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Commentary on Tony Blair's "The Persuasive Ineffectiveness of Arguing and Arguments"

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1. Introduction

The most general thesis held by Professor Blair in this paper is that "persuasion" and "argument" overlap but do not coincide. Of course, it is difficult to make sense of the coincidence of two things as different as the psychological state of persuasion and an argument (taken either as an assertion with considerations supposed to support it, or as a kind of communicational exchange). So, let us make the general idea a bit more precise: persuasion and argument do not coincide in a functional sense. Yet, it is true that persuasion sometimes is a goal and a consequence of the use of argument. But, a first point of Blair's general thesis is that, it is not always the case, since you can be persuaded by other means. A second one is that arguments do not always aim at rational persuasion. The tenet of Blair's title, namely the observation that arguments are "not terribly effective as a means of persuasion" (p. 2) supports this view of a relative independence of persuasion from argument. But it also raises a question. Since we spend much time and energy at arguing and arguments are not terribly effective at persuasion, isn't this energy stupidly lost? Blair's answer is straightforward: there is a stupid loss, if you tightly bind arguments and persuasion. But if you grant that when we argue we often have in mind other goals than rational persuasion, it becomes less obvious that this energy is lost.

2. Persuasion

Blair relies on O'Keefe's definition of persuasion: "a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication, a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom." O'Keefe grants this definition has fuzzy edges and faces many difficult cases. We can also notice that it focuses on the action: what you must do (and achieve) to reach a certain goal. This goal is a mental state (an "attitude" as discussed by O'Keefe (2002, p.6)). In my introductory paragraph, when I spoke of "persuasion" I explicitly alluded not to the action of the persuader but to the expected mental state of the persuadee. On the contrary, O'Keefe's definition focuses mainly on the persuader's action. What about the other side? Only one thing is explicitly said: "the persuadee has some measure of freedom." As pointed by Blair, O'Keefe's concept of persuasion is a "success" word. Ineffective attempts at persuasion are left in the shadow.

Nothing is said about the conditions of this success beyond the vague expression of an "influence" on a mental state. We guess that this influence has induced a change but it is left unqualified. Is influence enough for persuasion? To be persuaded is often taken as synonymous (or quasi-synonymous for those who do not believe in perfect synonymy) with being convinced. And to be convinced is also often taken as synonymous with being certain. Under this interpretation, when you are persuaded, no room is left for doubt. So, you could say that

persuasion is differently successful or introduce something like degrees of persuasion, more or less linked with degrees of belief, ranging from weak persuasion to doubtless persuasion.

As advertisers or politicians often only expect an act from you, they may be satisfied with a degree of persuasion sufficient to perform it, even if certainty is missing. But in the case of religious (or philosophical!) conversion, this might not be enough. This is certainly an important point when you discuss the effectiveness of various alleged means of persuasion. Here, it could be interesting to revive an old fashioned distinction between “moral certainty” and “metaphysical certainty” used for centuries by many authors.¹ Moral certainty is the certainty sufficient to act and metaphysical certainty is certainty that cannot be challenged (it is certified by God according to Descartes). But should we identify certainty and persuasion? At least, these questions remind us of the importance of the means used to decide of the effectiveness and success of attempts at persuasion.

This also points toward a sensitive point in O’Keefe’s definition: how can a persuadee have some degree of freedom? A charitable interpretation is that O’Keefe wants to stress that you can persuade only someone who can choose: you cannot persuade someone who can’t or is already persuaded by the point at stake, since you are supposed to be unable to choose when you are persuaded, especially in the strong sense. Hence, the expression is unfortunate: O’Keefe should have written that the persuadee *previously has (or had)* some measure of freedom. But if you grant that the persuadee is not (yet) persuaded, O’Keefe’s claim that the effort is successful is very bold, unless he discards failed attempts at persuasion. This could look like quibbling, but details matter when the effectiveness of means of persuasion is at stake.

3. Arguments as ineffective means

“The shoemaker has the worse shoes” says a French proverb to temper the tendency to believe that an expert has a special benefit from her expertise. We know that physicians are not always healthy or that professors sometimes forget to apply the enlightened advice they give to their students. This is also true for argumentation theorists: they know what should make an argument persuasive but also observe that the persuasiveness of their best arguments is often – let us not be too pessimistic – rather weak. This phenomenon is part of what Blair calls scholarly disagreements, but it spreads further. Neither will nor competence ensure a successful persuasion and arguments that should persuade can fail. Moreover, when the word “persuasion” qualifies a mental state its origin stays an empirical matter. On the other hand, when persuasion is caused by an argument it is not certain that this argument was good. If you grant that there is no necessary connection between the illocutionary correctness of a speech act and its perlocutionary effect, you should be open to the idea that a bad or weak argument can be highly effective. The occasional success of fallacies tends to confirm it.

Yet, Blair’s point is not only that the effectiveness of persuasive argument is uncertain or that poor arguments can be effective, but also that some means to persuade are often more efficient than arguments. Blair gives as example some aspects of religious education and I agree with his view that to be rationally persuaded has a cost. Let us remember that at least since the time of Reformation, most of the religious and political movements based on an explicit theory – or ideology if you like – have paid great attention to the education of young children and uneducated people, especially when they were suspected to be not (fully) rational. See for instance the case of the involvement of Jesuits in education.² Yet, you could object that the low performance of rational persuasion is partly explained by an expected high level of persuasion: in cases like these ones, metaphysical persuasion may matter much more than moral persuasion.

¹ About this concept already used by casuists, see for example, Descartes’s *Principles*, IV, §205. (1953, 1985)

² See, for instance, François de Dainville’s *L’éducation des Jésuites (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles)*.

Although going to church could be a good prelude to faith – as Pascal thought – and could count as evidence of moral certainty, it may not be enough.

Now, let us focus for a while on the case of advertising. Blair rightly stresses that professional commercial advertisers rarely choose to use explicit arguments. They often seem to prefer very concise statements, so short that they could even seem a bit obscure, puzzling or equivocal. They are also often matched with sophisticated pictures or videos, raising the vexed question of visual arguments. But, as Blair knows (2015), professional advertisers are likely not to be directly interested in speculations on subtleties like degrees of persuasion, but only in measurable efficiency. Any means supposed to contribute to an increase of the sales is likely to be welcome, the important question being “Does it work?” But this pragmatic approach does not mean that the design of an efficient ad does not require intelligence, subtle reflections and arguments, and empirical surveys, if possible, to check that all work well. This orientation is not only typical of advertising but also of political elections and other cases where a possible vagueness of the concept of persuasion does not matter anymore when a pragmatic threshold or criterion is sufficient to decide. What matters then, is not necessarily to offer good reasons, but first and foremost to make something happens, to cause an act. Practically minded agents are mainly interested in moral persuasion established by the expected act or, at least, its promotion.

Blair’s reply to the claim that by definition ads are arguments, focuses on the action of sellers, not of potential customers. According to the claim, sellers would rely on arguments to try to persuade. Blair’s criticism of the fallacious argument that would lead to this position denounces an unfortunate confusion between arguments and attempts at persuasion. He recalls that the means chosen by sellers are not necessarily reasons: efficient means – reasons or not – are enough. I agree with this. I also add that the seller’s reasons to choose this or that means of persuasion are not necessarily the reasons explaining why some potential customers are or will be persuaded. Confusion between attempts at persuasion, arguments, successful persuasion, plausible explanation and correct explanation of the success of the process is likely to lead to hasty false conclusions, including the identification between argument and attempts at persuasion.

Who decides whether an argument is hidden within a commercial ad? Instead of turning towards designers and their intentions, I suggest to focus on the alleged persuadee who did the crucial act. The question is not why the persuadee bought the product, but the explanation of the successful link between the ad designed to make people buy and the persuadee. A global correlation appears at the statistical level but it is much less obvious to give an explanation at the individual level of the persuadee. Having no time for a significant statistical inquiry, I will satisfy myself with an introspection that I believe little original. It may happen that I acknowledge that an explicit verbal argument in the ad is the reason why I did the purchase. But how do I explain my act when I acknowledge that the ad influenced me although it contains no explicit argument?³ I grant that someone else could show that I have been unconsciously influenced. But just like when you focus on the seller’s side the distinction between attempt at persuasion and argument does matter, when the focus is on the persuadee’s side the distinction between first and third person explanation is crucial. I can only grant that the reasons of my choices are not always clear for me. I feel sometimes embarrassed not only by questions like “Why did you do it?” but more specifically by “You acknowledge that this ad influenced your

³ What counts as an explicit argument is not always obvious. Is “Choose it!” part of an argument? Is it a premise or a conclusion?

choice, but how?” and I am not always convinced by my own reasons.⁴ (Blair’s *reassuring use* of argument is not always reassuring).

Blair explains why we *like* a commercial: it is clever, amusing, sexy ... But there is a gap between this aesthetic attitude and the act expected by the designer, especially when the cost of the act is high. Am I ready to confess: “The only reason why a (poor) guy like me bought this expensive car is that the ad was sexy”? I am not sure, but I can imagine that a rich person could sincerely say that and think that it is *her* sufficient reason to buy this car. Yet, for a more ordinary guy like me this reason seems irrelevant or at least “disproportionate” (insufficient!) to the decision made. It appears to work at most as a taste enhancer in a substantial dish: it is likely that the main reasons of my act are not here, but as we know and say: “it helps”. Blair rightly stresses the *indirectness* of this kind of persuasive means that are not irrelevant – at least in the sense that they may work –, but are rationally “far” or “disproportionate” for the conclusion at stake. This is why it is sometimes less ridiculous to rationalize a choice by resorting to direct but epistemically empty explanations like “I chose it, because I liked it” or “I did it, because it was the right thing to do”.

Furthermore, it is not certain that my reasons based on the ad coincide with the predictions of the advertisers. There are famous cases of failures or misunderstandings about ads. I may be right or wrong about the reasons that did persuade me, but the advertisers’ explanations about the means that are efficient can also be right or wrong. The four combinations are possible. Persuasion can thus be successful for reasons other than the designer’s expected ones and other than the ones put forward by the customer to explain the influence of the ad. Ads are often black boxes and experience has shown that there are tricks that work for various reasons, known or unknown. But as Blair reminds us, not all tricks are arguments.

4. Why do we argue anyway?

Blair thinks that when we use arguments we do not always aim at rational persuasion. We have seen that among his reasons is the fact that arguments often poorly fare at persuasion, so that other means are preferred to achieve it. The smaller the part of our arguments aiming at persuasion, the more urging is the answer to the question of the reason why we spend so much time and energy putting forwards arguments. Blair’s answer is quite straightforward: we sometimes have various other reasons to argumentatively⁵ use arguments.

Blair offers three examples. The reassuring use, for instance by rehearsing one’s reasons for a claim, the rationale use to justify a past decision, and the explanation of one’s reasoning. Blair argues that in all these cases, the arguer has no intention to persuade anybody in the sense suggested by O’Keefe. These three uses of arguments appear non agonistic and even not dialogical. They show someone working alone: you rehearse your arguments, the lawyer writes her rationale and Aristotle his *Ethics*.

But, as we already noticed about O’Keefe’s definition and in the case of advertising, the point of view of the arguer is no guarantee of what will happen and how it will happen. Opponents to Blair’s, especially people dialectically minded, could notice that Blair writes that when he reassures himself he does it because he “expects to be challenged”. They could also

⁴ On this topic see my “Persuadé ou convaincu, comment savoir?” (*Persuaded or convinced, how can you know?*) (Dufour, 2015)

⁵ I mean that the user thinks that the argument is good. This might not be the case in the case of a mere mention of the argument.

stress that someone found or could find the lawyer's decision arbitrary, or that Antisthenes laughed at Aristotle's claims. Hence all these previously uncontroversial arguments would have to be put at work to try to rationally persuade all these emerging detractors. So, Blair's characters would be short sighted; they should not forget, according to the dialectician, that arguments are made for others, or rather against others.

This is right, but the problem with this objection is that it may well be a *petitio principii* in the original sense of the term of an unsupported principle put forward before any discussion. In the case of argument, the constant possibility of an emerging opponent is what I consider as Protagoras' discovery when he said that there is an opposing discourse to any discourse, at least in the sense that you can always imagine someone who disagrees and then starts an agonistic argument.⁶ It seems to me that it is an irrefutable position, with all the drawbacks of irrefutable positions. But I think that Blair is right when he says that arguers sometimes have no persuasion projects and that they do not address their arguments to anybody. This actually happens; even if, someday, somebody may disagree or ask for an enlightening explanation. Arguments can be in principle available for others, without being each time for or against others, especially when you try to change their minds.

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⁶ For more details see (Dufour, 2020)