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Commentary on Kraus

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Commentary on Manfred Kraus's "Culture Sensitive Arguments"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Kraus's very interesting paper stresses the importance of cultural environments for argumentation. Its main objective is to find out the areas where cultural difference plays a role in argumentative communication, to identify types of arguments that are culture sensitive and to see how cultural insensitivity may spoil an argument. Though mainly dwelling on efficacy, the analysis also raises questions of logical validity, examining the fallacious or non-fallacious nature of culture sensitive arguments. Kraus defines the latter as arguments "that in their premises touch culture-specific beliefs, norms or values and are potentially open to misunderstandings."

The paper is divided into four major points:

1. Going through the vast literature on the subject of intercultural argumentation, it first determines three criteria of cultural diversity (a) values, norms, codes and institutions—be they religious, political, ethical or philosophical; (b) elements forming the collective memory (myths and history); (c) standards that regulate everyday life. (customs, sense of humour, etc.) An argument is culture-sensitive if it touches any one of these elements in its premises.
2. Kraus then provides a taxonomy of possible cases of failures like obscurity, irrelevance, insufficiency, strength, backfiring and embarrassment.
3. He proceeds to see if there are particular arguments forms open to cultural sensibility, and deals with standard arguments, arguments from examples, from authority, from popular opinion and *ad hominem*.
4. He then draws the consequences of globalization for culture sensitive arguments—cross-cultural argumentation becoming a permanent task. He concludes on the impossibility of being always politically correct by taking into account all cultural sensitivities. He also, and more forcefully, concludes that an argument that fails as the result of a cultural bias is not by definition a fallacy.

The paper thus throws light on the elements building up the cultural aspect of arguments, and on the effect they can have on argumentative dialogue. I would like to comment on a few points:

1. The problem raised by the very broad criteria of cultural diversity: to the extent that they are based on values, norms, habits, etc. that allow for an agreement on the reasonable, are not all arguments cultural, or culture sensitive?
2. The choice to confine (at least in the definition) cultural aspects of argumentation to premises, and the possibility of culture-dependent, alternative argumentations.
3. The question of political correctness linked to culture sensitivity and the way it blinds us to the importance of dissent and conflict in argumentation.
4. Kraus's premises for his own research, based on the necessity but also the possibility of finding a common ground even when there are cultural discrepancies. Can all kinds of differences be bridged?

2. ALL ARGUMENTS ARE CULTURE SENSITIVE

The first question concerns the categories selected to define the "cultural." Kraus shows—and, to my opinion, rightly so—that these categories are very broad and encompassing. However, one can wonder whether there is anything beyond what he enumerates: values, norms, codes, institutions; collective memory including myth, history, and art; language, customs, habits, routines, sense of shame, drinking and eating habits, life style. Any argumentation is grounded in language, and cannot develop outside its loaded vocabulary, its rich and complex network of notions, its specific ways of modeling the surrounding world. It relies on points of agreements, which are described by Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca (1969) as facts (or rather what is considered a fact), as values and norms, as presumptions drawing on habits and routines. It is framed by institutional rules depending on the nature of a country's regime and constitution. In other words, we can wonder whether pre-existing points of agreement are not by necessity cultural.

This derives not only from the nature of doxa as a set of opinions, beliefs and values shared by a community that informs the premises of any argumentation (Amossy & Sternberg 2002), but also from the substitution by Perelman (1979) of an ideal of reasonableness to a logical ideal of rationality. If argumentation has to be founded on premises that appear as plausible and acceptable to both arguer and audience, namely, on the reasonable, then it necessarily draws on what is accepted by a group or a by a culture. The cultural aspect can be overlooked only when the premise appears as self-evident in such a way, that its relativity escapes the attention of the arguers and/or the analysts. The comparative examples brought by Manfred Kraus amply demonstrate that only confrontation with another possibility (another agreement on the reasonable) can throw light on the cultural dimension of the argument, otherwise perceived as universal.

So the question remains to know whether we can distinguish between the a priori cultural nature of the argument, and a culture sensitive argument. It seems that the cultural aspect of the argument can be more or less conspicuous, but is inescapable, so that any argument is potentially open to misunderstandings.

From this perspective, however, I would like to argue that the measure to which it is open to misunderstanding depends on the target audience, and not on the nature of the premises. If the audience, defined as all the people addressed by a specific argumentation (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969), shares the cultural premises embedded in the discourse, then the argument is not culture sensitive. It becomes so only when is overheard or read by an audience for which it was not originally designed. The cultural component is in the situation of communication and not in the argument itself. In other words, the cultural nature of the premise does not make it by itself culture sensitive.

3. ALTERNATIVE MODES OF REASONING

Though less obvious, my second point nevertheless calls for consideration. Why should the cultural component of an argument be confined to its premises? It is true that cultural elements are often self-evident and as such, remain implicit. Being part of the doxa on which the argument is built, they can be easily observed in premises. However, Kraus's examples show that different cultures promote different types of argumentative moves. In examining the argument by example, by authority and *ad hominem*, he goes beyond his initial definition of culture sensitive arguments as "arguments that in their premises touch culture specific beliefs, norms and values." He shows, for instance, that heavy reliance on the argument of authority is part of religious cultures. We can see how it affects electoral campaigns in Israel, where part of the religious voters follow the instructions of the rabbis and not the inclination borne out of their own reasoning as modeled by the current political discourse.

Following this line of thought and expanding it, we can wonder whether there are not only of types of arguments obeying the spirit of a given culture, but also alternative, culture-dependent modes of reasoning. Could we, for example, define an argumentation characteristic of totalitarian regimes, of some kinds of so-called primitive societies—or do they lead us beyond the borders of argumentation—meaning that verbal exchanges regulated by different cultural laws do not pertain any more to argumentation?

4. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND THE PROCESS OF ARGUING

Let us shortly proceed to Kraus's remark on the fact that political correctness, taken to extremes, can only stifle argumentation. This would of course be a disastrous effect, since our democratic societies are built on the possibility of debate. However, two points can be made concerning this issue. First of all, political correctness applies only to the criteria of the community addressed by the argumentation, not to by-hearers (eaves-droppers, so to say). In other words, the speaker is supposed to respect the sensitivity of the audience she is trying to persuade, and not to take into account any sensitivity whatsoever. Second, attention given to culture sensitivity that can find its expression in political correctness, disregards the fact that argumentation deals by definition with dissent. No social and political life is possible without taking into account the conflicts that underlie it and that justify in great part the necessity of arguing and of looking for an agreement.

5. CAN ALL DIFFERENCES BE BRIDGED?

The last point seems to me particularly interesting insofar as it raises the question of the nature and goals of argumentation. It concerns the underlying assumption in Kraus's text that sensitivity to cultural differences in argumentation is the only way to bridge these differences and to promote efficacy in the persuasion enterprise. The criteria are practical as well as ethical: the goal is to prevent the argumentative dialogue from failure, and to build a possibility of understanding between communities. The degree of difficulty depends on the extent of cultural differences between the parties. Kraus points out that they range from slight to moderate and to radical.

Concerning the last category, I would like to refer to Marc Angenot's work on cognitive breaks (2006), claiming that today, various groups sharing the same living space are feeding on cultural premises so divergent, that they cannot even recognize the rationality of the other—they describe it as sheer madness. This is obvious in examples like radical Islamists and the Western world, but also according to Angenot, in 19th century French political movements and parties like the socialists and the anarchists. The dialogue between them (if there is any) can only be of polemical nature, and Angenot claims, on the basis of case studies, that in such instances, argumentation turns into a dialogue of the deaf. Even if this perspective is less engaging than the attempt at elaborating a culture sensitive argumentation able to overcome violent disagreement and mutual ignorance, it seems to me that it deserves some thought.

6. CONCLUSION

It thus appears that Manfred Kraus's paper on culture sensitive arguments raises essential questions on issues lying at the heart of our very understanding of argumentation. The interest of his work is both in his theses, and in his ability to show how an investigation into the role of culture in argument can engage us into a re-consideration of argumentation's nature and goals.

Link to reply   Link to paper

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