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Commentary on: David Godden's "On the norms of visual argument"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Godden's interesting paper starts with the assertion that visual arguments exist. He is interested in what may be a more interesting question regarding what to do once one accepts visual arguments, namely whether the existence of visual arguments substantially affects our normative practice. If our normative practice would not be substantially altered by the existence of visual argumentation, then, it would seem, the importance of the debate regarding the existence of visual arguments would be muted. However, if our normative practice would be significantly different with visual arguments than without, settling the issue would be important.

To map the territory, Godden distinguishes normative revisionists from non-revisionists. The former would require special methods for the evaluation of visual arguments. The latter take visual arguments to be susceptible to the usual techniques and standards. The non-revisionists, for example Leo Groarke, see visual arguments on the model of verbal arguments. Hence, an argument is a visual argument insofar as at least one of its elements is presented visually. Revisionists, e.g., Johnson or Gilbert, deny that visual arguments are susceptible to the usual methods, and therefore need their own.

Godden then argues for the non-revisionist position. The argument is succinct.

- P1. Arguments (whatever else they are or do, and however they are presented) necessarily involve (contain, express, convey) reasons.
- P2. Assessing the rational quality of arguments involves assessing the probative qualities of their reasons.
- P3. The probative qualities of reasons do not vary according to their manner of presentation or mode of expression.
- C. Hence, visual arguments do not require any revision to our normative theories of argument. (Godden, 2013, p. 6)

The first premise in this argument takes reasons to be necessary for arguments. Godden claims to expect "universal agreement" for this condition. Although I am sympathetic, I don't think it is as uncontroversial as Godden claims—indeed, the discussions regarding wholly dialectical *arguments* seem to belie the universal acceptance. But I'll return to this minor point later. Still, granting that reasons are

necessary for arguments, it follows that at least one of the normative elements of argumentation regards assessing the “probative qualities of [an argument’s] reasons.” Add to this the claim that the probative qualities of reasons are invariant to presentational mode, and we get the non-revisionist’s conclusion that the existence of visual arguments wouldn’t alter our normative theories of argumentation.

2. SUPPORTING THE ARGUMENT FOR NON-REVISIONISM

Let’s start with the first premise: that arguments require reasons. Godden’s support for this claim is an *ad populum*: expected universal agreement. As I noted above, I think this is more controversial than Godden. The controversy concerns whether there exist wholly dialectical arguments. Such arguments wouldn’t be *reason giving* but *objection replying*. Maurice Finocchiaro (2003), for example, advances what he calls the *hyper dialectical* model of argumentation. On this view an argument is an attempt to defend a position from potential objections. This is a small point, and I don’t think Godden’s paper depends on it any way. He could grant the existence of hyper-dialectical arguments, and simply offer his thesis conditional upon the arguments being illative or monolectical. So, I propose to move on.

The second premise—that assessing an argument involves assessing the “probative quality of its reasons”—doesn’t seem to need much support. Indeed, even if there were some controversy concerning this premise, the controversy doesn’t interest me.

The most interesting premise is the third: that the probative qualities of reasons do not vary with their manner of presentation. In support of this claim, Godden considers two cases where *the same reason* is presented using different modes. On the one hand, he asks that we consider the truth of the equation $y = 2x + 4$ as “good reason” to take the slope of the associated line to be 2. He compares this inference with one that has the same conclusion but takes as its reason the associated line presented in a unit-marked Cartesian plane. The inference to the line’s slope, then, is read off of the diagram, i.e., rise-over-run. The second case concerns categorical reasoning presented verbally and as a Venn diagram. Again, the claim is that the strength of the inference is unaffected by the manner of presentation.

I wonder whether the choice of examples hampers the conclusion in this case. Note well that in both cases, both inferences are deductive. Deduction doesn’t come in degrees. Hence, as long as a mode of presentation is capable of presenting a deductive inference, every such inference will have the same strength. I’m not sure whether the result will carry over into non-deductive cases. Rather, I want to leave this as an open question regarding the third premise. Perhaps Godden blunts the negative connotation of the question by focusing on the content of the reasons. If the content is equivalent, then the manner of presentation shouldn’t matter. Godden is well aware that there may be differences between verbal and visual presentations of what is purported to be the same information. But, he urges, when the visual and the verbal come apart, the difference is in the informational content rather than being a function of different modes of presentation.

One worry is that, except in rare situations, the verbal and the visual always come apart—that is, the verbal and visual always, except perhaps in the cases of mathematical and logical diagrams and related imagistic presentations, differ in informational content. Moreover, as seems likely, the difference in information content is probably a function of the mode of presentation. Otherwise, one would expect a reductive explanation for the non-revisionist agenda. Put another way, if the content of visual elements could be fully expressed verbally, then the visual-to-verbal connection would be established in every case. The logic of any argument, then, would be good old-fashioned logic. Indeed, I have argued for a similar strategy elsewhere (Dove 2012). Diagrams are a special case of visuals. In presenting a diagram, one generally gives a specific instance of a phenomenon that may be more general. The reasoning, though, can depend upon recognizing properties of the diagram. The matter is more complicated than this simple presentation, e.g., some of the properties of the diagram may be stipulated, and indeed may be stipulated to contradict the actual physical properties of the diagram. Nevertheless, the properties are in some sense read off the diagram. With other visuals, this method won't work. Some visuals are so rich in content that the actual procedure for identifying the argumentative information is a kind of filtering or selective attention to details. How does one go from a blurry picture of small sea bird to the conclusion that some species of petrel, long thought extinct, persists? It isn't the properties of the photo as much as it is the relationship between the properties of the photo and some real bird. And this doesn't even touch some of the more interesting visuals. Is the content of a political cartoon ever perfectly expressible in words? Although I count myself firmly in the non-revisionist camp, there is reason to think that more work remains to be done

3. CONCLUSION

David Godden has given us a very interesting and important foray into visual reasoning. His taxonomy of normative positions is useful and helpful—I will use these categories to describe positions henceforth. His argument for non-revisionism is, I hope, correct. But there are still some details in need of attention. What is a reason, anyway? Do replies to objections count as reasons? Is the claim that reasons are necessary components of arguments as universally accepted as Godden asserts? How do we know when a visual and a verbal presentation express the same argumentative content? Is this even possible in most cases? This seems like the beginning of a very good research project.

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