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Commentary on Christian Kock's "Arguing for Different Kinds of Speech Acts"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Christian Kock's paper argues that arguments in politics and practical argumentation generally are often about directives or commissives, and many of these cannot be reconstructed as assertives without significant remainder. Let us refer to this thesis as Christian's challenge to assertion-reductivism. I am broadly in agreement with this challenge, but I have doubts regarding the strategy Christian employs. I would mount the challenge on a somewhat different basis.

2. PROFESSOR KOCK'S STRATEGY

Much of Christian's argument relies on John Searle's classification illocutionary acts into *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, *declarations*. These may seem an odd choice; while Searle's taxonomy has achieved widespread acceptance, it is also somewhat problematic (Alston 1991, pp. 67-73; Williams 2002, p. 71). However, it does provide Christian with common ground shared by the principal targets of his challenge, pragma-dialectical theories of argumentation.

Christian's challenge to assertion-reductivism falls into three parts. The first adduces eight instances of argumentative discourse as counter-examples to the "naïve assertive theory" which assumes, that all subjects of argument are *assertives*. These counter-examples are identified as instances of arguments whose subjects are *directives* and *commissives*. These "authentic" instances of argument, They "suffice," Christian concludes, "to refute the naïve assertive theory" (2009, p. 5). The second part of Christian's challenge adumbrates a provisional "typology of claims in arguments," classifying them into factual, interpretative, normative, and practical policy proposals. Claims of the first three kinds, Christian holds, can be articulated as *assertives*; he holds, however, that the only proposals which can be expressed by an *assertive* are claims that typically contain "*must*, such as *We must reduce CO₂ emissions*; or they may appear as assertions that the proposed policy is definitely superior to any alternative" (2009, p. 6). Other proposals allowing for choice, Christian argues, can only be expressed by

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directives and *commissives* which cannot be reduced to *assertives*. The third part of Christian's challenge is directed explicitly to "The most elaborate representative of the sophisticated assertive theory is pragma-dialectics, which insists that any standpoint, if it is not already an assertive, should be reconstructed as one" (2009, p. 6). The difficulty in reconstructing as *assertives* those *directives* and *commissives* which involve choice is that "it basically changes a speech act of one type into its contrary opposite," i. e. it changes speech acts which have a world-to-word fit into speech acts which have a word-to-world fit. To show that "the suspension of this difference is at least questionable and in some cases impossible; that is, we cannot formulate any one assertion which fittingly represents the arguer's standpoint," Christian returns to the last of his counter-examples from the first part of his challenge, the advertisement promoting Cadillacs. According to Christian, this ad argues for a directive which cannot be satisfactorily transformed into an assertive; to support this claim Christian adduces and rejects various attempts at this transformation.

3. CHALLENGING SOPHISTICATED ASSERTIVE-REDUCTIVISM

My comments of Christian's paper will focus on third part of his challenge, that directed to the assertive theory presented by pragma-dialectics. I think this is the heart of Christian's argument. The first of Christian's claims, *viz.* that we argue about *directives* and *commissives* as well as *assertives*, does not itself seem controversial. It does raise questions about the relationship(s) between the kinds of speech under discussion, illocutionary acts, and arguments advanced on their behalf or as challenges to them. This is a matter that has been discussed at length by students of speech acts. To my mind the most satisfactory account of those relationships has been developed by Sally Jackson and Scott Jacobs in their work on how the commitments undertaken in speech acts determine a commitment space within which argumentation is possible. I will frame our consideration Christian's third challenge in terms of Jackson and Jacobs work. This approach has the additional advantage of continuing Christian strategy of mounting his challenges on grounds accepted by assertive-reductionists and specifically published in conjunction with pragma-dialectical versions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1990).

Sally and Scott's account of how speech acts are related to arguments starts from the basic insight that in performing an illocutionary act a speaker undertakes a complex set of commitments on the order of obligations. They initially draw this insight from a combined reading of Searle and Grice, but their account is compatible with other versions of the commitments undertaken by speakers in performing speech acts (Kauffeld 2007). For example, in making a proposal, a speaker attempts to induce (tentative) consideration of some proposition from addressees who are reluctant to give it thought and attention. She does so by openly committing herself to answering her addressee's doubts and objections, showing thereby that her proposal merits her addressees' consideration.

Sally and Scott's provide a basic structure for addressing our questions about the relationship between speech acts and arguments. They hold:

- (1) Arguments are subordinate speech acts issued in support of or in objection to some main super-ordinate act. The act of *proposing* may elicit arguments in support of the proposal advanced.

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(2) Every speech act performance creates a structured but indefinitely expandable disagreement space, an open-ended set of virtual standpoints, any of which on being 'called out,' might require defense. The proposer's commitment to answer doubt and objection obligate her to responding in defense of her proposal, and she is committed to providing answers which show that her proposal merits serious consideration

(3) While (A)ny element in the entire constellation of pragmatic presuppositions and implications of a speech act can prompt argument [...], this broader domain of issues is a structured one.

Consider now the Cadillac advertisement which, according to Christian, issues in a directive which cannot be analyzed as an assertive. The ad consists of an appealing (at least to some readers) picture of a Cadillac accompanied by the following text.

Not long after the motorist takes possession of his new Cadillac, he discovers that the car introduces him in a unique manner. Its new beauty and elegance, for instance, speak eloquently of his taste and judgment. Its new Fleetwood luxury indicates his consideration for his passengers,. And its association with the world's leading citizens acknowledges his standing in the world of affairs. Incidentally, this is a wonderful year to let a Cadillac tell its story on your behalf! We suggest you see your dealer—and that you place your order for early delivery.

Christian's argument, it will be recalled, adduces various unsatisfactory attempts to articulate a central claim for this ad expressed as an assertive. From his inventory of these attempts Christian concludes, "The illocutionary act performed by such discourse is to try to make the hearer follow a call to a personal choice, not to commit its speaker to the assertion of an identifiable propositional content." Christian's argument faces the difficulty of providing an exhaustive inventory of possible interpretations of the discourse in question. There remains the possibility of an interpretation which does present the ad as an argument for a conclusion with identifiable propositional content.

An alternative way of essaying the limits of assertion-reductivism on the basis of this discourse would be to find a plausible interpretation which attributes to the advertisement an argument which supports an assertable proposition, and then examine that argument for components which cannot be reduced to assertions without remainder. Consider the following interpretation.

On its face this ad appears to be a proposal designed to induce tentative consideration of a proposition that until reading the ad, its addressee had not deemed worth serious thought and attention. Suppose the addressee has reached a certain maturity in his life and his economic situation. Prior to reading the ad he had not entertained the prospect of buying a Cadillac, though he had for some time believed that they are excellent machines. The picture of the car in the advertisement catches his attention and the verbal message invites him to imagine himself as the owner of this fine auto. As he reads the ad it engages his imagination; for a moment he has a sense of what it would be like to be the proud owner of a Cadillac. This experience in turn prompts the realization that he has reached a point in life at which he can afford and would enjoy owning such a car. On this basis he might well conclude, if only in his heart, that the possibility of owning a Cadillac merits serious consideration. That conclusion seems to have assertable propositional content.

I have referred to the activity via which our addressee reaches this conclusion as tentative consideration. Just as one might tentatively taste as strange dish before

consuming it, as prudent managers of scarce cognitive resources, we commonly sort through the mass of messages addressed to us and the available prospective courses of action to determine which merit serious consideration. In doing so we often quite reasonably rely on tentative consideration in order to determine whether a prospect merits the time and energy involved in serious consideration. In the middle of a frigid winter, for example, when the possibility of a first-time Caribbean vacation seems attractive but *very* remote, we might welcome a light-hearted conversation with a colleague who had just returned from a Caribbean cruise, and our interest in the conversation might be lie in determining whether this is something we should seriously consider. A similar interest might be engaged by the Cadillac advertisement, and the experience of briefly imagining ownership of Cadillac might provide reason to suppose that the prospect merits serious investigation. This interpretation of the ad not only fits a defensible account of the pragmatics of proposing (Kauffeld 1995, 1998), it also accords well with the elaboration-likelihood theoretical account of how many advertisements work (Petty & Cacioppo 1981; Pratkanis & Aronson 1992), and it fits the advertising business' self-understanding of how "slice of life" advertising works (Belch & Belch 1995).

The question to ask now is whether the fleeting imaginative experience of owning a Cadillac enjoyed by our ideal reader can be reduced to an assertable proposition. It can be expressed by one, which might even be uttered by the ideal addressee while undergoing his imaginative experience. He might say to himself, "My heavens, a Cadillac does seem to fit my aspirations and station in life." What is more, a prospective Cadillac first-time buyer might reach that conclusion by reasoning which involved fewer, less dramatic, imaginative components; he might, that is, reflectively enumerate the respects in which owning a Cadillac seems to fit his economic situation, appears to fulfill a longer term appreciation of this kind of car, might enhance his sense of well-being, etc. Nevertheless, to reach the conclusion that buying a Cadillac merits serious consideration on the basis of this sort of discursive reasoning, our prospective buyer would need to rely on some imaginative elements regarding his situation in life and so on. Insofar as our prospective buyer relies on reasoning devoid of imaginative elements, he will have left off tentative consideration of this prospective purchase and verged into full, serious consideration of the matter. Moreover, substituting a discursive formation which relies on reduced imaginative elements leaves out a dimension important to the persuasive force of the advertisement in question. It leaves out the addressee's imaginative *experience* of the fit between aspiration and potential. To suppose that this experience is equivalent to a discourse with minimal imaginative elements which articulates a calculation reaching the same conclusion is to suppose that the experience of witnessing a terrible automobile accident can be reduced to reading a graphic description of such event without having witnessed it.

Suppose that the prospective buyer's response to this ad is reconstructed as an internal dialogue in which imaginative elements are replaced by substantial answers in a self-questioning dialogue about whether purchasing a Cadillac fits his economic situation, etc. Could this dialogue be reconstructed as a critical discussion involving strategic manoeuvring and relying on certain presentational devices (imaginative appeals) for its rhetorical effectiveness (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2007, pp. 35-37)? I see no reason why such a dialectical reconstruction would not be possible. Such a

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reconstruction might well be useful in determining the range of prospective-buyers for whom the ad's appeal is rationally defensible, if there are any such prospects. However, such reconstruction would presuppose some determination that such purchase merits serious consideration and, so, could not pre-empt the argumentative function of the ad as a basis for tentative consideration of the prospective purchase, and such reconstruction would also fail to include the imaginative experience of fit aspiration and realization which the ad seems capable of evoking.

I should like to conclude with a brief reflection on the importance the sort of imaginative appeal my reading attributes to Christian's Cadillac advertisement. Our core conception and sense of obligation, as Warnock and others, argue includes the idea, and corresponding sense, that others owe us something when their conduct has given us reason to expect that they will do *x*, such that we have reason to rely upon them to do *x*, and are suffering or will suffer harm if they fail to do *x* (Warnock 1971). It follows that much discourse—at personal, community, and even institutional levels—will require that persons incurring obligations manifest their awareness that failure to live up their commitments will result in pain and suffering on the part of aggrieved parties and will also require that aggrieved victims of irresponsible conduct manifest their pain and suffering. The communicative acts which manifest or invite emotional content would, I suppose, be classified within a Searlean framework as *expressives*. Pragma-dialectical doctrine holds that “expressive play no part in critical discussion [...] Such feelings can be relevant to a standpoint only by way of some asserted connection” (van Eemeren et al. 1993). This interdiction is not entirely clear, but I suppose that it requires that wherever an expressive might intrude into an argument, the reconstruction of that discourse for purposes of evaluation as a critical discussion would require that the expressive be replaced by an utterance with assertable propositional content. Practically what would this entail?

Such manifestations are a practically compelling elements of accusations and of other competent discourse calculated to hold others to the obligations incumbent upon them (Kauffeld 1998). In this connection I would refer you to the Martin Luther King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” which imposes on white moderates an obligation to reconsider their refusal to endorse civil rights activism by enabling their imaginative experience of Black suffering under segregationist tyranny (Kauffeld 2007; King 2003; Leff 2003, pp. 65-67). Competent acts of *praising* require that the praise-giver manifest her pleasure, delight, appreciation, admiration, etc. in response to the achievements praised. Exhorting requires that the speaker's discourse be openly designed to strengthen the addressee's resolve to act in some specifiable way. The confidence (trust) which we place in what a speaker says to us (what she asserts) commonly depends upon her manifest sincerity. It seems apparent that we could only replace such manifestations of felt experience with utterances expressing assertable propositional content in a world in which all obligations and commitments were incurred and brought into account in rule-bound institutional contexts. One doubts that our sense of obligation, indeed our capacity communication, could survive in such a world.

[Link to paper](#)

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