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### Seduction as deduction: persuasion as deductive argument

Leo Groarke

*University of Windsor*

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**Title:** Seduction as deduction: against the persuade/convince dichotomy

**Author:** [Leo Groarke](#)

**Response to this paper by:** [Richard Fulkerson](#)

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Jamie is twenty seven years old. He works as a carpenter but his avocation is bodybuilding. His body shows it. Every Friday he indulges in Dionysian revelry at a local bar. But he is interested in more than drinking. He tells his friends that he goes out "to get laid."

In preparing for a Friday out, Jamie selects his attire with care. He picks a form fitting short sleeve shirt that hugs his impressive chest and displays his biceps. He chooses white because white emphasizes the bulk that ten years of bodybuilding have produced. He wears tight black jeans which show that his legs and derrière are "ripped" as well...

One might easily continue with this story. It is fiction but fiction which reflects a reality which repeats itself tens of thousands -- perhaps hundreds of thousands -- of times every Friday and Saturday evening as young men and women prepare for evenings out. Their decisions about the clothes they wear are influenced by a great variety of factors. In some cases, they are motivated by the desire to convince others that they are beautiful, sexy, classy, avant-garde, in tune with the latest fashion or, like Jamie, that they should be taken home for erotic adventures of some sort.

In this and many other contexts, clothes are something more than an irrelevant or inconsequential background to human interaction. Instead, they function as an important way to persuade -- or help persuade -- someone of this or that point of view. This may seem obvious in the case of sex and fashion but it is equally true in other contexts. It is likely that everyone who prepares for a job interview spends some time thinking about what they will wear, for this is a context in which clothes may play a crucial role in convincing interviewers that one should or should not be hired for whatever job is in question.

The ways in which we use clothes in contexts of persuasion raise many profound questions about human nature and our drives, foibles and desires. In this paper I want to discuss questions that such behaviours raise in the realm of argumentation theory, especially when argument is understood in the traditional way assumed by logic. According to this account, an argument is an attempt to convince someone of some point of view by providing premises which rationally establish a conclusion by deductive means [1](#). Insofar as the clothes that Jamie and others like him wear function as a way of persuading someone that they should accept some point of view, it might be thought that they demonstrate the limits of logic, for they show that debate, persuasion, and the resolution of differences of opinion must in many cases be understood in other terms. Especially a context in which a disenchantment with traditional logic has helped motivate the development of argumentation theory, this tends to be assumed as simple common sense.

The kinds of issues raised by Jamie's clothes are usually addressed by invoking a distinction between argument and persuasion which Michael Gilbert has aptly labeled the "convince/persuade dichotomy." As he puts it: "to convince is to use reason, dialectic and logic, while to persuade is to rely on emotion, prejudice, and language. This distinction has moral as well as logical implications insofar as "convincing" has been considered to be a superior method. "Persuading" appeals to the "baser" components of the human psyche, namely, the emotions, while "convincing" speaks to the "higher" aspects, namely, reason. On this view, one who is persuaded may be so for reasons that have little to do with the value of the arguments or the truth of the premises put forward. (Gilbert 1997: 4) Gilbert attacks the values implied in this account, but he still suggests that we can distinguish between convincing and persuading, and proposes different ways of dealing with each of them.

The way in which the convince/persuade dichotomy informs argumentation theory can be illustrated with the account of advertising proposed in the most recent edition of Ralph Johnson and Anthony Blair's classic text, *Logical Self-Defense*. According to the account that they elaborate, advertising may "have the appearance of argumentation" but "this is a facade." "[M]ost advertising works not at the rational level but at a deeper level. There is some truth to the idea that advertising has a "logic" of its own, and it is important to understand that logic and to see the difference between it and the logic of real arguments" (Johnson & Blair 1994: 221). In explaining the "logic" of advertisements, Johnson and Blair do not use the terms "convince" and "persuade" but they still introduce an analogue of the convince/persuade distinction by distinguishing between "rational" and "psychological" persuasion -- the former a kind of rational convincing, the latter persuasion in the sense that Gilbert introduces. As they put it: "[M]any advertisements have the facade of arguments. They look like premises leading to a conclusion and like exercises in rational persuasion. In fact, we are persuaded by the school that holds that advertising is best viewed as psychological persuasion -- an attempt to use psychological strategies to implant the name of a product in our unconscious minds. Hence criticism of advertising as a form of argumentation is misconceived. Learning how to decode ads and making ourselves aware of the strategies that advertisers use is more useful than looking for fallacies in the arguments." (Johnson & Blair 1994: 225). [2](#)

In criticizing the convince/persuade distinction that accounts like this imply, I am not denying that argumentation theory needs to acknowledge facets of ordinary argumentation which have traditionally been ignored in disciplines like logic and philosophy. Historically, the latter disciplines have tended to take mathematical and scientific reasoning as their paradigm and in view of this dismiss or ignore the very different dynamics that govern argumentation in political debate, public discourse and day to day affairs. Unlike disciplines like rhetoric, logic has not, therefore, been sensitive to many of the complexities that characterize ordinary argument (to *pathos* and *ethos*, for example). In the context of argumentation theory, a more useful logic must in particular recognize that the assessment of ordinary arguments often turns on the acceptability of their premises (and sometimes their acceptability to a particular audience) rather than some stronger commitment to their truth; that argument schema which would not be acceptable in scientific and mathematical contexts may in other contexts be legitimate means of establishing conclusions; and that

premises and conclusions in ordinary discourse are often communicated indirectly, without employing explicit verbal claims.

The question I want to pose is whether the attempt to understand the complexities of ordinary argumentation requires that we accept some version of the persuade/convince dichotomy. I shall argue that this belief is mistaken, and that the dichotomy is simplistic and untenable. More importantly perhaps, I will argue that it is counterproductive insofar as it suggests that we should address ordinary argumentation by developing different means of evaluating persuasion and rational convincing. If one deals with argumentation in this way then one assesses it by first deciding whether one is faced with an instance of rational or non-rational persuasion. In the case of advertising, Johnson and Blair suggest the latter and thus propose the use of the appropriate principles of "deconstruction" they propose. When one is, in contrast, faced with a clear case of rational argument -- say a statistical conclusion about smoking -- one instead applies the techniques for analyzing rational convincing. The problem is that this way of proceeding is effective and efficient only if one has some easily applicable criteria which separate convincing and persuading. I shall argue that the standard account provides no such criteria and that many of the most obvious cases of "mere" persuasion can be usefully treated as instances of rational convincing.

A comprehensive study of persuasion and convincing is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but my suggestion that we reject the persuade/convince distinction does not in any case require it. The onus is on those who propose the dichotomy to provide an account which can clearly differentiate the two. The counterexamples I will present are intended to show that this is much more difficult than is commonly assumed, and that it requires something more than an appeal to vague distinctions between emotion and reason and rational and psychological versions of persuasion. The tenability of these distinctions has been called into question in theoretical discussions of emotion (see De Sousa 1987) but I shall take a different tack here, by elaborating examples that are more directly relevant to theories of argumentation.

It is at this point that we may usefully return to Jamie and his preparations for his evening out. Suppose he decides to run some errands first. He stops by his bank to withdraw some cash and deal with some financial matters. His timing turns out to be unfortunate and he is caught in the middle of a robbery. When things go wrong, the robber takes Jamie and three other people hostage. Being courageous or perhaps foolhardy, Jamie is determined to thwart the robber's plans. He waits until his captor isn't looking, then leans forward in his chair and reaches for a phone. The chair squeaks, and the robber spins around. He gives Jamie a threatening look and emphatically thrusts his gun in his direction. Jamie is an aggressive individual -- probably because he has used so many steroids -- but he gets the point immediately. He stops reaching for the phone, puts his hands above his head, and very slowly returns to his previous position in the chair.

What has happened here? How should we analyse it from the point of view of argumentation? In some sense the robber has convinced Jamie that he should not try to make a phone call. But has he *rationaly* convinced him or has he just persuaded him? Because he has not said anything, he has not explicitly forwarded premises and a

conclusion, assuming that "explicitly" means "verbally." In a non-verbal way he has ordered Jamie to cease and desist. But he has done something more than this, for he has provided Jamie with a *reason* why he should do so. This reason could have been expressed verbally, as the conditional "If you continue, I'll shoot" (like many conditionals in ordinary language, it is really a biconditional but that does not matter here). The robber assumes -- quite rightly -- that not being shot is more important to Jamie than continuing and it is this and the implicit conditional which are used to convince Jamie that he should stop. We might in view of this say that he has presented Jamie with an argument which might be summarized as follows (where "P" = Premise, and "C" = Conclusion):

P1: If you continue, I'll shoot.

P2: You want me not to shoot you (more than you want to continue what you're doing).

C: You should stop what you're doing.

We can in this way interpret the robber's interaction with Jamie as a case of rational convincing which forwards an implicit argument which is quite in keeping with traditional accounts of argument. Even though there are very good reasons for thinking that this is a paradigm instance of persuasion as it is understood in the context of the persuade/convince dichotomy. Most importantly, there can be no doubt that the robber has made a thoroughly emotional appeal. Assuming that Jamie doesn't have ice water -- or too much androstenedione -- in his veins, it is fear that directed his immediate reaction to the robber's gesture. It is worth adding that this is entirely appropriate, both because fear is in some sense reasonable in such a situation, and because an appeal to fear is the kind of argumentative strategy which is appropriate to such dire contexts.

It seems to follow that we have a paradigm instance of persuasion which can easily be interpreted as a case of rational convincing. We can see that this is so in another way, by noting that the same argument can in principle be made verbally. Imagine that the robber doesn't move his gun menacingly, and doesn't turn around. Instead he glances at Jamie and calmly says: "You should stop what you're doing. Because if you continue, I'll shoot and it's better to be a live chicken than a shot duck." We should resist the temptation to say that the robber's argument is conveyed more directly in this case, for one might easily argue the opposite. If you consider the situation from Jamie's point of view, there is a very tangible sense in which the aggressive pointing of the gun gets the robber's point across more directly than a mere verbal claim. But this is a secondary matter. The important point is that the same point is made in either case and that it would therefore be odd to treat one as a case of persuasion and another as a case of rational convincing that requires some other kind of analysis.

The similarity between these two cases suggests that we cannot define the persuade/convince distinction in terms of the distinction between verbal and non-verbal persuasion. In ancient times the word *logos* is ambiguous insofar as it can mean both "argument" and "speech" (and, of course, innumerable other things as well). Perhaps in view of this, it is natural to take verbal attempts to provide reasons for conclusions as paradigm instances of arguments. But already in ancient times, the possibility of argument

components which are not verbally expressed is well recognized (most clearly, in accounts of enthymemes). Especially in the wake of recent work that shows how non-verbal visual images are in many cases used to present premises and conclusions (see, e.g., Birdsell & Groarke 1996, Blair 1996, and Groarke 1999a), there is little reason to believe that the distinction between verbal and non-verbal persuasion can provide an easy way to eliminate the vagueness inherent in standard accounts of the persuade/convince distinction.

In the case of Jamie's interaction with the robber, it is notable that there are significant advantages if we understand his attempt at persuasion as convincing and thus argument, for this allows us to assess it in the same way we assess its verbal counterpart. It can thus be recognized as a variant of *modus tollens* and, more importantly, as an instance of *ad baculum*. It follows that it can be construed, not merely as an argument in the traditional sense, but also as a widely recognized form of argument which can be assessed accordingly. While there is no reason to pursue a detailed evaluation here, it is worth noting that it is a plausible argument which has the characteristics which convince Michael Wreen and John Woods that there can be good instances of *ad baculum* (see Wreen 1988 and Woods 1995). The decision to treat this instance of persuasion as rational convincing thus pays dividends by allowing us to understand it and evaluate it in standard ways, using well understood criteria. In contrast, a commitment to the persuade/convince distinction demands that we attempt to apply a muddy distinction which is at best clumsy in the case at hand.

We can better appreciate the extent of the problems with the persuade/convince dichotomy by noting that we can deal with other instances of persuasion in the same way. Consider the example I began with. We have already noted that Jamie picked his Friday evening wardrobe with great deliberation -- in order to display his sculpted body and in the process persuade someone to "sleep" with him. We should take seriously the suggestion that his clothes are a way to make the statement "I have a great body." But this is only the beginning of the story. For they are more than an attempt to make this statement. They go much further because they incorporate an attempt to provide evidence that proves that this is so. In the scenario I began to describe, they do so by showing that (i) Jamie has an impressive sculpted chest, (ii) his biceps are huge, (iii) he has extraordinary amounts of muscle, and (iv) his legs and his derrière are "ripped." In view of this, and the assumption that someone with these attributes has a great body, one might understand Jamie's clothes as a way to present an argument which can be (roughly) summarized [3](#) as follows:

P1: I have an impressive sculpted chest.

P2: I have huge biceps.

P3: I have extraordinary amounts of muscle.

P4: My legs and derrière are "ripped".

P5: Someone with these attributes has a great body.

C: I have a great body.

It is Jamie's clothes -- not verbal claims -- that present this argument. In doing so they provide another example in which someone makes a case for some point of view without explicitly presenting it in a verbal way.

It goes without saying that one might say much more about this argument. Real life Jamies and women or other men like them present themselves in ways that involve much more complex arguments than the one I have suggested. In Jamie's own case, the conclusion of the argument he presents is really a subconclusion which acts as a premise which supports his ultimate conclusion which might be summarized as "I am a good person to take home to bed." In real life, his witty comments, his ability to quote Nietzsche, the sports car he drives, and his willingness to spend money lavishly may all be very consciously planned as a means for supporting this conclusion. Whatever the ultimate argument is, it is likely that there are many aspects of it that one could take issue with -- whether Jamie's chest really is so impressive, whether these particular attributes are the hallmarks of a great body, how central a role someone's body should play in deciding who one goes to bed with, and so on. Treating Jamie's appearance and actions as an argument is useful precisely because it provides a context in which such questions can be discussed.

Other layers of complexity arise because clothes -- and other indirect attempts at persuasion -- are often vague and ambiguous, and therefore open to different interpretations. The same clothes may make one statement in one context and another one in some different situation. At a funeral black is a sign of respect. In a cafe it may be a sign that one is an existentialist. Clothes that appear sexy or business like may be worn for other reasons -- simply because they are comfortable, because they are the only things not in the wash, and even because one is unconscious of their implications. This is one of the reasons why there is a world of professional fashion consultants who are adept at understanding clothes and statements that they make. Untangling all these complications is not an easy matter, which might in many ways be compared to the attempt to understand all the different layers of meaning that attend verbal claims. In the present context, it only matters that there is no clear reason for believing that we will be able to do this better by treating clothes as a means of persuasion *rather* than convincing.

In Jamie's case, it is notable that his clothes, and the statements that they make, are designed for sex appeal. They in this way they exploit the kinds of psychological appeals that characterize advertising. It goes without saying that we need to be aware of such forces if we want to understand -- and to disempower -- not only advertising, but also individuals like Jamie. This is an important point. But there is no reason to think that it necessitates a foggy distinction between convincing and persuading. In dealing with any argument we need to be aware that its premises may be attractive for reasons other than their likely truth or falsity -- because they speak to our personal interests, because they flatter us, because they are presented in a captivating way, because they are humorous, or because they speak to our fears, desires and emotions. This point can thus be made -- and should be made -- in the context of convincing as much as persuading. It is not only the visual which can convey a covert appeal to our emotions.

In ordinary language, the distinction between persuading and convincing is a distinction between more and less subtle, and more and less forceful, attempts to get someone to accept some point of view. "Convince" is derived from *con*, meaning "wholly" and *vincere* meaning "to conquer." To convince might thus be rendered as "to wholly conquer." In contrast, "persuade" evolved from *suadere* meaning "to advise or urge" (*persuadere* is a rough equivalent of our persuade, which means "to bring over by talking"). This etymology is reflected in ordinary language, where persuading tends to be more friendly, more seductive, less explicit and less confrontational than convincing. But these are only general tendencies and there is no clear line between them. It is only a logician who would misunderstand the claim that "He convinced her that she should go with him by flashing his platinum American Express."

Even if we could establish a clear distinction between convincing and persuading in ordinary language, it is difficult to see why it should be imported into argumentation theory. The essence of this distinction is a difference between more and less explicit attempts to make someone accept a particular point of view -- what pragma dialecticians usefully describe as "direct" and "indirect" speech acts. One might be tempted to define arguments as wholly explicit attempts at rational convincing but this would lead quickly to the conclusion that arguments rarely occur in ordinary discourse, for explicitness in reasoning is a rare commodity. Outside of mathematics, logic, science, and scholarly endeavour, argumentation tends to be characterized by implicitness. Premise and conclusion indicators are often not employed; enthymematic constructions leave crucial premises unsaid; conditionals and biconditionals are not distinguished; rhetorical questions obliquely state conclusions; assumptions are taken for granted; a great deal is said for rhetorical effect; and sarcasm, insinuation, allusion and irony abound. In such contexts, a useful account of "argument" must recognize that arguments and their components are frequently implicit. Once we accept that this is so, there seems no way to draw a clear line between convincing and non-rational persuasion, for there are varying degrees of implicitness that do not allow for a clear demarcation.

And even in those cases where an attempt at persuasion might be said to be completely implicit, it is not clear that anything is to be gained by refusing to see it as an argument. Consider a case in which a pharmaceutical company tries to persuade us that I should buy their brand of cough syrup by airing television advertisements in which men and women in white lab coats speak about its superior qualities. If one restricts one's attention to their verbal claims, one might say that one has an explicit argument that this is the brand that we should buy. But this is only part of what is going on. Visually, there is another argument at work. The lab coats that the actors wear are not accidental, but an attempt to present them as experts. If they have stethoscopes around their necks, they will be seen as doctors. This is never said and is in this sense wholly implicit. But it can still be usefully treated as a case of rational convincing -- as an attempt to construct an appeal to authority which should be assessed accordingly. In the process of assessing this appeal it may be useful to say something about our psychological reactions to authority (or white lab coats for that matter). But this does not necessitate a problematic distinction between persuading and convincing.



Putting aside the issues raised by the persuade/convince distinction, we need to take more seriously the possibility that many, perhaps most, attempts at persuasion can instead be analysed as attempts to forward -- often in very subtle ways -- arguments in the traditional sense. I have sketched the way in which this can be done in a few cases but the method is easily applied more broadly. In the process, we can expand our account of argument so that it can deal with complex cases of persuasion it typically ignores, and can usefully evaluate such instances. Even if this way of proceeding cannot be sustained in all cases (even if it requires that we countenance inductive arguments for example [4](#)) this doesn't show that there is a viable distinction which can be made between rational and non-rational persuasion. To establish such a distinction, those who advocate it must elaborate much clearer criteria for distinguishing between the two and demonstrate that they can be broadly applied. Much more importantly, they need to establish that this is a useful thing to do -- that it adds something to an analysis of argumentation which can't be achieved without it. Until this is accomplished, argumentation theory will do better to stop assuming a vague distinction which impedes its development.

## Endnotes

[1](#)By "a traditional way", I mean the way in which argumentation has been traditionally understood in logic and philosophy, though I have amended the traditional account slightly, by substituting talk about the acceptability of premises for traditional talk about their truth.

[2](#)Of course, one might accept Johnson and Blair's point that one should not deal with these kinds of cases by looking for fallacies for different reasons -- i.e. because one thinks that a fallacy approach is not the best approach to the assessment of ordinary reasoning. This is my own view, but it is beyond the scope of the present paper.

[3](#)I say "summarized" because it is a mistake to think that a visual argument can be perfectly translated into a verbal one. For many reasons this is doubtful. But such arguments can still (especially by referring to the original visual) be roughly summarized in a way that is useful in the context of argument assessment.

[4](#)For reasons I have elaborated in Groarke 1999b, I do not believe that this is ever necessary (or more minimally, that anyone has shown that this is necessary). I have not addressed the issues that this raises in detail here but it can be said that they are a very secondary matter in the present context. Even if some sort of reconstructive deductivism can't be sustained, this shows only that some sort of deductive/non-deductive distinction is required in assessing ordinary arguments, not that some further distinction between argument and persuasion is required.

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