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Dialogical Structures in 17th Century Controversies

1. Introductory remarks

This article is a contribution to historical dialogue analysis, a field of research which has gained momentum in recent years (Fritz 1995, 1997, Gloning 1999, and other articles in Jucker/Fritz/Lebsanft 1999). In the present paper, I report some results of ongoing research from a project on the history of controversies from 1600 to 1800, which Marcelo Dascal and I are conducting at the Universities of Tel Aviv, Israel and Gießen, Germany.¹

One of the reasons why controversies form an interesting topic for historical dialogue analysis is the fact that exchanges of this type follow fairly well-defined rules and principles which are often explicitly stated and reflected upon by the controversialists themselves. Therefore we are in the fortunate position of having comparatively well-founded analytical categories for the history of this form of communication. Furthermore, there are highly interesting historical developments in this form of communication, especially in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries. Aspects of controversies that are involved in these historical changes include the traditional point-by-point procedure of refutation and its decline, the status of certain types of argument (e.g. the argument from authority, especially from biblical and classical authority in philosophical and scientific controversies), and the use of certain media (e.g. from pamphlets to scientific journals).

2. The basic form of a 17th century controversy

The first question I shall address is the following: What are the fundamental characteristics of a typical 17th century controversy? Basically, it consists of a sequence of printed pamphlets on some topic from science, philosophy, theology, etc. These pamphlets will be

¹ The project “Controversies in the République des Lettres 1600-1800” is supported by the German Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development. This cooperation between philosophers and linguists was inspired by Dascal’s ground-breaking work on the history and theory of controversy (cf. Dascal 1989, 1998).

closely related to each other by thematic and functional links. In many cases, the titles of the pamphlets will already indicate a dialogical connection between individual contributions, like in the following examples from a famous controversy between the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the Anglican Bishop John Bramhall on the problem of free will. The first, comparatively short pamphlet (49 pages) by Thomas Hobbes, printed in 1654, has the following title:

Of Libertie and Necessitie, A Treatise, Wherein all Controversie concerning Predestination, Election, Free Will, Grace, Merits, Reprobation etc. is fully decided and cleared, in answer to a Treatise written by the Bishop of Derry on the same subject. By Thomas Hobs. London: F. Eaglesfied 1654.

This title is quite a mouthful, but this is characteristic of the baroque titles of the period. Bramhall answered Hobbes's attack with a much longer pamphlet (253 pages) titled:

A Defence of True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsecal Necessity; Being an Answer to a late Book of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury entitled A Treatise of Liberty and Necessity. Written by the Right Reverend John Bramhall, D.D. and Lord Bishop of Derry. (1655)

Although the respective pamphlets are termed *answers* to earlier contributions – which suggests a dialogical relationship –, the question remains, in what sense such controversies can be considered genuine dialogues, or, to put it more precisely, in which way the organizing principles of dialogue structure controversies of this kind. The strategy of this inquiry will be to examine different parameters of dialogue in order to find out in which way the course of the controversy and the structure of the individual contributions are determined by these factors. These parameters are: system of address, topic management, and functional sequencing. In addition I shall present some observations on the use of dialogue form in 17th century pamphlets.

As a preliminary remark, it is necessary to point out that quite a number of controversies actually started out as genuine dialogues, i.e. as oral disputations. This is true, for instance, of Galileo's disputation about floating bodies which was held at the house of his patron Salviati in Florence in 1611 (cf. Bagioli 1993: 159ff.) and of the oral discussion of free will which Hobbes and Bramhall had at the house of *their* patron, the Marquis of Newcastle, during their exile in Paris in the year 1645. It is therefore not surprising that the traditional rules of oral disputation govern much of 17th century printed controversies.

3. System of address

The main difference between oral disputations and printed controversies lies in the fact that printed pamphlets normally aim at a wider public. Therefore one factor becomes dominant which, of course, may also be present in oral disputes, namely the orientation towards a public audience. This is clearly reflected in the system of address used in pamphlets. In the 17th century, the authors usually address two addressees directly, namely the patron to whom their pamphlet is dedicated and the reader who is normally addressed in the preface, typical forms of address being *gentle reader*, *Christian reader*, *to the sober and discreet reader*, etc. The opponent, however, is normally not addressed directly at all but only mentioned in the third person. Hobbes, for example, usually refers to Bramhall as “the Bishop” or “his Lordship”. The Englishman Clarke, in his controversy with Leibniz (1715-1716), usually refers to Leibniz as “this learned author” (cf. Correspondance: 190, 195, etc.). There are some notable exceptions to this rule, e.g. Milton’s polemical aside directed at an opponent: “Where didst thou learne to be so agueish, so pusillanimous, thou lozel Bachelour of Art [...]?” (cf. Bach 1997: 146). But, generally speaking, if we go by the system of address, there is no direct dialogue between the opponents in most 17th century controversies.

4. Topic management

But, of course, direct address is just *one* parameter of dialogue. There are other parameters, in respect of which sequences of contributions to a controversy show very strong coherence relations reminding us of exchanges of letters or even of oral talk exchanges. The most obvious case in point is topic management. In a typical case, author A will raise a number of topics. Author B will take up every single topic raised by author A in order to deal with these topics point by point. The principle of point-by-point topic organization is very characteristic of many 16th to 18th century controversies. It is a kind of generative principle for the textual structure of pamphlets. The power of this principle lies in the fact that someone who fails to take up a topic that has been raised will be seen as having lost a point in the disputation game, and of course nobody wants to lose a point. As this principle only fixes a downward boundary, it does not keep authors from elaborating on topics which have been introduced and from introducing topics of their own. So from the point of view of topic management we often find interesting cases of joint production of topics

which remind us of everyday dialogue. From the point of view of the textual structure of pamphlets, the application of this principle leads to very long and complex texts, which are often not particularly well-structured internally. The interesting point about this is that in this case what is obviously a disadvantage for the textual structure of the individual pamphlet is a direct consequence of the dialogical structure of the exchange of contributions. In many cases improving the structure of one's own text would mean relaxing the adherence to the point-by-point requirement, which some late 17th century authors did in fact do. For instance, August Hermann Francke, the Pietist theologian, in two cases answered the accusations of his Orthodox opponent Johann Friedrich Mayer by writing open letters to friends in which he concentrated on selected topics which he himself considered essential, thereby avoiding having to deal with a plethora of irrelevant calumnies. This was in 1706. A year later, however, Francke wrote a long pamphlet in which he reverted to the traditional point-by-point procedure in a final effort to stop his opponent's mouth (cf. Francke, *Streitschriften*: 217-381).

5. Functional sequencing

A second organizing principle of dialogue which creates text structure is what I call functional sequencing, i.e. the use of sequencing patterns like question and answer, assertion and objection or refutation, accusation and counteraccusation. The functional organization at the global level – i.e. the statement of an author's position followed by the opponent's answer in the form of a refutation or castigation etc. – is naturally also reflected at the micro-level. In the individual pamphlets we find typical reactions which are well-known from oral debates, e.g. giving an argument against a proposition held by the opponent, justifying a controversial earlier statement of his own or countering an accusation by a counter-accusation. So these dialogical micro-patterns also create coherence between the contributions to a controversy and they are also responsible for part of the textual structure of the individual contribution. As this is quite straightforward I shall not go into it in more detail.

6. The use of dialogue form in pamphlets

I shall however briefly discuss a typical problem of communication for authors of pamphlets and a solution to this problem – which consists in using dialogue form for the purpose of making visible the dialogical structure of the ongoing controversy.

One of the problems authors face in writing a pamphlet as part of such a presentation of dialogue is a problem of knowledge-management. In order to understand the point of a certain pamphlet, the reader has to know the history of the controversy, or, at least, he has to know the direct target of the new pamphlet, i.e. the opponent's earlier contribution to which the present pamphlet responds. In many cases, however, the authors could not assume their readers to have available the texts of which the controversy consisted or to remember previous contributions. So they had to take measures in their own text to provide readers with the appropriate knowledge. One frequently used method is to give a survey of the controversy in the preface. Another device is to begin the actual text with a paragraph summarizing the state of the controversy (“status controversiae”).

Other means are used in the micro-structure of the text itself, e.g. when the author gives a short indication of the opponent's position before presenting his own reaction. This kind of textual element usually has the form “My opponent says that p, but, of course, that is not true, as I shall now prove”. This is already a rudimentary presentation of dialogue.

Now, a particularly ingenious method of providing the necessary background is to actually replay the preceding controversy concerning a particular point in the form of a small dialogue. When authors do this the dialogue structure of the controversy surfaces in a particularly visible form. I shall give two examples of this technique, one taken from a controversy between the German astronomer Kepler and his opponent Röslin, who argues in favour of astrology, and the second one taken from the controversy between Hobbes and Bramhall, which I already mentioned.

6.1. Johannes Kepler vs. Helisaeus Röslin

In the year 1604, a spectacular comet was closely observed and widely commented on by astrologers and astronomers, among them Johannes Kepler in his book “De stella nova” written in 1606. In this book Kepler complained that in one of his earlier prognostic writings the astrologer Helisaeus Röslin had only picked out the two comets of 1556 and 1580 for astrological analysis, leaving out comets which had appeared *before* 1556 and others which had been observed *between* 1556 and 1580. Röslin, in his attempted refutation of

Keplers arguments, which he wrote in 1609, quotes Keplers Latin and gives an answer in German, presenting this exchange as a dialogue.

Keplerus: Quare imbecillis est connexio illius anno 1556. fulgentis, cum hoc anni 1580. ex solo contrario signo & contrario motu deducta.

(Kepler: Therefore the connection between the comet shining in 1556 and the one in 1580 is rather weak, as it is deduced merely from the fact that they have opposing astrological signs and an opposing direction of movement.)

Röslinus: Ich hab auch nicht dahin gesehen / vnd dieser contrarietät der Zeichen vnd bewegung nicht meldung gethan / vnd mein Sach nicht aus diesem grund geführt

(Röslin: Actually, I did not consider these facts and I did not mention the contrariety of signs or of movements, and I did not base my argument on these facts.)

In the same year, Kepler answered Röslin's pamphlet and used the same technique. Referring to the passage just mentioned, Kepler first quotes Röslin – not strictly verbatim – and then adds his answer, also in dialogue-fashion:

D. Röslin: Ich hab nit dahin gesehen / oder mein sach nit auß diesem grund geführt das der Comet Anno 1556 vnd der Anno 1580 auß contrarijs signis vnd contrarijs motibus gelauffen.

(Röslin: I did not consider these facts, and I did not base my argument on the fact that the comets of 1556 and 1580 moved in opposing signs and in opposite directions.)

Keplerus: Ich aber hette gemaint / dise vmbstende solten D. Röslins fürhaben in zusammenfassung baider Cometen ein vil bessers ansehen gemacht haben [...]

(Kepler: But I should have thought these facts would have made Dr. Röslin's attempt at tying together these two comets look much more convincing.)

From the point of view of Kepler's argumentative technique it would be worth analysing in detail Kepler's rather subtle manoeuvre of suggesting a possible improvement of his opponent's argument. However, I shall not go into this here.

What interests me at this point is the textual strategy which Röslin uses and which Kepler takes up, i.e. presenting their dispute on this particular topic in the form of an actual dialogue. This form of dialogical rhetoric has at least a double function: it adds to the attractiveness of the pamphlet by giving a more vivid picture of the dialogical aspect of the controversy and, at the same time, it provides the reader with the necessary background of knowledge.

6.2. Hobbes vs. Bramhall

As I said, this technique was also used in the Hobbes vs. Bramhall controversy. But there the authors used it even more extensively by stringing together three or even four utterance units and thereby creating three- or four-part dialogue sequences. Bramhall uses this strat-

egy in a pamphlet which was the third contribution to the controversy. He had written a treatise on the subject “Of liberty and necessity”, to which Hobbes answered with a treatise on the same subject, published in 1654. As I already mentioned, Bramhall replied in 1655 with “A defence of true liberty”. In his “Defense”, Bramhall replays the dialogue by first giving his own original statement under the abbreviation *J.D.* and then adding Hobbes’s reaction under *T.H.* The dialogue is then continued with Bramhall’s reply. Bramhall does this for every one of the 38 points which are covered in this controversy. A year later, in 1656, Hobbes responded again with another pamphlet “The questions concerning liberty, necessity, and chance”. In this text, Hobbes tops Bramhall’s technique by recording, for every one of the 38 points, the whole three-part dialogue enacted so far and adding, as a fourth part, his own “Animadversions on the Bishop’s reply”. As an example of this technique, I present a slightly abbreviated version of the exchange for point no. XVII:

J.D. “Fifthly, take away liberty and you take away the very nature of evil, and the formal reason of sin. [...] Therefore it appears, both from Scripture and from reason, that there is true liberty.”

T.H. To the fifth argument from reason, which is, that if liberty be taken away, the nature and formal reason of sin is taken away, I answer by denying the consequence. [...] And thus you have my answer to his objections, both out of Scripture and reason.

J.D. [...] it seems *T.H.* thinks it a more compendious way to baulk an argument, than to satisfy it. [...] But it will not serve his turn. And that he may not complain of misunderstanding it [...] I will first reduce mine argument into form, and then weigh what he saith in answer, or rather in opposition to it. [...]

Animadversions upon the bishop’s reply no. XVII

Whereas he had in his first discourse made this consequence: “If you take away liberty, you take away the very nature of evil, and the formal reason of sin”: I denied that consequence. It is true he who taketh away liberty of doing, according to the will, taketh away the nature of sin; but he that denieth the liberty to will, does not so. But he supposing I understand him not, will needs reduce his argument into form, in this manner. (a) “That opinion which takes away the formal reason of sin, and by consequence, sin itself, is not to be approved.” This is granted. “But the opinion of necessity doth this. This I deny; [...]” (cf. Hobbes, Questions: 228-233)

Bramhall himself at one point explains why *he* uses this textual device: for him, the point of this procedure is that it permits the reader to “compare plea with plea and proof with proof” (cf. Bramhall, Castigations: 506) and to judge for himself what the truth is. It is a certain rule, “contraries being placed one besides another, do appear much more clearly. He who desires to satisfy his judgment in this controversy, must compare our writings one with another without partiality, the arguments and answers and pretended absurdities on

both sides” (cf. Bramhall, *Castigations*: 226). But, of course, such a dialogue-presentation is also a means of presenting a more lively view of the course of the controversy.

7. On the history of the use of dialogue form

As for the history of this type of presentation of the dialogue structure of a controversy, I am not sure when this device was first used. What is obvious is that dialogues between fictional characters were a widely-used didactic genre, from Socratic dialogue to the many fictional dialogues written in the 16th century, e.g. the “*Colloquia familiaria*” by Erasmus (1518 ff.). This philosophical and literary genre provided a model for authors of how to present their real controversies in dialogue form. In many cases, fictional dialogues were related to real controversies, as in the case of Galileo’s fictional “Dialogue concerning the two chief systems of the world”, written in 1632, which can be considered a continuation of earlier real life controversies (Spranzi Zuber 1998). As for the use of dialogue sequences to represent the state of the controversy, examples go back at least until the early 16th century. There is, for instance, a beautiful example in the Reuchlin vs. Pfefferkorn controversy of 1525 (cf. Schwitalla 1999: 119). As I am at the moment not dealing with this earlier period, I shall leave it at that. But it would certainly be interesting to know more about the early history of this dialogical device for text construction.

8. Summary

The upshot of this analysis is that typical 17th century controversies are not, strictly speaking, dialogues between the opponents, although they show characteristic properties of genuine dialogue, like dialogical topic management and functional sequencing of a dialogical nature. Dialogue structures to a large extent determine the text structure of pamphlets. The authors involved in such a controversy *present* a dialogue-like sequence of texts to the reading public, not unlike what we find today in television debates. This is in consonance with Dascal’s view of “Controversies as quasi-dialogues” (Dascal 1989). In the second half of the paper I focussed on a particularly interesting textual device, the use of actual dialogue in monological printed texts, which, as far as I can see, serves at least three different purposes: it helps to present necessary running knowledge to the audience,

it provides an overview of the contrasting positions, and it gives the audience a more vivid sense of ongoing dialogue.

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