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Commentary on Reed & Long

Mark Vorobej

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WHAT EXACTLY IS A PERSUASIVE MONOLOGUE?

Mark Vorobej
Department of Philosophy
McMaster University
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Shortly after studying Reed's and Long's paper on persuasive monologue, I had (yet another!) occasion to lecture one of my six year old daughters on the topic of why she should watch less TV. This got me thinking—not only more about the tribulations of parenting—but also about whether I had just engaged in the practice of persuasive monologue.

I applaud the efforts of Reed and Long to expand our horizons beyond what has been a traditional fixation, within certain camps, on the logic of dialogue. What I want to suggest in what follows is that, unsurprisingly, the dialogue/monologue dichotomy is itself still insufficiently fine-grained to properly capture many common and interesting forms of argumentative exchange. We need to draw further distinctions yet.

Reed and Long identify three features of a persuasive monologue (PM) which, I take it, they view as essential, individually necessary conditions of a PM.

1. THE INTENTION CONDITION: The aim of a PM is to alter the beliefs of another party, the members of the audience. This distinguishes PM from soliloquy.
2. THE ASYMMETRY CONDITION: PM is a one-shot deal. There is no possibility or expectation of audience response. This crucially distinguishes PM from persuasive dialogue.
3. THE COMMITMENT CONDITION: PM does not involve retraction (on the part of the speaker).

Exploring the logical permutations that possibly arise out of the interplay between these three criteria, and asking critical questions about what the criteria mean, I hope to be able to encourage Reed, Long and others to continue to till this fertile soil. The most basic critical question I will raise here has to do with defining more precisely the logical limits of PM.

Let's start with the intention condition. The aim of a PM is to alter the beliefs of another party. (If the aim is to alter the beliefs of oneself then we have a soliloquy which, I take it, Reed and Long want to distinguish from either monologue or full fledged dialogue.) Now, if this *is* a necessary condition of a PM, it is worth noting that some of the examples of the sort of discourse which Reed and Long cite as instances of PM—newspaper editorials, political addresses, advertisements—would not properly qualify as PMs. These forms of discourse often aim (principally) to alter behaviour, generate enthusiasm, or create feelings of various sorts (guilt, pleasure, solidarity), rather than alter beliefs. I'm not suggesting that this is a problem, as long as we are clear about this implication. Not all ads or political speeches are PMs.

Second, Reed and Long are also probably assuming that, as a form of *argument*, PM aims to alter beliefs through a fundamental appeal to reasons, rather than by some non-rational or irrational means. This too is ok, provided we are prepared to accept that this will again leave out a substantial number of editorials, political

addresses, and advertisements—and, I dare say, even some academic writing (!), another example of PM which they cite.

More interesting theoretical questions arise when we turn to the asymmetry condition, which has to do with the passive role played by the audience in PM, relative to the speaker's active role of constructing and presenting the monological argument. Reed and Long variously describe the passivity of the audience, stating that "monologue *allows* no response from the audience", and that "there is no opportunity for the speaker to assess progress, and no means of verifying assent to premises". These statements suggest no physical contact whatsoever between the speaker and the audience, and no possibility of any sort of communication on the part of the audience towards the speaker.

At other times, however, Reed and Long state that in a PM "the audience does not *say* anything", and "no *locution*" on their part "is permitted at all". These phrases suggest a somewhat weaker interpretation of the asymmetry condition according to which it is the case merely that the audience member is not permitted to *speak* to the speaker, and that therefore the speaker has no expectation of a verbal response from the audience. However, this formal restriction on PM leaves open the possibility of *non-verbal* responses on the part of the audience. These responses could occur either at the conclusion of the monologue, or throughout its presentation.

Therefore, let's distinguish between, what I will call, *veiled* PMs—where there is no possibility of any physical, verbal, or symbolic contact between the audience and the speaker—and *face-to-face* PMs, where the audience is verbally silenced, but may symbolically interact with the speaker in other ways.

I'm not sure whether Reed and Long want to admit face-to-face PM as a bona fide monologue. But their existence is suggested by some of the examples used in their paper (eg. political addresses, and one could add sermons to the list of face-to-face PMs). Reed and Long also write suggestively that "the speaker *typically* does not have access to a particular hearer and cannot *observe* the reaction of a hearer to the monologue." These remarks suggest the possibility of face-to-face PMs, even if their occurrence is somewhat atypical. Though even here one needs to question the sense in which face-to-face PMs might be atypical. For one thing, I don't believe they are terribly *uncommon*. Think back to my daughter, for example, and the lectures I subject her to, and which she is forced to, receive in (verbal) silence—probably while pouting though—before being ordered off to her room.

Turning to Reed and Long's third criterion, the possibility of face-to-face PMs bears quite dramatically on how we interpret and appraise their claims to the effect that the retraction of commitments on the part of the speaker does not occur, or is not possible within PMs. Already, you will notice, we encounter an ambiguity. I will assume that Reed and Long are to be taken as making the stronger, modal claim to the effect that there is no *possibility* within a PM for speakers to retract their commitments. So that, if they do, they are no longer (or never were?) playing the game of PM. Or at least they have violated the rules of that game.

Now, this modal claim seems implausible, in my judgment, when applied to face-to-face PMs. If speakers in a PM can pick up on the non-verbal cues and messages sent by the audience (e.g. pouts, gestures and expressions of scepticism, disbelief, shock, impatience, boredom, etc. to name a few—never minding stamping one's feet and walking out of the room!) then there seems no good reason why a speaker wouldn't, or shouldn't be permitted to modify her commitments in response to audience reactions. (The speaker may, of course, engage in a wide assortment of other modifications having nothing to do with commitments per se, e.g. changing the pace or length of her monologue). The point is that the retraction of commitments seems like quite a sensible option within a face-to-face PM. So, if we accept face-to-face monologues as bona fide PMs, Reed's and Long's third essential

criterion needs to be toned down.

Even if we don't accept the legitimacy of face-to-face PMs, I'm still inclined to believe that the third criterion is too strong—interpreted, that is, as stating a necessary condition of PMs. Reed and Long generally speak of PMs as being prepared with great care and diligence, and as requiring a more significant investment of energy before its delivery (as compared to dialogue). They justify these claims in terms of the non-existence of an audience response (which I accept as a defining condition of a veiled PM). Since the speaker can't read, in an ongoing fashion, how the audience is reacting to her claims in a monologue, and adjust her argumentative strategy accordingly, the speaker must move more cautiously and more carefully in reconstructing the beliefs of her audience, and get them right, right from the start. Errors initially incurred cannot be rectified later.

This, indeed, is good advice. This describes how the speaker in a PM very often *ought* to behave. But to stipulate this as a condition of the very practice of PM is to rule sloppy, hasty, hurried, and ill-conceived PMs out of existence. I take it that we don't want to do that either with dialogues or monologues. We must allow arguments to be good or bad.

Now, imagine that I'm engaged in a veiled PM with my daughter. She's locked herself in her room, will not speak to me, and I'm yelling at her (in argumentative fashion of course) through the door! Whatever we're arguing about, I haven't previously given the topic much thought. And while the general aim of the whole exercise is certainly to alter *her* beliefs, I may find myself shifting ground as I go, groping for a persuasive argument, and *reconsidering* some of what I've said earlier (perhaps in the heat of the moment), and even retracting certain commitments—all within a veiled PM.

I should also add here that I don't believe that the retraction of commitments within either a veiled or a face-to-face PM is necessarily a sign of poor reasoning. Rather, it shows a reasonable and open flexibility to be willing to reconsider matters as the monologue progresses and develops. This underscores the point that not all PMs are, or even ought to be fully articulated and carefully planned well in advance of their delivery.

One final comment about speaker commitments. I wonder if Reed and Long are assuming that in dialogue the possibility of a speaker retracting her commitments always does, or ought to exist—so that if there is no genuine possibility of this occurring, no genuine process of dialogue is occurring. Well, if so, then I guess I'm sceptical of this claim too because it seems to me that certain dialogues may quite appropriately be structured around significant asymmetries of this nature.

Can I have a dialogue with the Pope about Catholicism? I would hope so, but I doubt that the Pope would be willing, or even ought to budge on any matter of Catholic history or theology, in light of anything I might have to say. I'm inclined to think that the Pope and I can engage in an argumentative dialogue even if it's virtually inconceivable that he would ever retract any of his commitments on the topic at hand. All that this means is that this is an argumentative game which I'm virtually certain to lose. And if the Pope and I aren't engaged in dialogue, then I wonder what we're doing, since (unless I'm dreaming) it's not a soliloquy, nor is it a PM in the sense in which Reed and Long define the term.

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