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Commentary on Bibal Amjarso: “Persuasiveness from a Pragma-Dialectical Perspective”

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In this interesting essay Bilal Amjarso aims to examine the neglected partner in the dance of argumentation, viz., the antagonist, interlocutor, opposer, dispute partner, persuadee, or what have you. Building on the historic distinction between convincing and persuading he undertakes a pragma-dialectic analysis of the idea of “persuadedness,” i.e., the result that occurs when someone is persuaded. We know that when someone wants to persuade, they want to be and/or appear to be convincing. The goal of persuasion may be obtained independently of whether or not the arguments presented actually were arguments we believe should conclusively establish a standpoint. Is there, the question becomes, such a distinction for the persuadee? That is, is someone sees herself as persuaded, are there options, halfway points, or rhetorical stances that fall short of being convinced. This, as I understand it, is the subject at hand.

Now, in convincing, we expect a completeness of acceptance: “Accepting is considered as a commissive act because by declaring that he accepts the standpoint defended by the arguer, the listener binds himself to the commitments that result from that” (p. 2). This means that, contrary to most real life situations, there are no caveats, if-buts, or hold backs so common in different kinds of agreement (Gilbert, 2000). But this, as Amjarso quickly points out, is the conclusion of a critical discussion, and this creates very high criteria for convincingness which may not be applicable to marketplace argumentation. “We need,” he says, “to be prepared to say something both about the ‘persuasiveness’ of the arguer and about the ‘*persuadedness*’ of the listener” (p. 5). This is important because it recognizes argument as an activity that takes place between people. We are told that, persuasiveness “refers to the quality of being persuasive (without necessarily being convincing, i.e. reasonable,) and [persuadedness] refers to the state of being persuaded without being convinced” (p. 5). However, Amjarso continues:

One would not be persuaded to accept a standpoint and act upon it unless one sees that the argumentation brought forward in support of it has been reasonable in the sense of being conclusive. [5]

Is this, then, a distinction without difference? Can one be persuaded without being convinced? In real argumentation, I would claim, standpoints are accepted for a myriad of reasons ranging from overwhelming arguments, to the antagonist’s desire to be home in time for the hockey game. Persuasion of action does not require convincing as a necessary condition. Surely, the whole point about persuasion, as opposed to convincing,

is that the former comes in degrees. One might, for example decide that the argument is more trouble than it is worth, and so I will visit grandmother rather than attend the football game. But my reasons for agreeing may have little to do with your argument, and certainly not with my being convinced that your standpoint is correct and mine not. From this point of view, it is not the case, as Amjarso claims that, “Being persuaded seems then to boil down to being convinced” (p. 6).

The point at issue is this: We know that it is possible for an arguer to appear convincing even when she is not. Are there such rhetorical stages for the opposer? Amjarso to reiterate, says, “Being persuaded seems then to boil down to being convinced” (p. 6), because, why would one accept a standpoint unless one agrees that there are conclusive arguments in its favour that cannot be answered? The answer, I believe, is for a myriad of reasons, many of which have little or nothing to do with conclusiveness. Clearly, when we are talking about the pragma-dialectic notion of “convincing” then conclusiveness must reign. But that, I contend, only happens in the context of a critical discussion, and that is not the arena we are now investigating.

The difficulty does not stem from Amjarso’s analysis, but rather from the focus on the standpoint as the only thing an argument is about. Amjarso understands that a listener may want to concede without being convinced, as when he correctly says: “the listener can for instance [downplay his acceptance] by being ironic or by conveying that for some opportune reason he sees no opportunity but to accept that standpoint” (p. 6). In these instances one asserts agreement and agrees to perform whatever action is consequently entailed. So, as far as *externalized* components of the interaction are concerned, there is agreement and persuasion. This is just how I believe the idea of persuasion, *if we are going to distinguish it from convincingness*, works. But then, poor persuadedness is cut off at the knees by the, “sincerity condition involved in the illocutionary act of accepting” (p.6), which demands that there is no such thing as persuadedness that is not also “being convinced” (p. 6). So, the bottom line is that the argument receiver must believe that the arguments presented are conclusive before she pronounces agreement, and this, it would seem, makes persuadedness the same as being convinced. This conclusion, I hasten to point out, is one Amjarso is happy to embrace.

Amjarso has interesting things to say about persuasiveness that utilizes work by both empirical and rhetorical researchers. His discussion here also points out the close ties there are to the idea of text, and that standpoints are clear discursive objects subject to agreement and disagreement without ambiguity. Consider the following quote.

Receivers would always want to be convinced that they have made the right choice regarding accepting or rejecting the standpoint: that they have accepted the standpoint because they believe it to have been conclusively defended or that, otherwise, they rejected it because they believe it to have been inconclusively defended. [p. 8]

This immediately raises the question of just what a standpoint is. Is it something to be believed like an assertion, say, “The 2007 OSSA conference is taking place in Windsor, ON”? Or, is it something more action-oriented such as, “Write your MP and encourage her to send Canadian peacekeepers to Darfur”? In the former case, I can see that *more often than not*, my concurrence can be taken as an indication of being conclusively convinced. However, in the latter case, my concurrence might well be a result of my wanting to appear a certain way, to impress the arguer, to end the discussion, and so on.

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When we think of standpoints as primarily pointing to the discursive then we are liable to think of agreement and persuadedness as YES/NO switches; if we think of them as much more complex entities, then we must consider degrees of concurrence as well as concurrence for a multitude of reasons (Gilbert, 1997, p. 105).

The crux of the matter seems to hinge on the term “accepting,” and just what it is one is accepting. If one accepts the standpoint, and that is the only thing that is there to be accepted, then Amjarso is correct. When the standpoint is construed in pragma-dialectic terms as the propositional item about which the disagreement turns, then, presumably my acceptance is the same as my being convinced. If, however, acceptance need not be so fulsome, but can refer, for example, to actions entailed (or merely encouraged) by being convinced, then we can maintain what I take to be a useful difference between being convinced and being persuaded.

Amjarso’s paper is a very interesting one, especially insofar as it continues the pragma-dialectic journey into the land of rhetoric and realistic argumentation. I applaud his integration of empirical work alongside the theoretical. Finally, I believe that examinations of the roles of both players in the argument game is vital, and as such his step in this direction is vital as well.

[link to response](#)

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