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# Commentary on Mika Hietanen's "Finnish Working-Class Argumentation—A Minimalist Exercise"

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Hietanen's paper draws on the work of Searle, Grice, and the Pragma-dialectical group to analyse the argumentative content of twenty dialogues from the film *Shadows in Paradise* by noted Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismaki. As analyses of argumentation Hietanen's readings are clear and insightful applications of argumentation theory to a medium, film, in which philosophers are not perhaps wont to go looking for arguments. What interests me more about the paper, however, is its general aim, stated, but not fully developed, to explore the role argumentation plays in working class life.

Hietanen did not choose *Shadows in Paradise* arbitrarily but because it is the only film in the so-called *Proletarian Trilogy* that "depicts reality in a plausible way and in a way that can be fairly easily accessed through a pragmatic analysis." In his overall conclusion Hietanen claims that although one critic thought that the depiction of working class life in the film was not realistic, this interpretation was out of step with its broad reception. I will assume that Hietanen's reading is sound, and that the dialogue in the film conveys at least something important about how the Finnish working class communicates. With that assumption in mind I want to interrogate Hietanen's conclusion that "the characters do not argue much and when they do their argumentation is simple and defective." Hietanen was working from a manuscript version of the screenplay and not the actual film. In the film itself, as Hietanen notes, "part of the communication takes place through body language, glances, touches." I want to inquire whether there is something of general significance in this division of labour between verbal argumentation and bodily expression not only in Finnish working class life, but in working class life in general, and perhaps, beyond the working class, in everyday life as a whole. I do not intend my thoughts as rigorously entailed conclusions, but only as thoughts offered freely for others to explore more rigorously if they choose.

I grew up in Sudbury in a working class family and this background attuned me to a striking feature of the dialogues, what Hietanen calls their "taciturnity." I think that this taciturnity tells us something important about the role of explicit formal argumentation in working class life, whether in Finland or in Northern Ontario. Most adult members of my family and their close friends had no formal education beyond secondary school and many of them did not even complete secondary school. I would assume that this is true of

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the characters in the film. And yet, despite their lack of formal education there are genuine arguments, even if they are defective. I think that this shows us that argument, in the general sense of reasoning together towards a conclusion, is not a product of philosophy or any specialised form of study, it is a human communicative practice which we all engage in regardless of our level of education. Argument is a function of human sociality and not an engineered product of philosophy, which also means that philosophy too is not a science *sui generis* but finds its forms and content in human social practices in general. By examining the argument forms typical of working class life Hietanen is thus not only drawing conclusions about the whether the rules of argument are followed or not in particular instances, he is, at least by implication, showing that the substance of philosophy and argumentation theory is constituted by the demands of everyday life. Hence the philosophical study of argument is relevant not first and foremost as an academic speciality, but as a social practice itself which, if done properly, illuminates how people communicate in their day to day existence and perhaps contributes also to improving mundane communication.

On the other hand, Hietanen's analysis of the film also reveals that much of what is "said" in working class life is not conveyed verbally, but is "spoken" through gesture, expression, body position, and so on. This division of labour between the verbal and the gestural holds generally, I believe, but it perhaps takes on more importance in working class life given the fact that, until the late 1960's, almost no working class people had access to university education. As their expressed capacity to reason in argumentative forms shows, this was not due to native lack of capability, but to extraneous socio-economic factors. Reasoning is a social practice of human beings, but reasoning well in the formal sense of the term is a capacity that must be deliberately cultivated. Where the technical facility is absent, people fall back on gestural forms of communication that do not require the understanding of formal rules. And yet, even though no formal rules of argument are followed, people manage to get their point across. Indeed, so much everyday communication is non-verbal, and yet has, if we want to treat it as such, propositional content, one wonders if a strictly verbal analysis of working class speech is sufficient to understand what they are saying. Thus my question is whether it is possible to understand working class life through what they say alone in abstraction from how it is said. Perhaps what appears as "defective" argumentation from a formal pragmatic perspective is not defective if the non-verbal context is included?

This point leads me to my final thought: what exactly is defective argumentation? Is it just argumentation that violates one or another pragmatic rule, or is it failed communication? If the later, then Hietanen's paper shows, I believe, that one can successfully communicate without properly following every pragmatic rule of argumentation. To successfully communicate means to enable the other to understand your ideas and aims; to successfully communicate in argumentation would mean to convince others of the truth of your conclusions without resorting to threats or intimidation but solely on the content of what you explicitly say and implicitly suggest through your body language. But if the later end can be achieved even when certain rules are ignored or violated, perhaps some of the rules need to be re-thought, at least for purposes of the analysis of everyday speech. One wonders whether or not argumentation theorists might sometimes be guilty of treating arguments like pure chemicals distilled in laboratory conditions but which are never found in that state in nature. If real everyday

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argument is never found in a pure state and succeeds even though it doesn't follow all the rules, might it not be the case that argumentation theory needs to leave the lab for the street if it wants to understand as fully as possible the role that argumentation plays in everyday life, of the working class or any other group?

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