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Commentary on Campolo

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In Response to: Chris Campolo's *Agreement and Argumentation*

I have a standard pedagogical trick I use in critical reasoning classes. In the midst of a lecture I seem to suddenly remember something, pause, then turn to the class and say, "Sorry, almost forgot. I've got a petition here against hanging. It's legal in (say) Louisiana, and I'm hoping I can get some people to sign it. Who'd be willing?" Invariably, a number of hands go up. "That's great, thanks. You see hanging is too fast, and we're hoping to replace it with something more painful."

The point, of course, is that it is dangerous to agree with a claim without first identifying the reasons for it. Campolo's paper concerns the nature of claims qua propositions, and argues that a surprising amount of the time, the "hanging claim" problem does not, in fact, occur. Rather, the proposition that identifies the claim works well as a signal for the complex position and is understood by all hands in the discussion. In this I believe he is largely correct. The difficulties arise, not in thinking that we can agree on propositions understood as position icons, but by assuming that said agreement means there is further agreement on ancillary beliefs and decisions.

Consider two paradigm examples of unproblematic cases of agreement on "lonely propositions" (to use Campolo's phrase).

1) You get me to agree that we should go hiking this weekend, so I plan my whole week accordingly.

2) I agree with you that the cat is acting strangely, so we prepare to bring him to the vet.

Very well, Campolo gets me to agree to go hiking. As a result, I make sure that I will not have to work this weekend. But, where are we going? When I agreed, did I agree to a vigorous hike up and down the Niagara Escarpment? Or a more leisurely sojourn that might be an excuse for a picnic? Of course, we might be such regular hiking partners that no more needs to be said, but even in that case, the position will surely be a bit richer. "Shall we," I respond, "tackle the Tobermory section this time?" Or "Great, but I don't think I'm up for the deep woods in this heat."

Campolo writes, "…in everyday communicative and argumentative discourse we do indeed seek agreement on a position *by seeking assent* to a proposition. It's as if by getting you to accept the proposition that I employ to represent my position, I can be assured that you will hold the same position." I think this is a safe assertion, but we must be cautious in a way that I believe Campolo will accept. Yes, we often use statements to represent positions. Yes, *sometimes* by getting your assent to that statement I am reassured that we hold the same position. But, I do not think that the assent to an iconic statement representing a position is often sufficient to warrant my being assured that we are, in fact, holders of the same or relevantly similar, positions. Most often, save for the most mundane and familiar communicative interactions, at least some more is required.

It must be remembered that the situations being considered are ones in which there is disagreement. If there is not, then agreement may be swift and not need any checking at all. When my mate and I are arranging a pub date, and I say, "Usual place, 5.30?" and he responds,

"Yes," nothing more is needed. As soon, however, as he says, "Well, I'm going to be uptown," then a new negotiation must commence. But arguments centred on a disagreement that end in agreement normally have some investigative aspect attached. Of course, in cases such as Campolo's example [1] there is an assumption made about the acceptance of a position just because there was no apparent disagreement. It is, in fact, in those cases, as in my hanging example above, that danger lurks. It is very upsetting to believe you have agreement when, in fact, there are important components of the two positions that do not overlap.

Some agreements also entail other discussions. The second and fourth examples, the former concerning Western Civ. becoming broader based, and the latter about the Smith family vacation, involve an agreement about one thing that means there must be a further discussion of another. The college course case involves what is sometimes called an "agreement in principle." We agree that it is a good idea to broaden the intro course to include cultural diversity, but the ways and means of doing that need to be worked out. That does not mean there was no real agreement on changing the course, but that the position was about just that: the course needs changing, and the serious business of just how that needs to be done is something else entirely.

The Smiths and their elusive vacation is particularly interesting since there is so little disagreement. It is difficult to speculate about the dynamics of the situation without knowing a great deal more, but if we take the example at face value then the situation is one in which the two parties each understand the other's position, but have different attitudes or emotional reactions to the various destinations. In other words, Mr. Smith fully understands Junior's desire to go to Baja and go surfing and thinks it is a warranted and reasonable view. Nonetheless, he and Mrs. Smith put a very high rating on the fine cuisine available in the keys. Junior, in turn, knows how important good restaurants are to his parents, but for him a holiday ought include surfing. And so on. In short, in no way is simply having a real understanding of someone's position a guarantee of agreement. Clearly, some negotiation is called for here.

Campolo says that, "a position, though it may contain many different elements, is an essentially organized affair, and its organization can be discerned by examining the proposition it hangs on." And, shortly thereafter, he explains that positions are actually answers to questions, and that, "If we can figure out a speaker's implicit question, and think of the proposition he offers as an answer, we can identify and map some important elements in the structure of his position." However, it strikes me that the way in which a proposition can be used to examine the organization of a position is by asking questions about it, or inspecting whether or not your opposer holds the corollaries you derive from it. Determining the position as an answer to a question may work when the proposition used is an answer to a simple question and will be understood by both parties. But, in fact, we do not always understand the implications of our own positions, let alone other's.

The idea of a position being an answer to a question strikes me as a handy metaphor in certain circumstances, but it is liable to be forced in others. In the example concerning the bridge that was washed out, Campolo says that the response, "Take Ocean Heights," is an answer to an implicit question. This may be, insofar as every statement, a la Jeopardy, can be construed as an answer to a question, but how far does it get us. Someone making that assertion may not see themselves as answering a question, but as giving instructions. Does that make a difference?

In the Mary & Sue abortion case–they agree on everything but what to do in cases of rape. How can we know what "questions" they revolve around? And why questions? Why not visions?

In fact, if followed through the disagreement will reveal a number of very deep rooted and profound issues and which they do not agree at all. Some of these may go right to the heart of their beliefs about religion, God, obedience to canon law, and so on. Similarly, I am confused as to why the Sarah and Jane duck hunting example is construed as involving answers to different questions. Jane answers the question, Why is it wrong to hunt? with the answer, It is wrong to be cruel to animals. Sarah, with the answer, It's wrong to hunt if done in a cruel way. It strikes me that they do not have different answers because they are answering different questions, but because they have different positions on hunting and its relationship to cruelty to animals.

My concern here is a familiar one. It may indeed be the case that viewing a disagreement in terms of questions and answers offers helpful insight into the positions and priorities of the participants. I have no quarrel with this, and can see the process as a useful heuristic in uncovering differences and similarities. My fear is that we are liable to see the questions and their answers as simple statements and, as a result, ignore the complexity of the positions they represent. All of the examples demonstrate that agreement with propositions is fraught with difficulty, and that the more complex a position is, the less known to each other are the dispute partners, the less likely is it safe to rely on a statement as being *the* position.