Commentary on Blatz

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Commentary on Charles Blatz’s “Culture, Judgment, Integration of Attention and Argumentation”

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Charles Blatz in his paper seems to make two related points. First, he tries in a systematic manner to explore the relationship between mutualistic argumentation (MA) and metacognitive frameworks of thinking (MCF) by showing how the former contributes to the shaping of the latter and how the latter also influences the various ways in which arguments are worked out with a view to achieving agreement that is both thought constituting as well as will forming. The second point is exegetic; it shows the similarities and significant differences between what Bourdieu calls *habitus* and how MCF’s operate by building forms of agreement and mutual acknowledgment that on the one way enhance and on the other limit the practical and cognitive relations of individuals to themselves and to one another. I agree with much of what the author has to say in his complex and detailed investigation and see no point in trying to fully reconstruct his ideas and arguments in my response. Instead, I will focus on some questions and problems that might be raised in relation to some parts of the paper with the hope that these comments will provide the author with the opportunity to further develop his work as well as clarify some aspects of it.

First I would like to explore the issue of normativity and values. In relation to this, I also hope to raise some questions about the wider social and moral implications of the paper, dealing with the question of consensus formation through reaching understanding and the attendant issues of social integration and autonomy. The question of how norms are constituted, challenged, and modified seems to always be present in the background of Blatz’s discussion of the way in which MA works, but the author does not explicitly address the question of normativity in his paper. Moreover, by insisting that MA is closely associated with corresponding MCFs, which are always present as the cognitive and practical background condition for MA, as premises as well as goals, the author seems to suggest that norms that are implicit in MCF come out into the open in MA. This raises the interesting question of how, exactly, is MA related to MCF when the question of normativity becomes the front issue. Is MA the privileged space where norms are constituted, that is, agreed upon, before being relegated to the status of background conditions of operation of MCFs? Or, rather, the MCF is the normative background that always already directs and controls the way in which MA is pursued? If it is the latter,


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can one, then, speak of mutualistic argumentation as a creator of new normative contents, in often disruptive ways, or is MA just the outward form in which MCFs assert or reassert their dominance, as habitus does for Bourdieu. This seems to be the case in situations of normative disruption (disputes over which norms apply to certain life situations or whether they do indeed apply) or in situations of cognitive indetermination that require additional clarifications, interpretations, etc. As well, if the latter were the case, can we even speak of argumentation or mutuality as opposed to legitimate interpretation and enforcement of preexisting norms?

Also on the question of norms: Are norms of argumentation, whether mutualistic or agonistic, reducible to or deducible from the implicit norms that endow MCFs with their powerful hold on the minds of the agents? If they are not, is there something specific about the kind of attitude we adopt when engaging in either MA or AA, something that transcends, whether in the psychological mindset of the arguers, or in the content, practical or cognitive, of their communication that transcends the limits of the MCF from within which they normally operate? Furthermore, and presuming that norms regulate needs whose interpretation is always bound to the value horizon of the individuals who are engaged in argumentation, is there a specific set of values that orient MA? Or, if they are reducible to the value horizon of a dominant MCF, does it mean that, whenever norms are agreed upon, the agreement just happens to reproduce a more tolerant or liberal MCF that is the result of historical, social, or psychological contingency? If this were the case, what chances are there to achieve MA against the pressures of some repressive kind of MCF unless one appeals to a normative standpoint that is not reducible to that MCF. Since he argues against Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, I suspect that Blatz has something of this sort in mind. Could it be that he also assumes some fundamental kinds of goods or values, such as those that lead to greater inclusion and personal autonomy, and his discussion of MA and MCF is just the way in which he tries to articulate the reasons why we should also prefer these values?

Second, and in relation to the previous point, I wish to discuss the important role of agonistic argumentation and cognitive thought in disrupting false or coerced consensus and clearing the setting for achieving consensus on different factual, normative, and evaluative foundations that were perhaps available before a false consensus was achieved. Blatz acknowledges the many ways in which agonistic and mutualistic argumentation inter-penetrate one another, and he uses several interesting examples to make his point. But I’m wondering if the dialectical relation between these different ways of arguing and the types of cognition and cognitive (or meta-cognitive) forms is not in some cases reducible to instances of mutualistic argumentation that also must be intrinsically agonistic in order for the condition of mutuality to lead to reaching understanding, consensus, and social integration that preserves individuality and autonomy. Or, conversely, can it be that cognitive thought assumes the leading role in securing MA against reductive or repressive MCFs, as in some of the examples provided (i.e. Galileo)? In such instances, it seems to make more sense to go directly to those deeply, often even personally felt normative disruptions that stand out in any MCF with the force of frustrated expectations or moral injury. In such cases, we are dealing with what is real in social and mental life itself that pierces through the shield of any MCF or habitus thereby guiding argumentation, either mutualistically, or agonistically, toward
newer and more encompassing forms of integration. If so, notions such as MA, AA, CT or MCF can only have heuristic value.

Third, I will briefly discuss some significant differences in the way in which Bourdieu regards habitus (as a deeper, practical relation between available forms of social and personal representation of the self, the world, and the relation between these two) and the way in which Blatz constructs the duality MA-MCF in order to show that MCF may be seen as overstepping the boundaries of habitus by allowing for more cognitive and normative autonomy, which has beneficial but not necessarily decisive results, while in other respects MCF may be regarded as operating within the boundaries of an existing habitus and thus as being conditioned by habitus in ways that might undermine MA.

The notion of habitus in Bourdieu has a very strong, practical connotation. It penetrates not only how we think, but also how we perceive and how we relate to the world and ourselves in a physical, even bodily fashion. Habitus is so ingrained in our thinking and action that it constitutes a second nature for the individual and the group, and individuals are socialized in, and culture and the social structures of the world are reproduced by means of, the learning processes that lead to specific forms of social integration by way of acquired habitus. In this respect, habitus seems to fundamentally differ from a MCF, which seems to be closer in nature and mode of operation to something like Foucault’s notions of episteme and/ or mentalité. At any rate, and against some of the author’s explicit remarks on this issue, MCF appears to enjoy a greater autonomy, and therefore that it can more easily undergo transformations, because the model on which it is conceptualized seems to come closer to a cognitive or theoretical notion of mind rather than a practical model of the will – which I define in Bourdieu’s terms, as something deeply ingrained in the physical and psychical structure of a person. In this sense, the essential difference between MCF and habitus may be reduced to a difference in the underlying conceptual model of the self on which each is premised.

If this is true, then MCF and habitus as understood by Blatz and Bourdieu, are very distinct notions because they are called to fulfill different epistemic roles by design. Thus, and depending on the angle from which we approach the relationship between these two, in some respects MCF seems poorly equipped to fulfill the more substantive function that Bourdieu reserves for the habitus, while in some other respects habitus seems too “wooden,” to use the Blatz’s expression, to perform the kind of cognitive and practical functions that MCF can assume due to its greater autonomy. I wonder, therefore, if the underlying difference between these two cannot be reconciled by reference to the implicit anthropological conceptions on which they rest, which might throw new light onto how MA is either enhanced or limited depending on the standpoint from which it is considered.

Link to paper