from the start and ultimately culminated in the permanent suspension of a prominent creationist forum member and moderator. This member started the meta-discussion with the heading “The standards are still unclear”:

[Faith, member]

(...)

Something is going to have to be finally determined about this endless problem of demanding that creationists meet scientific standards right down to the nitpicking about terminology and the reference to in-house journals.

(...)

Allowing people with a nonscientific background to think they are welcome to argue their case, only then to slap them around for not meeting this or that supposed scientific standard (and who knows really if the supposed standard is valid?) is some kind of cruel practical joke. Spell it out. What do you want? What scientific degrees would be most helpful? What degree of experience do you require? What books must we have read?

(...)

TalkOrigins² provides a whole raft of such information for the unwary. It's a good idea, but what it does is drive people like me away. If that's what you want, MAKE IT CLEAR.

OTHERWISE, it ought to be reasonable to argue from common sense and ordinary English at least in fora designated for the purpose and not be accused of writing "nonsense" just because it doesn't meet the Guild criteria.

This excerpt of the meta-discussion on debating standards illustrates the general disagreement among forum members over the appropriate requirements for substantiation and evidence. Already the first sentence in Faith’s post suggests that she acknowledges the existence of “scientific standards” for debate, but that she finds they should apply differently to advocates of creationism. In the second paragraph of her post she openly questions the validity of the “supposed scientific standard”,

² www.talkorigins.org; this is another forum on the controversy that explicitly advocates the evolutionist perspective (second hit on the Google-search for discussions on the controversy).

implying either that scientific debating criteria are invalid by themselves, or that their adoption and employment in the forum are based on illegitimate interpretations. She ends her post with the clear message that the defective scientific standards should be dropped for certain discussions, as their clearer articulation and strict adherence would motivate her to abandon the forum.

Subsequent messages by other forum members narrow down the disagreement to the nature of evidence, portraying the evolutionists' understanding of it as limited to references to peer-reviewed papers. This kind of accusatory portrayals of the opponents' interpretation of what is good evidence is not uncommon in the meta-discussions. Evolutionists for their part tend to criticize creationists' method of substantiation to be limited to references to the Bible, as occurred in several other discussions:

[Brian, member]

To begin with the premise that the accuracy of an ancient book of faith is completely factual and then look at the evidence is contrary to the scientific method.

[Modulous, member]

I'm all for continuing to investigate rather than relying on 'this specific god did it as described in this specific piece of Bronze age writing'.

Confusion about the appropriate standards for debate is clearly the source of these disagreements. Advocates of different positions in the debate hold diverging procedural starting points about valid methods of substantiation of their claims, even though the rules of conduct are made available for all members. But as their formulation indeed leaves space for interpretation (What counts as evidence? What is sound reasoning? What to add to assertions to avoid their bareness?), forum moderators are forced to participate in the meta-discussions to clarify the exact requirements. Their rationales for suspending purportedly transgressing members allow some conclusions about the prevailing standards for substantiation. Sadly

however, moderators themselves also do not always unequivocally agree with each other on this issue. The forum does not give any clear insight into the hierarchy between moderators, but there are several occurrences of one moderator suspending the other, and even a moderator suspending (for 24 hours) the regular member-alias of the forum director. The lack of clarity about norms for evidence and reasoning thus exists on all levels, which invites members and moderators to make for ad hoc interpretations of forum rule 4 and which invites the analyst to study an abundance of frictional debate due to disparities in starting points.

Incommensurability

The design of the forum website pays minimal respect to the potential friction between starting points of evolutionists and creationists. Among the main categories of forums, two are clearly assigned to the discussion from separate sides of the controversy, namely “Science Forums” and “Social and Religious Issues”. Meta-discussions witness that the demand for scientific evidence weighs more heavily on discussions in the former, than in the latter category. So, creationists desiring to preach Biblical Truth would be encouraged to do so in the religious forums, but not in the science forums. However, this construction does not provide a solution to the problem of conflicting starting points, as the EvC Forum promotes discussion from and between both sides and therefore could not decide to completely ban creationists (including their religious starting points) from the science forums. If reinforced at all, the measure would ultimately take away any possibility for a critical discussion, conform the expectation of the hypothesis of field-incommensurability.

The invitation for arguers for both sides to partake in all forums invokes various kinds of behavior from the discussants, some of which are indeed in line with the incommensurability hypothesis. The prime example of forum behavior that shows the

incommensurability of arguers' fields is the thorough controversy around Faith's allegedly Christian fundamentalist style of deliberation. The issue became hotly contested as most prominent forum members joined to air their squarely opposing opinions. Finally, forum director Admin mingled in the dispute to point Faith to her transgressing behavior by quoting specific contributions:

[Admin, forum director]

Faith writes:

“That is a ridiculous and obvious point, Percy³, to which the obvious answer is that the Bible is not regarded by Biblical creationists as just a book, which I believe is how I answered, and if you will not accept Biblical creationist premises -- not for yourself or for EvC but as a simple statement of our position -- there is nothing more that can be said.”

This is another good example of why you experience so many problems here. Too many times the discussion comes down to your assertion that nothing more can be said. You can't repeatedly draw people into the middle of detailed discussions and then suddenly throw up your hands and quit, not without drawing moderator attention.

As everyone knows, there is always plenty that can be said. I'm not sure why you think it is reasonable to require that others "accept Biblical creationist premises" without your side having to make any effort at persuasion or argument. This is a debate site. The expectation is that there will be evidence and argumentation from each side for their respective positions. If you're not willing to discuss and defend your position, then you shouldn't be participating in a debate site. This isn't a creationist issue, it's just what a discussion is: give and take, back and forth and all that.

This meta-discussion continued for a month after this post, until finally Admin took action:

³ Admin's posts all end with the signature “—Percy / EvC Forum Director” and the same person uses the alias of Percy to participate on the forum as a regular member – the other regulars on the forum act to this knowledge.

[Admin, forum director]

It is with a heavy heart that I announce that Faith and her moderator counterpart AdminFaith have been permanently suspended. All I can say publicly is to cite unspecified irreconcilable differences. Faith has made innumerable contributions to EvC Forum in her time here, and for that we are profoundly grateful. We wish her well in all her endeavors both on and off the Internet.

Admin explicitly mentions the “irreconcilable differences” that hampered a critical discussion between Faith and other, predominantly evolutionist forum members. These differences according to Admin himself were not the result of Faith’s creationist stance, as he makes clear. However, Faith’s deliberation techniques do appear to be motivated by her conviction of what the creationist perspective entails. She cites the Bible as God’s word and universal Truth. To her, this very direct access to truth serves as a valid starting point in a scientific discussion and is a direct consequence of her literal interpretation of the Bible:

[Faith, member]

Speaking only for Biblical young earth creationism, we simply start with some facts we have in the Bible. (...) There is nothing unscientific about beginning with known facts, and nothing that keeps you from applying scientific method to all observations from that point.

This Biblical starting point is something absolute for Faith, as according to her its rejection by others remains inconsequential for its validity; it would be impossible for her to compromise it. Faith’s adherence to creationism as she understands it necessitates the starting point that Admin refuses to accept. His refusal is an act of forum guideline observance, and his suspension of Faith an act of guideline enforcement. Even though Admin as forum director claims an agnostic position in the creation / evolution controversy, in the appearance of his member-alias Percy he clearly advocates the evolutionist side. The stance to debate of the person behind these aliases is evident; universal Biblical truth is not to be accepted as a valid starting

point in the critical discussion on the forums. This stance moves him to the most final form of shutting an opponent out of the discussion.

Overture – building bridges

Before Admin came to his decision to place a permanent ban on Faith, he attempted to mitigate his own objections to her behavior and reach an understanding of her position. To that end, he posited the following exempting rule in one discussion that involved Faith:

[Admin, forum director]

I'm torn because on the one hand you're unable to stay within the Forum Guidelines, and on the other hand this is a very interesting discussion. Let us try a compromise. If you agree to participate in only a single thread at a time, I'll ignore your guidelines violations.

To everyone else: please do not respond in kind to Faith. Treat her and her ideas with honor and respect.

This time Faith's violations of the guidelines not only involved inadequate substantiation, but also name-calling, for instance:

[Faith, member]

[Mark24 writes:]

“If we cannot tell if a historical text is true or false, then it cannot help us to deduce the truth or falsity of any given proposal.”

One CAN tell, but YOU apparently can't if you make the perfectly asinine statement that nobody can tell whether Moses existed or not, the kind of asinine statement that the majority around here seem addicted to.

Oh blah blah blah to your sophomoric lecture on evidence.

Faith maneuvers strategically in the confrontation stage of the meta-discussion that should determine the validity of the starting point of Biblical Truth. She tries to get her standpoint accepted by immunizing it against doubt, dismissing such doubt as asinine. After that she disqualifies an alternative standpoint about what proper evidence should be by labeling it sophomoric. Her maneuvers derail as she violates the pragma-dialectical Freedom Rule, and also forum rule 10, which prescribes respect to other members and inhibits insults.

This is the kind of behavior Admin decided to tolerate and asked other members to tolerate but not copy, in order to save the discussion. The measure elicited a wide variety of reactions on the forum for meta-discussions about moderation procedures. Members signal the double standards that are essentially employed towards Faith and discuss the ulterior rationale. The following post is a typical expression of why what was also labeled “affirmative action” is important to the discussion:

[Wounded King, member]

(...) If we don't molycoddle the anti-evolutionist or christian fundamentalists they either get banned for their blatant infringements or run away. We have to give them some leeway unless we all want to spend our time sending ourselves smug little congratulatory messages about how right we all are to believe in evolution or atheism.

As moderators allow creationist principles as starting points for scientific debate, they rely on evolutionists' capability and willingness to concede to these premises if only for the sake of discussion. Innumerable cases exist on the forum where this reliance is clearly vain as evolutionists keep trying to convince creationists of the possibility of other truths besides that witnessed in the Bible. And often these attempts result in mutually offending episodes of the nature of Faith's post above. These episodes resemble the aforementioned witnessing and heckling episode of the preachers and students in that the discussants are “reasoning in ways that maintain the consistency between the assumed authority for their perspective as a field of argumentation and the fact that others are apparently not impressed by the force of the arguments generated by their perspective” (Van Eemeren et al., 1993, 164). In this way they are only interested in reinforcing their own position and ridiculing the other's. A reflecting post in the meta-discussions indeed suggests that the debate on the forum has a different goal than persuasion or dispute resolution:

[arachnophilia, member]

(...) nobody ever said this debate -- evolution v. creation -- was constructive. it's not. it doesn't decide anything in any places that matter, it doesn't affect schools or congress or churches. it rarely changes anybody's mind.

The rare occasion in which an evolutionist appears to accept creationist presuppositions is at best an expression of agnosticism, rather than a true concession of their starting point. Creationists, on the other hand, are more inclined to give in to their opponents' starting points, specifically those defining standards for substantiation. Unlike Faith, who so forcefully rejects demands for evidence in the fragment above, some creationists do strive for compliance with the forum's debating norms. As the scientifically oriented evolutionists typically already endorse these norms on beforehand, it makes sense to analyze the creationists' adoptions of these standards as strategic maneuvers that should make their persuasive endeavors more acceptable to their opponents. In other words, by means of abiding by forum guidelines of substantiation, creationists adapt to the demand of their evolutionist audience. In what follows I will analyze and evaluate one instance of such strategic maneuvers.

The following fragment is part of an ongoing discussion about what the writings of scholars like Newton and Galileo could mean for the evolutionist / creationist controversy. Modulous opened the discussion with quotes from these writings to show how they either warn against invoking an intelligent designer in scientific inquiry (Galileo), or exemplify how such an invocation turned out mistaken (Newton). Confidence criticized Modulous, claiming he misinterpreted the quotes and provided his own, creationist interpretations as the right ones. Modulous inferred that "we shouldn't allow the good book to provide us with insight into science" from the following quote by Galileo:

“He would not require us to deny sense and reason in physical matters which are set before our eyes and minds by direct experience or necessary demonstrations. (...) If the sacred scribes had had any intention of teaching people certain arrangements and motions of the heavenly bodies, or had they wished us to derive such knowledge from the Bible, then in my opinion they would not have spoken of these matters so sparingly in comparison with the infinite number of admirable conclusions which are demonstrated in that science.”

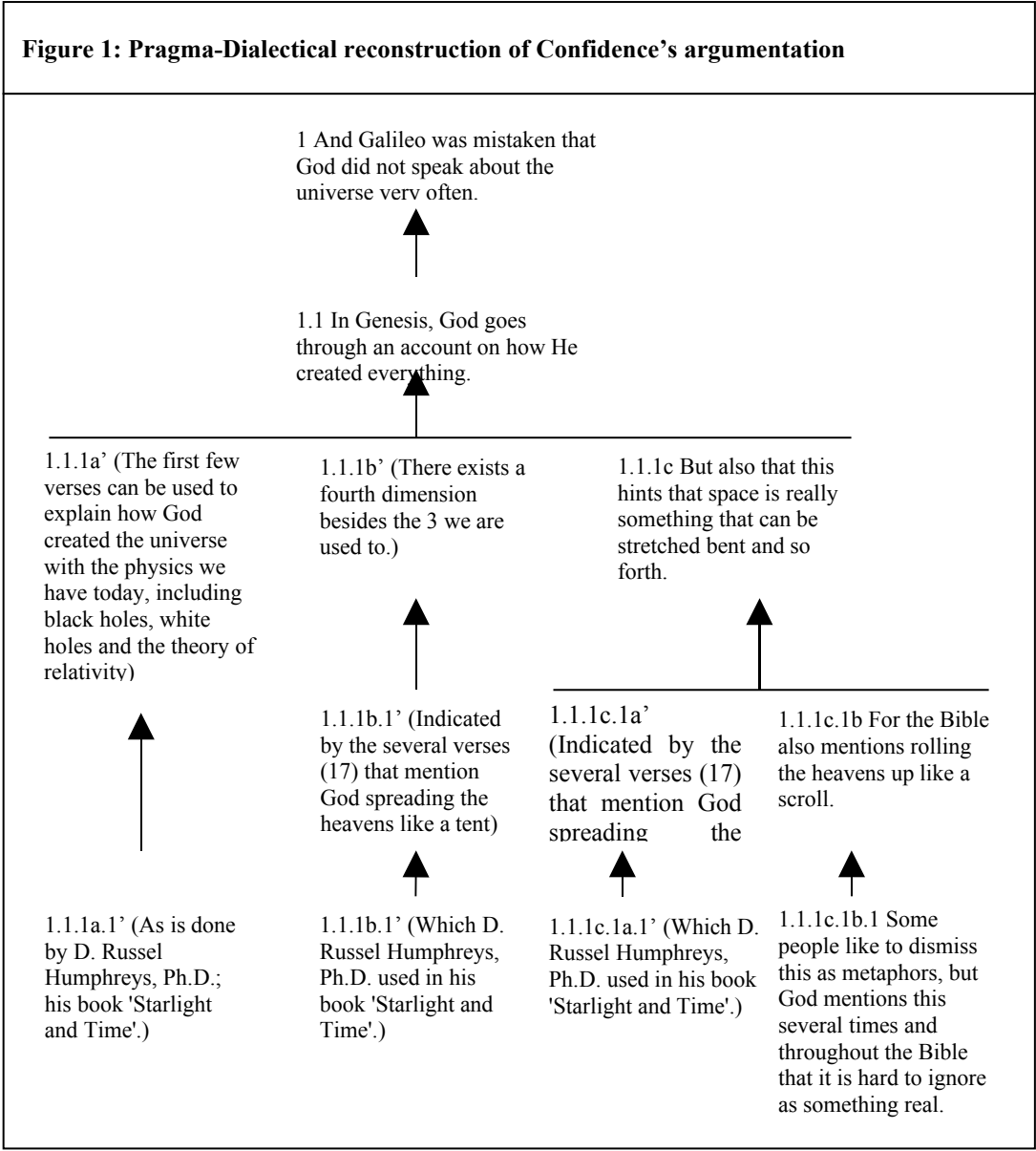
Confidence sheds doubt on Modulous' interpretation as he replies:

[Confidence, member]

(...)

And Galileo was mistaken that God did not speak about the universe very often. In Genesis, God goes through an account on how He created everything. D. Russel Humphreys, Ph.D. uses the first few verses to explain how God created the universe with the physics we have today, including black holes, white holes and the theory of relativity in his book 'Starlight and Time'. He also uses the several verses (17) that mention God spreading the heavens like a tent, which indicate a fourth dimension besides the 3 we are used to. But also that this hints that space is really something that can be stretched bent and so forth. For the Bible also mentions rolling the heavens up like a scroll. Some people like to dismiss this as metaphors, but God mentions this several times and throughout the Bible that it is hard to ignore as something real.

In this paragraph of his post, Confidence refers to D. Russell Humphreys, Ph.D., which signals an interesting change in his argumentation. In Figure 1 this part of his argumentation is reconstructed using the pragma-dialectic method of reconstruction. Confidence counters Galileo's claim that the Bible says little about the arrangement of the heavenly bodies, thereby weakening Modulous' argumentation for the standpoint saying Galileo warned against meshing religion and science. Confidence substantiates his standpoint with references to the Bible, as is deemed valid in the creationist movement. Yet he bolsters his Biblical argument with references to a published



scientist, which is where he maneuvers strategically with the conflicting starting points in the debate. In the argumentation stage, the dialectical aim is to put forward and critically test the argumentation that should support the disputed standpoint(s) in accordance with the material and procedural starting points that were agreed on in the opening stage. Confidence is aware that referring to the Bible as substantiation is not among the shared procedural starting points, but that his interlocutor *would* accept as procedural starting point that claims are grounded in references to works of science. Hence he adapts his argumentation to this specific demand of his evolutionist

audience (in the form of his opponent and in the form of other onlooking forum members) by maneuvering the two diverging starting points into combined employment. As such, he strives to make his argumentation prone to sustaining the critical testing of his interlocutor; he bends the dialectical aim in a direction harmonious with his own rhetorical aim.

So does Confidence succeed in maneuvering with the starting points? Whether he is successful in adapting to his audience's demand is a question I will address here in a pragma-dialectical sense. And that involves an evaluation of the reasonableness of the strategic maneuver. Did Confidence negotiate his personal rhetorical aim with the shared dialectical aim so that the latter could be met? A pragma-dialectical evaluation of the employed argument schemes is asked for.

The apparent adoption of the evolutionist starting point for substantiation comes to the fore in three arguments from authority. As appears from the reconstruction in Figure 1, Confidence mentioned Dr. Russell Humphreys' book as evidence for three coordinated claims; 1.1.1a Verses in Genesis help explain in terms of modern physics how God created the universe; 1.1.1b There exists a fourth dimension; 1.1.1c Space can be stretched, bent, and so forth. Whereas in 1.1.1a the argument from authority is direct, in 1.1.1b&c the appeal to authority substantiates the claims indirectly through another subordinate argument. Assuming in these two cases the reasonableness of the intermediate subargument (mentioning the 17 verses from which Dr. Russell Humphreys inferred his claims), the reasonableness of arguments 1.1.1b&c ultimately depends on the reasonableness of the subordinate argument from authority⁴.

All three arguments from authority serve to ensure the truth of certain Biblical interpretations, which altogether should prove the claim that God provides an account

⁴ Under 1.1.1c the mentioned intermediate subargument is one half of a compound of coordinative argumentation. If either one coordinative argument fails, the whole compound falls apart.

of the creation of the universe in Genesis, which in turn should substantiate the standpoint that Galileo was wrong. As all three references to Dr. Russell Humphreys' book have the same general aim, I will evaluate them simultaneously. The argument from authority is an instance of the argument scheme of symptomatic argumentation; the fact that this published scientist made these claims is a sign of their truth or acceptability. Pertinent critical questions that should be addressed in order to test this relation of concomitance are (cf. Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992): Does D. Russell Humphreys really hold a Ph.D.? Does his area of doctoral specialization make him an authority in exegesis? Could other experts in his field perhaps interpret the same verses differently? Is concordance with scientific exegesis really symptomatic for the literal physical truth of what is written in the Bible?

The website www.answersingenesis.org recognizes Russell Humphreys as a distinguished creationist physicist, which positively answers the first two critical questions. The third question should for present purposes remain open for inquiry, leaving the fourth as the crux of appropriateness of the argument scheme and its application. Indeed, the fourth question addresses a necessary – and, assuming positive answers to the preceding questions, sufficient – condition for reasonableness of this argument scheme. And the answer to this question should probably be no. Those with a scientific authority in exegesis conduct debate with the same starting point of Biblical truth as creationist forum members like Confidence do. Their debate may be distinguished due to a whole community of believers who endorse their publications, but the distinction is in essence an educated amplification of that same presupposition of Biblical truth. As long as their interlocutors on either the academic or the public level do not share this presupposition as a starting point, then it cannot

be intersubjectively established that words in the Bible may be taken literally, not because a scholar in exegesis says so.

The implication for Confidence's strategic maneuver is that he only creates an appearance of adopting the evolutionist starting point of scientific substantiation, but essentially keeps relying on the creationist starting point of Biblical truth. His maneuver derails as he breaches the pragma-dialectic Starting Point Rule (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004):

Discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point.

Three of four subarguments on the lowest level of Confidence's argumentation hinge on the reasonableness of his strategic maneuver. The fourth, 1.1.1c.1b.1, is clearly a straightforward expression of the creationist starting point that we already know will not be accepted by evolutionists, so the argumentation fails across the whole scope.

5. Discussion: Discourse Design

In the previous section I discussed various configurations of the debate as they appeared on the forum. These discourse configurations are direct products of the forum design and illustrate the complexities of online cross-field deliberation. The influence the forum has on the discussion is best analyzed using the design stance developed by Aakhus and Jackson (2004) that accounts for how technical features of an Internet forum alter debate.

Aakhus and Jackson (2004) propose an engaged, theory- and method-driven stance toward design research and intervention. Their starting point is a conception of design as a hypothesis about how communication works. They see communication as an ongoing conversational activity, and the employment of a communicational device as an intervention in that ongoing activity. The intervention affects the

communication in ways that do or don't meet the expectations of the producers of the technology. It is when these software professionals implement their design that they test their hypothesis, and the yielded practical feedback calls for adaptation of their hypothesis and redesign.

In the analyzed Evolution v. Creation Forum the general problem its designers deal with is that of the discussants' conflicting starting points. The forum director and moderators design the forum according to their hypothesis about communication. They equip the online deliberation environment with *affordances* and *constraints* (Aakhus and Jackson, 2004) that should structure the discussion to promote their goal of establishing a better understanding of the evolution / creation controversy through open debate between both sides. One clear affordance is the provided link to a Reference library, supporting the production of evidenced claims by giving access to information supporting both sides of the debate. Constraints on the other hand serve to restrict messages on the forum to those that in the eyes of the hosts count as constructive contributions to the debate. An example of such constraints is the separate forum for proposed new topics. Members wanting to open a new discussion post their confrontations on this forum so moderators can review them and decide upon their suitability for constructive debate. Let me now evaluate the affordances and constraints designed to overcome the problem of conflicting starting points and which gave rise to the different instances of deliberative behavior discussed in section four.

Division

Parties from opposing sides are assigned separate forums to discuss their own views according to the shared standards of their own field (in the categories "Science Forums" and "Social and Religious Issues"). No clash of starting points should take

place here, as the views expressed should naturally fit with the locally prevalent starting points. However, strict enforcement of this division constraint would ultimately render critical discussion impossible simply because confrontation would not take place. Indeed, both evolutionist and creationist members seek for confrontation and hence participate in discussions in both forum categories. Along with these confrontations, clashes between disparate starting points do occur, undermining the desired effect of the division constraint.

Suspension

Forum moderators enforce the debating guidelines by suspending wrongdoers for varying periods up to permanent suspension. Both evolutionists and creationists get suspended for not following the guidelines, but the permanent suspension of creationist member Faith illustrates how creationist starting points can become intractably incompatible with the forum guidelines. Ironically, in the attempt to improve debate through dissolving the starting point conflict, the suspension constraint leads to the exclusion of a party from the critical discussion. However, the implementation of this constraint should not be completely in vain, as it also constitutes a warning to other forum members not to pursue their own presumptions about discourse all too adamantly in the debate.

Exemption

Forum director Admin recognizes the incommensurability of the desired conduct in forum deliberation and the violating debating style of certain creationist members. In one discussion this recognition drove him to exempt creationist member Faith from the forum rules in an attempt to save the critical discussion. Such exemption affordances of affirmative action towards creationists could be successful but are not, as they are only endorsed by forum moderators – by being more conservative in

imposing suspensions on those arguing for the creationist position – but not by evolutionist members. The latter only continue explicitly rejecting creationist starting points, which results in irrevocably defective mutual railings that surpass the goal of dispute resolution. The exemption affordance misses its purpose as double standards in deliberation only amplify the discordance of opposed starting points.

Adaptation

Forum rule 4 demands evidenced and reasoned assertions; a decree of which members and moderators alike have their personal interpretations. This is a constraint that demands adaptation of forum members to make their contributions constructive to the debate. Despite the rather equivocal formulation of this guideline, it is clear from meta-discussions and moderator interventions that references to the Bible do not pass for adequate evidence on the forum. Some creationists recognize the exigency of compromising their Biblical starting point and try to adapt to the forum demand by adopting a more scientifically acceptable one.

In one such attempt, creationist member Confidence maneuvered strategically with the conflicting starting points as he appealed to the authority of a creationist physicist holding a Ph.D. Sadly though, his maneuver derailed as the reasonableness of the scientific reference still depended on a literal interpretation of the Bible. The adaptation constraint seems suitable for evoking the right kind of action of (creationist) discussants, however, the disparity in starting points is either unbridgeable, or the instructions for proper evidence not clear enough.

The negative tone of the evaluation of these measures points much in the direction of the field-incommensurability hypothesis. All four measures assessed here at least partly permit, if not spur unreasonableness in the discussion; opposed parties either

ignore each other or they clash; a participant is excluded from the critical discussion; interlocutors resort to ranting in the face of double deliberation standards; attempts at adaptation to prevailing debating norms derail. However, the analysis also reveals some possibilities for amelioration of the debate. The special features of the online forum provide opportunities to design the discourse environment favorable for deliberation.

Successful design starts with good hypotheses about communication. The ten forum guidelines most explicitly represent the forum hosts' hypotheses about constructive debate. Most explicitly, but not most unequivocally. As some rules allow different interpretations, much active moderation and meta-discussion is required to support their functionality. Both the forum guidelines and the moderator interventions and discussions suggest that the forum designers employ inadequately specified hypotheses about communication. Analogous to what Aakhus and Jackson (2004) propose for design research; since website manufacturers are professionals in ICT but laymen in communication, their common-sense hypotheses should be replaced by theoretically derived ones. These hypotheses should specify exactly what speech event is aimed for on the forum. If a critical discussion is desired, then the exact discussion rules should be clearly articulated on the forum. They should promote dispute resolution and be acceptable to all participants in the discussion (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).

The analyses in this case study revealed how the forum guidelines as they stand are incompatible with creationist procedural starting points in the discussion. The demand for evidenced and reasoned assertions appears with an evolutionist bias as it is put into practice and enforced on the forum. Before the two opposed parties reach agreement about the disparate starting points, they cannot hold a critical discussion

and it is useless to unilaterally suspend those members who unwittingly endorse undesired standards.

So the revised hypothesis of communication should incorporate both theoretical insight into the ideal of a critical discussion and an understanding of the different starting points parties from both sides bring to the discussion. Subsequently, the affordances and constraints of the forum should be adapted to recreate the online deliberation environment in concert with the new hypothesis. Existing constraints, such as suspension and adaptation discussed above, could well be employed to benefit the critical discussion, provided that it is clear for all when suspension takes place and which debating standards should be adapted to.

6. Conclusion

Communicating worldviews through public discourse nowadays increasingly takes place via computer-mediated communication. The Internet forum bridges time and distance as it facilitates public interactive confrontations between otherwise relatively isolated worldviews. But a critical discussion imposes requirements far outreaching just the possibility of confrontation. These requirements are or aren't realized by the design of an Internet forum, as its features alter public discourse in ways that do or don't spark reasonable debate.

Unreasonableness in communicating worldviews lurks as an increasing population of Internet users enter the discussion with radically diverging starting points. In this case study, we saw how creationist advocates collided with evolutionists over assumptions of valid evidence. Any remote possibility for a critical discussion is shut down as interlocutors descend into episodes of mutual railing that only serve to confirm the rightness of their own, and the perverseness of their opponents' deliberation standards. The analysis also showed how a creationist's strategic

maneuver aimed at adapting to the scientific evidence demand of evolutionists derailed due to a lack of understanding of what that demand exactly entails.

A better understanding of the demands for a critical discussion and of the complexities of cross-field discussions with disparate starting points could support forum hosts to design their online debating environment as optimally conducive for the modern public sphere of argumentation.

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