Chapter 1

Lifting the Fog – Exercises in Analytical Discourse Evaluation

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1   Analytical Discourse Evaluation

> Did you ever see such a mist in your life? It's the thickest fog I ever knew. We can't even see our feet in the light of the torch now.' [...]We'll be walking in it all night long,' said Julian, desperately. 'Why did we leave the girls? Suppose this frightful fog doesn't clear by tomorrow? Sometimes it lasts for days.' 'What a horrible idea,' said Dick, lightly, sounding much more cheerful than he felt. 'I don't think we need worry about the girls, Ju. Timmy's with them and he can easily take them back to the stables across the moor, in the mist. Dogs don't mind fogs.' Julian felt most relieved. He hadn't thought of that. 'Oh yes, I'd forgotten old Tim,' he said.[1]

There is a thick and persistent fog hanging over our democracies. When one looks at our political discourse, be it in parliaments, newspapers, or official and unofficial reports, one cannot help noticing that it is not an exchange of well-presented, developed, and structured arguments. Rather, it is full of ambiguous statements, unverified assertions, appeals to inspiring but vague values and speeches that sound somewhat like actual arguments, but are at best only partial arguments-leaving many important premises implicit and unspecified. This fog makes it difficult to evaluate what participants in any given political debate are saying. After all, if it is not clear exactly what people are saying, it is impossible to determine if it makes sense. And if it is not possible to determine whether what participants in a debate are saying makes sense, the decisions that are made on the basis of that debate are also likely to be compromised. For one thing, the decisions are unlikely to be good decisions. After all, in democracy, debate and political discourse are used to consider the pros and cons of certain courses of action. If that discourse is plagued

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[1]   Enid Blyton, *Five Go to Mystery Moor* (London: Hodder Children's Books), 1997, 54.

by vagueness, the decisions made are likely to be misguided. Furthermore, foggy discourse makes it difficult to explain in coherent and clear terms why a certain course of action was taken. This undermines the legitimacy of those decisions, and the trust in government. For short, if the moor is full of fog, it is hard to know if you are going the right way, and you are likely to get lost.

Hence it is important to find ways of lifting the fog, i.e. of making our political discourse less vague, and more precise, coherent and structured. If one can get participants in political debates to makes their contributions less foggy, it will be possible to understand and evaluate their contributions better, and on that basis make better decisions that can be explained better. Analytical Discourse Evaluation, the form of political philosophy applied in this volume, has as its goal to do exactly that. It proposes a way to take political discourse, as it may be found in actual politics, and transform it into precise, clear and well-structured arguments as they might be found in analytical philosophy. These arguments can then be systematically and rigorously evaluated in a way that the original discourse could not. As a result, Analytical Discourse Evaluation has the potential to clarify our political discourse, enabling better decisions that enjoy a higher degree of legitimacy.

This anthology presents a number of essays applying the methodology of Analytical Discourse Evaluation to a variety of topics and cases. They were produced by students participating in University College Maastricht's Research-Based-Learning program, PEERS, between 2010 and 2013. Students conducted individual research projects using Analytical Discourse Evaluation over a six-month period, gathering discourse, refining that discourse into philosophical arguments using the methodology, and evaluating the resulting arguments critically. Analytical Discourse Evaluation was first developed for a research project investigating the vexing question of the proper payment of high public officials, for which I was awarded an NWO-Netherlands Scientific Research VENI grant. As a result, many of the earlier pieces in this anthology deal with that topic, examining the debates concerning this issue in wide variety of political cultures. However, the method proved flexible and versatile, and soon students were anxious to apply to it a wide variety of topics, as reflected in the later contributions, which examine a number of controversial political issues, ranging from secularism in Italy to the future of Belgium and even an analysis of the claims of Analytical Discourse Evaluation itself. While they share a common method, every contribution has adapted the method to suit its own purposes and has adopted a unique style. Together, they demonstrate the possibilities and versatility of Analytical Discourse Evaluation as a way of looking at political discourse in order to help democracy function better. This is an important goal. We live in difficult times. Western liberal democracies are confronted with economic crises, security challenges, foreign policy dilemmas and a

variety of moral dilemmas. If our political discourse, the way we meet those challenges, continues to be of low quality, it is uncertain whether or not democracy can rise to those challenges. Analytical Discourse Evaluation has as its goal to improve our political debate, with the hope that doing so will make our system of government function better, and thereby vindicate democracy as a viable system of government.

2   How to do Analytical Discourse Evaluation[2]

The basic idea behind Analytical Discourse Evaluation is simple: one looks at actual political discourse pertaining to a particular political debate in a particular political culture, and tries to express the arguments made in those discussions in the language of analytical philosophy. Once this has been achieved, it is possible to systematically and rigorously evaluate those arguments, in a way that is not possible without such a reconstruction. As such there are three distinct steps in the process: the gathering and processing of political discourse, the reconstruction of the central arguments in that discourse, and the evaluation of the resulting arguments. However, carrying out these steps requires a great deal of methodological care. Only then can one be sure that one has really found all the relevant discourse, has produced a reconstruction that is both a faithful representation of what people are actually saying and a solid philosophical argument, and has made an evaluation that is reliable for the context one wishes to apply it to.

Analytical Discourse Evaluation is a versatile method; it can be used to examine almost any political debate. As such, those who use the method must delineate the scope of inquiry. One must decide exactly what issue one wishes to examine. In principle, any contentious political issue can be used; any normative question concerning what should be done and about which there is a substantial political debate can be subjected to clarification. Furthermore, one must also determine the political culture or cultures on which one wishes to focus, as well as the particular timeframe in question. One might decide to focus only on one country over a relatively short period of time, during which the issue was particularly prominent. But one may also focus on a wider set of cases,

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2   This is a condensed version of a much longer discussion of the goals and methods of Analytical Discourse Evaluation. For a more extensive presentation of the methodology see Teun J. Dekker, "Analytical Discourse Evaluation: A Manifesto," in *Paying Our High Public Officials: Evaluating the Political Justifications of Top Wages in the Public Sector*, vol. 5. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 11-36.

or a longer period of time, to get a more general perspective of the types of arguments typically used. Once one has delineated the particular debate one is interested in, the next step in rendering current political debates in a philosophical fashion is to get a sense of that political debate, and to gather the discourse that will be the basis of the investigation. Again, one has a great deal of flexibility in deciding what particular items of discourse one wishes to include. In principle, any discourse which addresses the issue under consideration, advocating a particular position and supporting it by some reasoning, can be included. Concretely, one might think of parliamentary debates, speeches by high public officials, Op-Ed pieces in newspapers and magazines, reports by think tanks and government organizations, as well as some types of legal documents. Nevertheless, an investigator can decide not to cast the widest net possible, but rather focus on a particular sub-set of sources or even a single source, so as to specifically examine the arguments used in that source. It all depends on what one wants to achieve.

Once one has collected the discourse one has decided to examine, by conducting extensive searches in databases, archives and libraries, one must read and process it. This means that one must identity types of argument and themes that occur in the discourse, deciding which lines of thought are central to the debate and are interesting enough to warrant further examination. Once one has made that selection, one can then isolate every fragment of discourse that in some way pertains to these lines of argument. These fragments of discourse can then be used to reconstruct the underlying arguments in a philosophical fashion.

At its most basic level, an argument consists of a series of premises or statements that, via logical entailment, support a particular conclusion. Hence the basic idea behind the process of reconstructing political discourse into philosophical argumentation is that one must fit that discourse onto an argumentative structure, by distilling it into a series of unambiguous premises that deductively lead to a conclusion. Of course, any such construction is an interpretation of the discourse, designed to enable a particular type of evaluation and reveal a particular insight into the debate under consideration. In making that interpretation, one is guided by two important constraints, the fidelity and the quality constraint. The fidelity constraint requires that whatever reconstruction one produces must be a faithful interpretation of the discourse under consideration, i.e. that participants in the debate would recognize it as an interpretation of their contribution. This is important because Analytical Discourse Evaluation seeks to clarify actual political debate. If the reconstruction were not a faithful representation of those debates, the conclusions of the eventual evaluations would be meaningless for the actual debate. On the other hand, it is also important that the arguments reconstructed are good arguments, i.e. likely

to be evaluated favorably. Evaluating arguments that are not as strong as possible is not informative, as it leaves open the possibility that a better reconstruction might be more favorably evaluated. Of course, these two constraints might conflict. When they do, the fidelity constraint takes priority. After all, evaluating an argument that is not representative of the discourse, however good it might be, is unlikely to be helpful. For short, one seeks to produce the best possible argument that is a fair representation of the discourse.

The basis for the reconstruction is a model of what a good argument looks like structurally. This is the basic mold into which the content of the discourse will be poured. Analytical Discourse Evaluation adopts Stephen Toulmin's model of argumentation as its basic mold.[3] Central to this model is the interaction between Claim, Data and Warrant. Any argument has a Claim, the eventual conclusion of the argument, the thing it is an argument for. Following logical convention, such Claims must be supported by 2 further premises: the Data, which is the purported reason for the Claim, and the Warrant, which explains why the Data is a reason for the Claim. For example, in the classic argument for Socrates' mortality, the Data would consist of the assertion that Socrates is a man, while the Warrant would hold that all men are mortal. Needless to say, the Data and Warrant are themselves Claims, and need to be supported by further argumentation. The supporting argumentation for the Data is referred to as the Verifiers, while Warrants are supported by Backing. In these supporting sections of an argument, the same pattern of Warrants and Data working together to support a Claim repeats. In this fashion, an argument may be written down as a series of premises in a hierarchical pattern. Such a pattern can be presented graphically, or as a number of syllogisms indicating their role in the overall argument.

In order to transform political discourse into philosophical arguments, one must fit ideas and elements from the discourse onto this structure, so that one ends up with an argument that has the form of Toulmin's model and the content of the discourse one has gathered. One does this by interrogating the discourse, asking which statements fulfill the role of the various elements of a proper argument. For example, one might ask what the Claim of certain related fragments of discourse is. This will be easy to determine as this refers simply to the position that is argued for in the discourse. Likewise, one might ask what the reason offered for the position is, and one has the Data. Needless to say, in answering these questions one will face a great deal of ambiguity. After all, if the discourse contained defined premises, one would not need to undertake a philosophical reconstruction. Rather, one will find vague suggestions, implied meanings or incomplete

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3   Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ideas. Hence one must interpret. In this process, the two constraints play an important role. When confronted with an ambiguous piece of discourse, one simply lists all the possible clear and unambiguous premises one might distil from that discourse. Based on the fidelity constraint, one then eliminates those premises that are incompatible with the discourse, i.e. which are clearly not what those contributing to the debate had in mind. Then, based on the quality constraint, one selects that interpretation that is most likely to be favorably evaluated. In this way, one can transform the discourse into specific and clear premises, suitable for inclusion in a philosophical argument.

However, in many cases, the discourse will not specify a complete set of premises. Often important ideas will be left implicit, or simply not mentioned at all. This is especially the case for Warrants; often the discourse will present reasons for certain positions, but will not explain why those reasons are reason for what they claim to be reasons for. In order to nevertheless produce a complete argument, one must insert premises. In this process, the quality constraint is of particular importance, as the fidelity constraint is, by definition indeterminate when the discourse does not provide any clues. In some cases, inserting a premise is fairly straightforward, such as when a premise must link two existing premises. In such cases logical form will dictate what that missing premise must be. In other cases, there might be a variety of premises one might include in the argument under reconstruction. In those cases, one again lists all the possibilities and selects the premise that results in the strongest possible argument. Following this procedure, one can build up a complete argument that is suitable for systematic and rigorous evaluation in a way that one cannot evaluate political discourse in its initial form.

At its most basic level, a good argument is an argument that is based on acceptable premises which lead via valid logic to its conclusion. Hence the evaluation of arguments must focus both on their premises and their logical structure. As the arguments under consideration have been reconstructed with an eye to producing the best possible arguments, there are likely to be few issues in terms of logical validity, although if there are the argument can be demonstrated to be invalid. This means that the evaluation must concentrate on the individual premises, and in particular the most fundamental premises that are not themselves supported by further argumentation. If those premises are deemed acceptable, the logical structure of the arguments will ensure the conclusion is well supported. However, if these premises falter, the knock-on effects will ripple through the argument and undermine the conclusion.

Such fundamental premises can be demonstrated to be acceptable in different ways. Some premises make factual assertions about the way the world is. They refer to empirical matters, and can be evaluated as such. Hence one can use scientific research to check whether these premises are true. After all, science is all about determining how the world works, which makes it the obvious benchmark for judging factual premises. As such those who do Analytical Discourse Evaluation often refer to established research results in discussing the acceptability of the premises they have found. However, not all premises encountered will be factual in nature; politics is, among other things, about values and beliefs about what a good society or desirable state of affairs would be. Hence the arguments one encounters in politics tend to feature normative premises. Such premises do not refer to states of the world in the strict sense, and as such cannot be evaluated on the basis of scientific research. Rather, one must ask whether those premises are acceptable to the political culture in which the argument features. This is because these arguments are meant to function in that particular context, and convince members of that society. Hence Analytical Discourse Evaluation uses the reasonable citizen standard to judge such premises. Ultimately every political culture is held together by some overlapping consensus of shared beliefs, in virtue of which it can be said to be a political culture in the first place. A reasonable citizen is an imagined citizen who holds only those constitutional values. If such a citizen would agree with a particular normative premise, that premise would be acceptable to the political culture at large.

By examining all the fundamental premises of a reconstructed argument in that way, one can systematically evaluate an argument and get a sense of the strength and weaknesses of arguments, and pinpoint any areas of concern with exact precision. Oftentimes, lines of thought that seem quite plausible when stated informally are much more problematic when examined in this way. By revealing any areas of concern, Analytical Discourse Evaluation can inform the political decision making process, by leading to a better awareness of the merits and demerits of various positions and arguments. In this way, our societies can make better decisions on the basis of those arguments, and not get lost in the fog of discourse that sounds very appealing, but does not, upon further scrutiny, make sense.

The research based learning project that produced these papers ran in parallel with my own research. It was a particular pleasure to guide a group of capable and highly motivated students through their first endeavors in the field of independent research. Research is often lonely. The methodological dilemmas, frustrations, wrongturns, and dead ends are many and varied. This is true for students and more experienced researchers

alike. Hence it is both inspiring and instructive to face those tribulations together. For students to see that the questions and difficulties they face are no different from those faced by more established researchers can reassure them that they are on the right path after all. Those who have done research for many years can be inspired by the enthusiasm, and the original insights of those who are only embarking on that journey. As such, this experience was proof, if such proof were ever required, that teaching and research are not at odds, but mutually enriching. For this reason, I am very grateful to NWO for funding the research that led to this project, to the Sirius program and Maastricht University's MaRBLe/Peers program for funding the project itself, to Ellen Bastiaens and Oscar van den Wijngaard for superb management of the project and Carla Buil for doing an excellent job of editing the final manuscript of this book.

At the same time, Analytical Discourse Evaluation is also very much aligned with the essential values of liberal arts education that inform all teaching at University College Maastricht. Among the most important goals of this type of education is to foster a capacity for critical thinking. While the concept of critical thinking is notoriously difficult to define, it has much in common with the idea behind Analytical Discourse Evaluation. Both are about not taking ideas at face value or judging them based on first impressions, but rather suspending judgment until a careful, methodical analysis has been completed. Both are about not being content with whether or not things appear to be true, but always striving to find out whether they are in fact true. And both are informed by a belief that one should not jump to conclusions, but rather think about things carefully, and that doing so result in better outcomes and solutions. Because of this similarity, doing Analytical Discourse Evaluation is a good way of improving one's critical thinking skills. Hence these essays do not merely stand as a tribute to the enriching nexus of research and education, but also as a monument to critical thinking, and the importance of ensuring that future generations of citizens and politicians, the ones who will have to make the important decisions, like Old Tim, do not mind the fog.