

Confrontation and Ridicule

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Abstract: Ridicule can be used in order to create concurrence as well as to enhance antagonism. This paper deals with ridicule that is used by a critic when he is responding to a standpoint or to a reason advanced in support of a standpoint. Ridicule profits from humor's good reputation, and correctly so, even when it is used in argumentative contexts. However, ridicule can be harmful to a discussion. This paper will deal with ridicule from the perspective of strategic maneuvering between the individual rhetorical objective of effecting persuasion and the shared dialectical objective of resolving the dispute on its merits. In what ways can ridicule be used in strategic maneuvering and under what conditions are these uses dialectically sound?

Résumé: La dérision peut s'employer pour provoquer l'accord aussi bien que le désaccord. Dans cet article on traite de la dérision employée pour critiquer une conclusion ou ses raisons. La dérision profite de la bonne réputation de l'humour, même dans des contextes argumentatifs. Toutefois, elle peut nuire à la discussion. On examine la dérision à partir de la perspective de la manœuvre stratégique entre le but rhétorique de persuader et le but dialectique partagé de résoudre le désaccord. De quelles façons est-ce que l'acte de ridiculiser peut s'employer dans des manœuvres stratégiques et dans quelles situations est-il dialectiquement justifié.

Keywords: argumentative functions of ridicule, critical discussion, dialectical objective, rhetorical objective, ridicule, soundness conditions, strategic maneuvering

1. Introduction

The following example is typical of a ridiculing response, in this case to an opinion about the importance of the conservation of rare animals and plants, an issue that has come up in a series of legal decisions.

- (1) To the annoyance of many persons involved, some major construction projects in the Netherlands have been delayed and even cancelled due to European rules protecting rare

animals and plants. Joop Schaminée, an affiliate of a research institute, holds it to be ridiculous that construction firms sometimes must wait for three months due to a few bank swallows who have chosen to brood in vacant land designated for building: “We really don’t have to give way to every house sparrow” (Bezemer, 2008).

Schaminée ridicules decisions based on European rules by opposing a position about the commonest of birds, the house sparrow. This position clearly has not been adopted in that way by the other side, but is meant to show the absurdity of the actual position, about certain birds that are in fact quite rare in the Netherlands, that is, bank swallows.

Ridicule can be used in order to create concurrence as well as to enhance antagonism. As I will be using the term, *ridicule* is a particular type of humorous contribution to a conversation (cf. Billig, 2005b). In this paper, I will deal with ridicule that is used by a critic who responds to a standpoint or an argument that has been put forward by an arguer in a discussion. To some extent, ridicule profits from humor’s good reputation, even when it is used in argumentative contexts. This is rightly so, since both cooperation as well as some degree of competition can be instrumental in achieving the dialectical aim of a discussion, which is dispute resolution. However, ridicule can also be harmful to a discussion. It can incite a malicious kind of laughter that spoils the discussion and excludes persons as not being serious participants. Though an argumentative discussion need not be hampered by a dose of rivalry, that rivalry should be tempered by the requirements for a reasonable discussion. These requirements are part of the ideal model for reasonable discussion. This ideal model will in this paper be referred to as *critical discussion* (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).

In this paper, I will deal with ridicule from the pragma-dialectical theory’s perspective of what is called, “strategic maneuvering” between the individual “rhetorical objectives” of effecting persuasion and the shared “dialectical objective” of resolving the dispute on its merits (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2000; 2003). First, I will outline the pragma-dialectical theory’s notions involved in the theory of strategic maneuvering, and characterize ridicule from that perspective as an argumentative phenomenon. Second, I will delineate a number of functions ridicule can perform in an argumentative discourse and examine whether these functions of ridicule can be brought into line with the dialectical ideal of living up to the norms of critical discussion. Third, I will discuss how ridicule can be used in order to maneuver strategically between effectiveness and reasonableness.

2. Rhetorical and dialectical objectives in argumentative discourse

Ridicule will be examined as a particular way of strategic maneuvering. When putting forward argumentation or criticism, a party typically tries to strike a balance between his rhetorical objective, that of persuading his audience, and his dialectical objective, that of resolving the dispute on its merits. The attempt to strike such a balance between the two is called *strategic maneuvering* (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2000; 2003).

Dialectical reasonableness can stand in the way of having things your own way. But that need not be the case. The maneuvering is successful when optimal use is made of the rhetorical opportunities while staying within the bounds of reasonableness. However, if rhetorical considerations gain the upper hand, and a dialectical norm ends up being violated, the maneuvering is said to have been derailed into a fallacious move.

The dialectical aim of the parties in a real-life discussion is to find out whether, given the starting points they agreed upon, their difference of opinion is resolvable and, if so, in what way. What resolution amounts to is spelled out in terms of the ideal model for critical discussion.

The critical discussion is defined in the pragma-dialectical theory as a normative procedure that is carried out by two parties and that goes through four stages. In the simplest case of a critical discussion, one party, called the *protagonist*, advances a standpoint and defends it against criticisms, while the other party adopts the role of *antagonist* and challenges and tests the acceptability of both the standpoint and the argumentation offered in favor of it. Ideally, a discussion starts with the so-called *confrontation stage*, where the protagonist puts forward a standpoint and where the antagonist expresses a critical stance towards it. Next, in the *opening stage*, the parties decide upon procedural and material starting points. Next, in the *argumentation stage*, the defensibility of the standpoint, given the starting points, is tested. Finally, the conclusions of the discussion are drawn in the *concluding stage*, leading either to the antagonist's withdrawal of her critical doubt, or to the protagonist's withdrawal of his standpoint, or to the decision that the former stages do not necessitate one of the parties to withdraw its position.¹ In the first two situations the difference of opinion is said to have been *resolved*.

The meaning of *resolution* can be stretched to make it applicable to real-life arguers. A dispute, then, counts as *resolved* if the parties have followed the rules for critical discussion and, moreover, if either the party with the role of the antagonist has withdrawn her critical doubt regarding

¹ For a diverging view, according to which a concluding stage must contain the withdrawal of one of the positions, see Krabbe (2007).

the standpoint, or if the party with the role of the protagonist has withdrawn his standpoint vis-à-vis this antagonist.²

Since I will be focusing on ridicule as used for the purpose of responding to standpoints and arguments, I will elaborate on those parts of argumentative discussions where the parties pretend to make contributions to the confrontation stage and the argumentation stage. Therefore, I will propose formulations of the relevant dialectical objectives of the discussants as well as the rhetorical counterparts of these objectives.

In the argumentation stage that is part of the normative ideal of a critical discussion, there is a division of labor. The antagonist must critically test the standpoint and the reasons adduced in favor of it. It is up to the protagonist to answer all criticisms, in that way building up a case for his position. The mutual antagonism needed for a critical discussion is restrained by rules that guarantee that the dialogical moves that are thus put forward serve the common search for a resolution. I start from the assumption that the shared *dialectical objective of the argumentation stage* is:

to obtain a clear and sufficiently complete view of the available arguments in favor of the protagonist's standpoint along with the available critical questions and objections that speak against this standpoint's acceptability.

As in the argumentation stage, there is a dialectical division of labor in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. The protagonist³ must make preparations for doing a good job in the argumentation stage. He strives for a result from the confrontation such that the standpoint will be defensible and the critical stance untenable. It is up to the antagonist to strive for the reverse. Again, the mutual antagonism at this stage is restrained by norms that guarantee that the antagonism will serve the common dialectical aim of the confrontation. Given the expectation of having a disagreement about an issue, the *dialectical objective of the confrontation stage* is:

² That two parties have been able to resolve their difference of opinion does not imply that the underlying issue has been resolved in any absolute sense. Different persons may want to take up the issue anew, or the same persons may want to try alternative argumentative strategies or start from a different commitment store.

³ According to the pragma-dialectical theory of a critical discussion, the roles of antagonist and protagonist have not yet been distributed among the participants in the confrontation stage. This distribution takes place in the second stage, the opening stage. So, some occurrences of the term *protagonist* mean to refer to the participant who in the confrontation stage prepares for the role of the protagonist in the argumentation stage. Likewise for the term *antagonist*.

to find out what the disagreement amounts to and how this disagreement is to be formulated in a way that optimizes its resolution.

The idea of a rhetorical objective has been emphasized by van Eemeren and Houtlosser in order to do justice to those motives in a real-life conversation that influence the behavior of discussants, but that are not exclusively dialectical. Discussants not only strive impartially for a resolution of the dispute. They often are also profoundly interested in persuading the addressee and in creating the impression that their position prevails. This persuasive aim must be understood in a non-normative way. A discussant can be said to be *persuaded* even when he has changed his position as a result of a flawed argumentation process.

In the counterpart of the argumentation stage of a critical discussion—let's call it an *argumentative exchange*—the arguer, that is, the party with the role of the protagonist,⁴ is not only concerned with accomplishing the dialectical objective of the argumentation stage. In addition he can be seen as trying:

to create the impression, whether or not this impression is correct, that the gap between the starting points admitted by the antagonist and the protagonist's standpoint has been successfully bridged.

The rhetorical objective of the critic in an argumentative exchange is to try:

to create the impression, whether or not this impression is correct, that the gap between the starting points admitted by the antagonist, and the protagonist's standpoint has *not* been bridged.

Let us call the real-life counterpart of a confrontation stage simply a *confrontation*. In a confrontation, then, the parties can be seen as preparing the ground for accomplishing their rhetorical persuasion purposes in the argumentative exchange. The *rhetorical objective of the arguer* in a confrontation is:

⁴ Because the terms *protagonist* and *antagonist* are tied to the normative model, I will be using different terms when talking about the agents who maneuver strategically. The *arguer* is the person or agent in a real discourse who takes primary responsibility for fulfilling the individual dialectical tasks of the protagonist while at the same time trying to realize his rhetorical purposes. The *critic* is the person or agent taking the role of antagonist, while trying to realize *her* rhetorical purposes. So, even though it is nonsensical to state that an antagonist has committed a fallacy, it can be said consistently that the critic has committed a fallacy.

to arrive at a formulated standpoint such that, during the argumentative exchange, he will be able to bridge the gap between shared starting points and the standpoint, whether this really is so or only apparently so.

In other words, his rhetorical objective is to make those preparations he considers opportune in the light of realizing his rhetorical objective in the argumentative exchange. In most cases, this will come down to an attempt to formulate a standpoint that has the appearance of being defensible within the terminology of the antagonist. In exceptional cases, however, it can be rhetorically opportune to make the initial disagreement appear to be intractable in order to profit from the surprise on the part of the critic that arises when, during the argumentative exchange, arguments are put forward that seem to bridge the gap.

The *rhetorical objective of the critic* in a confrontation is:

to arrive at a formulation of the dispute such that, during the argumentative exchange, the gap between shared starting points and the standpoint will appear to be unbridgeable, whether or not this appearance is fully correct.

In most cases, this simply comes down to the aim of arriving at a dispute such that the gap between the positions appears to be wide.

In this paper, I will examine how ridicule can be instrumental in reconciling the dialectical and rhetorical objectives of a critic in a confrontation or argumentative exchange. Consequently, the focus will be on ridicule as one kind of response to the type of move in which an arguer puts forward either his initial standpoint or a reason that, possibly via intermediate standpoints, aims to support the initial standpoint. (I will not deal separately with ridiculing argumentative connections or warrants, as I do not expect that this gives rise to truly new issues.)

A consequence of choosing this perspective is the emphasis on the interactions between a protagonist and an antagonist. This does not in any way imply that the importance of the attending audiences is downplayed. It does, however, imply a particular view about the roles of audiences. Take, for example, the standard situation where two parties are debating an issue in front of an audience, such as a televised panel discussion or a polemical exchange between two columnists in a newspaper. Such a situation can be analyzed as a series of separate discussions between a protagonist and an antagonist such that these separate discussions hang together in a particular way (*cf.* Feteris, 1989, for a similar kind of approach to the complex situation in courtrooms). I will elaborate a bit further on this approach so that I will be able to do justice to situations where a person is ridiculed in front of an audience.

Suppose person A is, in front of audience C, defending standpoint S against person B who has expressed her critical doubt regarding S. Then

this situation can be understood as involving three different critical discussions.

First, there is a discussion D_1 between A and B where A takes the role of the protagonist and B the role of the antagonist.

Second, there is the discussion D_2 between A and C where A takes the role of the protagonist of S while C is imagined to take the role of the antagonist. In other words, the arguer is also trying to address the attending audience with his argumentation. Typically, B will try to influence the course of this discussion by voicing concerns and criticisms that are instrumental for the rhetorical objectives of C in the audience's capacity as a critic of S. So, when B airs a critical question "Why S?", this can be reconstructed both as a move in B's own encounter with A, in D_1 , while at the same time also as a move put forward by C, in D_2 , that A must respond to. In other words, B can pretend to act on behalf of C, representing C's critical position in B's actual encounter with A.

Third, there is a discussion D_3 between B and C where C takes the role of the protagonist of S and B the role of antagonist. A can be expected to try to influence the course of this discussion by voicing concerns and arguments that are instrumental for the rhetorical objectives of C in its capacity as an arguer defending S. So, when A presents an argument in support of S, this then can be reconstructed both as an attempt to persuade B, while at the same time it can also often be understood as a move on behalf of C, in representing C's defensive position.

The first and the second kinds of discussion are the most relevant ones for understanding ridicule used for critical purposes. When, for example, a politician ridicules his colleague in front of the cameras, we will understand this also as a way of influencing the discussion where this colleague, in his capacity as an arguer, is defending a standpoint in an attempt to persuade the attending audience in its capacity as a critic. (The third kind of discussion is relevant for understanding ridicule for defensive purposes.)

In order to develop a dialectical account of argumentative ridicule used for critical purposes, I will stipulate the term *ridicule* to refer to a contribution by the critic that has three dialogical consequences. After stating these consequences, I will make a few clarifying remarks.

Suppose a critic B ridicules an opinion O that has been expressed by an arguer A, by A's putting forward of a formulation F.⁵ Then:

- (a) B is committed to O's being indefensible.
- (b) In the attempt to ridicule O, B has revised or resituated F, creating F^* as a result, and by having done so, has

⁵ This paper deals with ridiculing opinions, not with merely ridiculing their phrasing. Still, as we shall see, one prominent way to ridicule an opinion is to focus on its formulation.

committed herself to O's being as indefensible as (what is expressed by) F*.

- (c) B has apparently elicited the response of bringing about some kind of laughter, either on the part of members of an audience (in its capacity as critic) or on the part of A himself.

Thus, in the house sparrow example: (a) the speaker (Schaminée) commits himself to the indefensibility of the proposition that building projects ought to be delayed in order to protect brooding bank swallows; (b) he has changed the actual standpoint to something much more implausible, namely that building projects should be delayed in order to protect house sparrows and he commits himself to the position that what makes this latter statement implausible is, in essence, what makes the former opinion implausible; and (c) he aims to elicit some kind of laughter. I will now make a few comments on the three properties.

(1) That the opinion is alleged to be indefensible must be taken to mean that the critic is not convinced of the acceptability of the proposition brought forward by the arguer and, what is more, that the critic assumes that the arguer will be incapable of developing a successful argumentation in support of his standpoint, that is, an argumentation that is completely based on premises and justificatory connections that the critic is willing to concede. Typically, the critic also takes the ridiculous proposition to be false, but it is feasible to ridicule a position without committing oneself to the falsity of the arguer's standpoint. For example, it is possible to ridicule any firm position, positive or negative, on the issue of whether there has been life on Mars from the standpoint that the available evidence, pro as well as con, is utterly deficient. If someone were to say: "My position is ridiculous, but true", then I understand him to be using *ridicule* in a somewhat different sense according to which something ridiculous is merely something that is surprising or laughable, rather than challengeable or false. This paper is about ridicule as a way of framing a charge. The inherent purpose of expressing a lack of defensibility will be discussed more extensively when dealing with the dialectical function of ridicule, in the next section.

(2a) There is a wide range of methods by which one can ridicule. In the house sparrow example, the critic parodies the arguer by opposing a statement that resembles the arguer's real statement, but that overtly exaggerates it. Alternative devices are the pointing out of an inconsistency ("So you keep construction companies away in order to save swallows but you protect the foxes that hunt them!"); the simplification of a position ("So you consider these tiny birds to be more important than our economy!"); irony ("Yes, the European Community should regulate the brooding of bank swallows!"); making a word pun ("I won't swallow this idea!"); and making the arguer look foolish ("You seem to live in a fairyland"). Simply saying that something is ridiculous or expressing one's contempt for an opinion is not necessarily an

example of ridicule. It is possible to taboo an opinion as outrageous, without either having changed or resituated O, or aiming in any way for a smile or a sneer. The incongruity theory of humor, developed by Locke (Billig, 2005b, pp. 62-65), Kant and Schopenhauer (Norricks, 2003, p. 1333), explains humor and laughter as being the result of the cognitive experience of incongruities. One important source of incongruity is stating something that pushes, or transgresses, the boundaries of politeness (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). In the remainder of this paper, however, I will leave these various techniques unexamined and deal instead with the various argumentative functions ridicule fulfills.

(2b) By revising or resituating the other party's standpoint, the critic commits herself to the proposition that the arguer's standpoint is as absurd as the revised standpoint is or as absurd as the standpoint would be if it were to be presented in the situation as sketched by the critic. After having ridiculed a standpoint or a reason, adopting a subtle or nuanced stance towards the proposition is no longer an option, at least not without making it clear that the ridicule has been retracted, for example, by saying that you're sorry.

(3a) The laughter that the speaker manifestly aims for may vary from a gentle and happy kind of laughter, to sneering laughs and snorts of derision. In as much as a sneering laugh is a borderline case of laughing, some instances of ridicule are no more than borderline cases of humor. B can invite this effect from A, leading to some kind of acknowledgement by A that his position is, in some way or other, problematic, but more likely B will invite this reaction from an audience attending the discussion. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, something is ridiculous when it "deserves to be greeted with laughter" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 205). The kind of laughter they have in mind is restricted to *rire d'exclusion*, exclusionary laughter, a term from Dupréel (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 205). The ridiculous deserves to be laughed at, sneered at, scorned. Differing from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca I am using ridicule in a more general way, allowing it to be possible for ridicule to be of a gentler kind that invites some friendly laughter (see Billig, 2005b, pp. 189-192 for an examination of various kinds of laughter).

(3b) What deserves to be greeted with laughter of whatever kind is dependent upon what is considered to be true, just and prudent, and consequently the very same linguistic contribution can constitute ridicule when brought forward in a certain company or culture while lacking in ridicule when produced in another. Still, whether or not a move ridicules an opinion is not so much dependent upon whether or not the listener or audience in fact laughs, nor solely on whether the critic intends her contribution to be ridicule, but on whether the social and cultural context determines the contribution to invite laughing about the arguer.

(3c) If we understand a humorous conversational contribution as an apparent attempt to produce some kind of laughter (cf. Billig, p.179), and we are liberal in what we regard as laughter, then ridicule constitutes a

kind of humor. Standardly, three approaches to humor are distinguished (see: Billig, 2005b; Morreall, 2005; Smuts, 2006). According to the superiority theory of humor, defended by Hobbes, among others, humor is generated by the pleasant feelings of superiority over others (Billig, 2005b, pp. 50-53). Laughing at a stumbling professor is thus seen as experiencing oneself as less clumsy than he is. According to the incongruity theory of humor, humor is the result of experiencing events as incongruous (Billig, 2005b, pp. 62-65; Norrick, 2003, p. 1333). Laughing at a stumbling professor is then seen as the cognitive experience of a man that ought to walk in a dignified way while in fact he fails to do so. According to the relief theory of humor, humor is produced by the relief when a tense situation disappears. Laughing at your stumbling professor is then seen as the mental experience of an escape from rules imposed on you. In his book, Billig (2005b) departs from this psychological tradition and adopts a view on humor and ridicule that is critical and sociological. He tries to capture humor in terms of the disciplinary effects it produces. Even though the humor in the example appears to rebellious, the actual effect of the humor, according to his approach, would be to affirm or even strengthen the norm that applies to the way professors ought to walk and move in front of a classroom. The approach adopted in this paper resembles Billig's in that it focuses on effects, but differs from his both by focusing solely on effects within the context of an argumentative discussion, and by including effects that are not to be characterized as social, but rather as propositional.

3. Functions and soundness conditions

The ridicule discussed here is a kind of *instrumental humor*, rather than a contribution merely to entertain others (Morreall, 2005, pp. 74-77). It is used by a critic for the purpose of responding critically to the standpoint of the arguer or to a reason brought forward in support of a standpoint. First of all, the ridicule is to be seen as a contribution to the discussion between an arguer and a critic. But, as already suggested above, ridicule can, in addition, be used in order to inform an attending audience of the absurdity of an opinion that the arguer is trying to convince them of. In such cases the ridicule is also to be seen as a way of influencing the discussion between the arguer and this audience. The critic's attempt consists of passing to this audience a device with which to face up to this arguer. Arming the audience in this way can have two kinds of effects. First, it can have the effect that the position of the arguer becomes weakened in his attempt to persuade the audience. Second, it can have harmful effects on the arguer's position in his attempt to persuade the critic.

As has become clear in commenting on the first clause of the definition of ridicule, one objective of ridicule is to express a critical attitude towards the arguer's statement. Because the expression of critical

doubt is a necessary part of an ideally reasonable confrontation or argumentation stage, this function of ridicule will be called its *dialectical function*. In addition to having a dialectical function, ridicule performs functions that can best be called *rhetorical*, even though it is not precluded that the realization of rhetorical purposes is dialectically legitimate.

Among the rhetorical functions, a distinction can be drawn between a function that has to do with the propositional aspects of persuasion, *the propositional distancing function*, and functions having to do with the persons involved in the discussion, *social functions*. This latter category, in turn, allows for ridicule that is used in order to keep a person included in the discussion, the *inclusion function*, but also of ridicule used to disqualify him as a serious discussion partner, the *exclusion function*. These rhetorical functions will be dealt with in the following section.

The soundness conditions that are subsequently introduced provide the requirements that need to be met in order for the ridicule to be an acceptable contribution to an argumentative discussion that resembles as closely as possible a critical discussion aimed solely at a resolution of the existing differences of opinion. That ridicule is appropriate for the purposes of a particular social event, such as an eristic, polemical contest, does not imply that it is appropriate from an argumentative perspective. We will find, however, that even from the perspective of a critical discussion, the kind of ridicule at issue can be dialectically legitimate when it satisfies three soundness conditions.

3.1 *The propositional distancing function*

By definition, ridicule sends the message that the distance between the arguer's statement and the critic's commitments is unbridgeable. If a critic ridicules a position, she commits herself to the indefensibility of the standpoint, either only vis-à-vis herself or also vis-à-vis a different audience adopting a similar position as she does. The critic holds the position of the arguer to be incomprehensible, due to ambiguities or lack of clarity, or she supposes that the proposition cannot be derived from propositions she is willing to commit herself to.

When conveying the message that the arguer, in the subsequent turns of the dialogue, will have a hard time persuading the critic or a different audience, the critic can be seen as making a contribution to the opening stage of a critical discussion. In the opening stage, the parties are to decide on the requirements that the protagonist must meet in order for his defense to count as a fulfillment of his burden of proof. In practice, most of the decisions of the opening stage will be left implicit. In an ideal case, however, parties do commit themselves explicitly to the standard of precision and comprehensibility that is required for a clear discussion, as well as to the standards of strictness that apply to the reasoning from starting points to main standpoint. These latter decisions come down to decisions about the connection premises (or inference licenses) that the

antagonist is not allowed to challenge. The intended effect of ridiculing a position is either that of creating the appearance of a formulated standpoint or sub-standpoint that will not in any way live up to the required standard of clarity or to the required standard of strictness for reasoning involving this kind of (sub-)standpoint. The critic will not be satisfied with an off-hand explanation of the expressions used, but instead she will require the arguer to make his language sufficiently precise. Nor will she be satisfied with weak connection premises between material starting points and the main standpoint; on the contrary, she will require quite strict proof. Given the utter lack of comprehensibility or plausibility of the standpoint or substandpoint, or so the critic contends, it will be unlikely that the arguer will succeed in getting the propositions accepted that he needs for a successful defense or to provide the necessary clarifications. Using ridicule for this *propositional distancing function* is directly instrumental to the realization of the critic's rhetorical objective.⁶

The dialectical procedures for the opening stage of a critical discussion do not require the antagonist to demand a particular level of proof or precision. But neither should the procedure prohibit the antagonist from choosing a particular level of criticism.⁷ Consequently, making ridicule perform this propositional distancing function is not inherently fallacious. Still, there are two conditions that need to be satisfied if it is to be sound.

The first condition is that it should be unlikely for the ridicule to mislead anyone about the position that the arguer has actually put forward. If, however, the critic leaves it unclear that she has revised or resituated the arguer's position, she can be considered to have committed a straw man fallacy. This condition for the legitimacy of ridicule will be referred to as the *transparency condition*.

When ridiculing a position, there is the danger that the ridicule may convey the message that, due to the gap between the positions, there is no other reasonable option for the arguer than to retract his position. If this message is conveyed by the ridicule, then the opinion has, in effect, been tabooed. An arguer must be given the unconditional right to defend his standpoint, even if his chances are slim. If the critic is wrong in holding the opinion to be outrageous, the arguer must be given a chance to point that out. Even if she is correct in finding it outrageous, the arguer still has a right to more serious and articulated criticisms. So, a second condition for the legitimacy of ridicule is that it should not be used by the critic to

⁶ Shaftesbury (1790/1711) started from the premise that when a thought, religious or otherwise, appears to be ridiculous, it actually is ridiculous. In public discourse, therefore, it is legitimate and useful to ridicule in order to put opinions to the test (pp. 8-9).

⁷ It is up to the antagonist to choose the level of criticism that is appropriate for the disagreement at issue. However, the level should not drop below what is required for the dialogue to be called genuinely critical.

shut down the discussion prematurely. Even though bringing a discussion to a close by using ridicule can be sensible, for example, from the perspective of spending your intellectual energy on an interesting standpoint, rather than on one you consider absurd, it is fallacious from the perspective of resolving the very difference of opinion that started the discussion. This condition will be termed the *non-closure condition*.

Since these conditions are not impossible to satisfy, ridicule used for the rhetorical purpose of propositional distancing is not always fallacious.

3.2 Social functions

Social functions have to do with the social distance between, on the one hand, a critic (and possibly an audience on the same track as she is) and, on the other hand, an arguer. In addition to having dialectical and rhetorical functions that have to do with the propositional distance between the two positions in the discussion, ridicule always has a social message. Ridicule makes fun of the arguer as much as it does of his opinion. Like humor in general, ridicule can support as well as damage a social relationship. When aimed at evoking gentle laughter, ridicule can help to create, maintain or restore cooperation. When aimed at evoking a condescending “ha” or a snort of derision, ridicule most likely will breed antagonism instead.⁸

This first social function will be referred to as the *inclusion function*. Mild ridicule aims at a gentle kind of laughter and creates a feeling of solidarity between the speaker and his interlocutor or audience by highlighting a common ground and shared norms. More especially, good-tempered ridicule can be used to attenuate the message that the arguer’s standpoint is anything but acceptable (*cf.* Holmes, 2000, p. 159, 167). The intended effect is to keep the arguer involved in the discussion, notwithstanding the fact that he is facing harsh criticism. The underlying message is that, in spite of the utterly false position that has been adopted, the arguer is to be regarded as a worthy discussion partner. Ridicule is used for inclusion purposes when the social distance would have been greater if the ridicule were to have been left out.

Consider as a case in point a discussion between a lecturer, A, and a chairperson, B, in front of an audience of students, C. B challenges the standpoint of A, say, that a particular politician has been lying at a particular event, by making the remark “not all leftist politicians are unreliable, *per se*, Mr. A”, in such a way that it evokes some friendly laughs on the part of A as well as of C. B thereby makes it clear that, as far as she is concerned, A’s standpoint is indefensible, but she attenuates this message by framing it in a way that is both friendly and, apparently, humorous. In this manner, A is encouraged to continue the discussion,

⁸ This reflects the widespread idea that humor can be used in aggressive ways as well as in ways that are conducive to rapport (Norrick, pp. 1341-1342).

probably even to provide argumentation for his thesis, both in his capacity as protagonist in the discussion with B as well as in his attempts to persuade the attending audience C.

Ridicule used for inclusion purposes plausibly improves the degree to which the higher-order conditions for having a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) are satisfied. Provided that the ridicule is transparent and that it does not bring an end to the conversation, the ridicule does not hinder or impede the resolution process and is, all things being equal, non-fallacious. So, there are no further requirements for using ridicule for inclusion purposes in addition to the ones formulated in the transparency and non-closure conditions.

On the other hand, ridicule can be used to push the arguer away, putting him at a distance that is greater than it would have been had the standpoint been challenged without ridiculing it. Infante and Wigley even categorize “ridicule” as a form of “verbal aggressiveness” that is aimed at damaging the self-concept of the addressee, leading in turn to further harm. “Some [effects of verbally aggressive messages] are more temporal in nature: hurt feelings, anger, irritation, embarrassment, discouragement. Others pertain more to interpersonal relations: relationship deterioration and relationship termination” (1986, pp. 61-2). Such uses of ridicule can be associated with the borderline cases of laughter. Typically, the critic tries to arouse scorn in an audience that is of importance to the arguer. In the worst case scenario, the arguer is laughed out of court and made to grovel.⁹ The feeling of solidarity aroused by the humorous element of the ridicule applies to the critic and the attending audience, but it clearly leaves the arguer out. The effect is to disqualify the arguer as a serious and competent participant in the discussion. The laughter from the audience disqualifies the victim. And when the arguer cannot help laughing himself, even if only to brush away the embarrassment, or when the arguer shows anger, frustration or lack of confidence as a result of the ridicule, he can be taken to have disqualified himself, giving in to the verdict of the laughing audience. One possible side-effect that the critic can aim for is to get the arguer so angry, frustrated or timid that his capacity or motivation to develop a persuasive strategy (aimed at either the critic or the attending audience) becomes damaged. This second social function will be referred to as the *exclusion function*.

The use of ridicule in its exclusion function must always be seen as a way of violating the freedom rule for critical discussion, according to which parties are not allowed to put restrictions on the expression of a

⁹ The superiority theory of humor seems partly fitting in so far as ridicule is used in its exclusion function. Burke discusses a related function of ridicule in his drama theory of rhetoric. One of the elements of so-called burlesque rhetoric, is caricaturing and ridiculing one’s opponent. According to Burke, this kind of rejection of the opponent is not complete but limited (Burke, 1959, pp. 52–56; Appel, 1996).

position (Rule 1 in Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: pp. 136, 190). Ridicule, thus used, borders on *ad hominem* fallacies. If the ridicule fails to satisfy the non-closure condition and expresses the message that the opinion is not worthy of discussion, the freedom rule is violated in a different way, by tabooing the standpoint. If ridicule is used to exclude a discussant, then, of course, it also works to close off the discussion. However, closing the discussion prematurely can be done without attacking the person, but instead by suggesting that the propositional distance makes any discussion superfluous. If the ridicule fails to be transparent, the rule for properly responding to standpoints is violated (the standpoint rule: *ibid.*, p. 191) and a straw man fallacy has been committed. Still, even if the ridicule is fallacious, the arguer does not find himself empty-handed. From a dialectical perspective, he is advised to start a metadialogue by raising a fallacy criticism (Krabbe, 2003).

There are also other functions ridicule can perform in strategic maneuvering. To mention a few: ridicule can be used to embellish criticism, to show one's wit, to incite disinterested persons to enter the debate,¹⁰ to get others to behave in a socially appropriate way,¹¹ or to meddle with a social taboo. However, these will not be discussed here for the reason that they are less central to the ways in which a critic can respond to argumentation or a standpoint.

4. Strategic maneuvering with ridicule

I will distinguish two variants of maneuvering strategically by ridiculing the opinion of one's interlocutor. In each case, the critic instantiates the speech act of raising critical doubt regarding a standpoint or a supporting reason of the arguer. So, in both cases, the dialectical objective is to express critical doubt.

In both cases, the objective of propositional distancing is among the rhetorical objectives. The two variants of maneuvering diverge in fulfilling different social functions. In the one case, the critic adapts his criticism to the emotional state of the arguer in an attempt to keep the interlocutor included in the conversation. In the other case, the critic

¹⁰ Both inclusion as well as exclusion ridicule can be used for the further purpose of getting disinterested or even apathetic persons to enter the discussion. Ridicule can prompt a person to action, either by making the discussion look enjoyable, or by motivating him to restore his damaged dignity.

¹¹ According to Bergson (2004 / 1900), laughter has the function of getting people to behave with the degree of fluidity and flexibility that is socially required. Hobbs discusses several cases of judges who use ridicule for the purpose of disciplining the accused party. Billig even defends the idea that the main function of ridicule is disciplinary: its possibility ensures that "members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu" (2005b, p. 2). The victim of such uses of humor not only has to obey social rules, he must also show that he enjoys the speaker's disciplinary act (p. 45).

adapts his criticism to the preferences, values and prejudices of an attending audience in an attempt to exclude the interlocutor as a serious and credible arguer.

The first variant of strategic maneuvering with ridicule is where the ridicule is used both to emphasize the propositional distance between the two positions as well as to keep the arguer included in the discussion. It can be used in a situation where the critic reckons with the possibility that her challenge of the standpoint leads to the premature ending of the discussion, due to the sensibility or touchiness of the arguer. In order for the critic to stand a chance of persuading the arguer that his position is indefensible, without causing the arguer to run away from the conversation, she can choose to ridicule the arguer's position in a gentle manner, inviting friendly laughter, and in that way keeping the arguer included in the conversation.

There are various reasons why this strategy might succeed. First, laughter can create solidarity and feelings of friendship. Second, there is the fiction that humor does not count.¹² So, in a way, the arguer is not allowed to act as an offended party on pain of being a bore. Third, laughter elicited from the arguer can be taken as a commitment that, indeed, the criticism conveyed in the ridiculing way is appropriate or even that there are serious problems with the arguer's statement (see the idea that "laughter after a joke expresses some degree of agreement with the speaker that the occasion was appropriate for joking," Attardo, 2003, p. 1289). The message of this maneuver is subtle. First, the critic challenges the arguer, second, the critic does not expect that there is a way for the arguer to come up with a successful argumentation, and third, the critic does not want the arguer to withdraw from the discussion.

The second variant of strategic maneuvering takes place where the rhetorical aims are both to propositionally distance oneself from the arguer's position, as well as to disqualify and exclude the arguer from the discussion, or at least to depict the victim of the ridicule as lacking the required credibility. Part of the mechanism behind this maneuvering is that the exclusive kind of laughter, either produced by the critic or elicited from the audience, can be taken as expressing the implausibility of the arguer's position as well as the utter lack of credibility and significance of the arguer himself. If the arguer himself cannot suppress a laugh, this can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the critic is onto something. Another part of the mechanism is that the humorous effect is often generated by pushing at the boundaries of politeness: "humour at once permits, legitimizes and exonerates an insult" (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005, p. 12). Consequently, in many cases it will be impossible to decipher whether the message is excluding rather than

¹² According to Pizzini, "[b]ecause humour officially does not count, persons are induced to risk sending messages that would be unacceptable if stated seriously" (cited in Holmes, 2000: 177).

including. The speaker always has the (easy) excuse at his disposal that he was “just joking” (Billig, 2005a).

A special subtype of this second way of maneuvering is where it serves the further end of putting the arguer off balance by making him angry, frustrated or timid. A large laughing audience will be intimidating to the arguer, and it will impair his performance in his attempts to persuade both the audience and the critic. The critic can try to uphold the pretence of reasonableness by abusing the good reputation of humor as a positive thing and by appealing to the commonplace that “you should be able to take it.”

As we have seen, there are three soundness conditions for maneuvering with ridicule. First, the maneuvering must be transparent, second, it must fulfill the non-closure condition, and third, it must not be used for exclusion purposes. So, the first variant admits of both fallacious as well as legitimate instances, while the second variant is inherently fallacious. Still, the second variant can be rhetorically opportune when one conceals its fallacious nature by highlighting the propositional distancing function or by acting as if the humor were inclusive.

I will illustrate the two variants with three examples. Schimanée’s response “We really don’t have to give way to every house sparrow,” can plausibly be seen as an example of the first variant. The message is that the position under attack is implausible and indefensible. Although it is hard to decide without having the contextual details, the ridicule seems to be gentle and will not in any way scare off conservationists from continuing the discussion. Since the maneuvering satisfies the transparency and non-closure conditions, this instance of expressing.

Hillary Clinton’s story, according to which she had been under attack by snipers when visiting Bosnia, was ridiculed by a comic, Sinbad, who happened to have joined her at this trip. Alluding to an ad for Hillary Clinton in the 2008 American presidential nomination race, where she had been presented as the best, because most experienced, choice for answering the “red phone” in case it should ring, Sinbad said:

- (2) “I think the only ‘red phone’ moment was: Do we eat here or at the next place?” (*The Washington Post*, 2008).

In addition to accusing her of lying, Sinbad was putting across the message that Clinton’s position regarding the dangers she had experienced in the past was indefensible. He did so by making a statement that implied his critical doubt regarding her position and that at the same time represented her in a silly way as someone who stated that her life had been at stake whereas it was just her next meal. The maneuvering clearly satisfies the transparency condition. However, the ridicule cannot plausibly be taken as being of a gentle kind, motivating the arguer to provide a defense. Both the implicit accusation of lying as well as the ridicule discredited Clinton and excluded her as a serious discussion partner. Sinbad’s move may have had various virtues. It might

have been funny and presumably he was correct about the falsity of Clinton's position. Still, from the perspective of resolving the difference of opinion that centers on the issue of whether or not Clinton was experienced when it comes to life-threatening situations, Sinbad's contribution must be regarded as fallacious for the reason that he closed off Clinton as a party who had any interesting arguments to offer in defense of her position.¹³

In the build-up to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, Jacco Verhaeren, a successful Dutch swimming coach, criticized the IOC for trivializing the human rights problems in China. Hein Verbrugge, a member of the IOC, disparaged Verhaeren's remarks by referring to them as:

(3) "fashionable behavior of just a small-time swimming coach"
(*Ephimenco* 2008).

Juxtaposed to this twofold belittling qualification of Verhaeren, Verhaeren's position was made to look ridiculous. This form of ridicule was acid and aimed to exclude Verhaeren as a credible discussant. In addition, it probably also served to unbalance Verhaeren in the public debate with Verbrugge. So, this example of ridicule illustrates the harsher form of exclusive and fallacious ridicule.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the use of this kind of ridicule as a way of maneuvering strategically between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness enables us to explain in some detail what goes on when a party ridicules his interlocutor and why a critic would choose such a technique. The dialectical soundness conditions for the ridicule at issue enable us to make the distinction between dialectically licit versus fallacious instances of argumentative ridicule.

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¹³ Lying is a moral but not a dialectical sin.

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