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Acts of Ostension

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Abstract: Acts of ostension are a kind of speech acts. As such they can provide the premises of a certain sort of arguments. We have to distinguish the proper act of ostension from both its content and the object of ostension. While the latter can serve as evidence, the act of ostension is a genuine act of arguing. Acts of ostension are directive acts; thus imperatives can act as premises in some kind of arguments.

Keywords: directives, inference, multimodality, visual argument, ostension

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 1996 the theory of visual argumentation has focused on the question whether there are visual arguments or not. Johnson (2000, p.30) distinguishes between the study of the practice of argumentation, which he calls the theory of argumentation, and the study of the product (argument) of that practice, which he calls the theory of argument. Thus it can be said that the theory of visual argumentation has remained a theory of visual argument.

Although there are many slightly different definitions of visual argument, Groarke’s definition may be considered canonical: “Visual arguments forward premises and conclusions which are, wholly or partially, expressed by (non-verbal) visual means” (Groarke 2009, p. 230).

Twenty years after the special issue on visual argument of Argumentation and Advocacy (no. 33, 1996) the debate over the existence of visual arguments has not yet reached any definitive conclusion, as one can confirm by reading the recent issue of Argumentation (29 (2), 2015) on visual and multimodal argumentation. However, Blair (2004, p. 269) argues that in the course of the discussion the burden of proof has reversed and now lies with the skeptic.

Blair holds that arguments against the existence of visual arguments rest on two central questions. The first is that the visual is inescapably ambiguous or vague, so that it is difficult or even impossible to determine the purpose of the use of a visual element and its relation to other discursive elements. Blair’s reply is that vagueness and ambiguity also afflict spoken and written communication without precluding argumentation (2004, p. 266). The second objection carries more weight: images cannot express propositions or statements since they are not truth bearers. When someone offers an argument for a conclusion, she invites the addressee to infer the truth of the conclusion from the truth of the premises. But if it cannot be said properly that images and other visual elements are true or false, then they can function neither as a premise nor as a conclusion of an argument.

Blair has a double answer. For one thing he tries to show with an example that images can express contents that can be assigned a truth value, so that propositions can be expressed visually. Secondly Blair argues that linguistic units lacking this property can figure as premises or conclusion in an argument. This is the case when we argue with a purpose other than to cause

1 In this I follow Kjeldsen (2015, p.115).

belief-change.

We also use arguments with the intention of changing the attitudes, or the intentions, or the behavior of our audience. The structure of the arguing process is the same. The arguer appeals to attitude-, intention- or behavior-commitments of the audience, and tries to show that they commit the audience to the new attitude, intention or behavior at issue. But attitudes, intentions and conduct do not have truth-value. […] Yet since we do offer reasons to people to change their attitudes, intentions and behavior, it is clear that there can be (even) verbal arguments in which not all the components are propositions. Not all arguments must be propositional. Hence, even if it is true that (some) visual images do not express propositions, it does not follow that they cannot figure in arguments. (Blair 2004, pp. 268-269).

Thus Blair appeals to the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning, restricting the requirement that the premises and the conclusion must be propositional to theoretical arguments. Therefore nothing prevents images or other non-propositional elements from figuring in practical or evaluative arguments.

Blair concludes that even if the answers to the objections don’t settle the question, they shift the burden of proof to the opponent, and hence they entitle us to assume the possibility of visual arguments.

Of course the existence of visual arguments – and not just their possibility – cannot be properly proved, but only shown by compelling examples. My purpose here is to describe a kind of visual arguments that are characterized by the fact that one of their premises is a directive – i.e. what is expressed by an imperative sentence. This directive premise brings an ostensive mechanism for the inclusion of visual elements in an argument. Hence I dub them arguments from ostension or from deixis. I will define first this class of arguments, and then I will consider possible objections to the coherence of this category, to end with an account of the working of such arguments.

2. Acts of ostension

Many scholars have held that argumentation is a complex speech-act (Bermejo-Luque 2011, van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1983, and Hitchcock 2007, among others). As it is known the concept of language-game anticipates that of speech-act. In Philosophical Investigations §27 Wittgenstein characterizes ostensive explanation as a language-game on its own. Notice that if both explaining and arguing consist in giving reasons, the differences between them being pragmatic in nature, the existence of ostensive explanations is a sign of the existence of ostensive arguments.

An ostensive explanation, just like an ostensive definition, incorporates both verbal and visual elements.

So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition “That is called ‘sepia’” — And you can say this, so long as you do not forget that all sorts
of problems attach to the words “to know” or “to be clear” (Wittgenstein 1986: §30).

“That is called ‘sepia’” is a pro-sentence, a sentence containing context-dependent expressions. Its use in a situation like that described by Wittgenstein produces a statement when the context provides additional information to give the content of the demonstrative pronoun “that”. This information can be visual and hence the expression of the components of an argument can depend on visual elements. When that is the case, are we facing a visual argument? Let us imagine that “That is called ‘sepia’” is used as a premise in an argument. Visual elements will be needed to determine the reference of “that”. Without them the use of the sentence will produce no statement and the result will be a failed speech-act. Obviously if there is no statement, there is no premise, and without a premise there is no argument. In such a case visual elements are needed to say something using a sentence, and hence they play a communicative role. But it can be objected that in order to have visual arguments stricto sensu visual elements must play an argumentative role.

My interest here is not in indexicals but in acts of ostension. By an act of ostension I mean the act carried out by saying “Look”, “Hear”, “See” or the like, pointing out something to someone with gestures or other non-verbal signs. Doing that in appropriate circumstances one performs a directive speech-act, since the purpose is to cause the hearer to take a particular action. My thesis is that such acts of ostension can play an argumentative role, and that when they do it, they produce multimodal arguments that combine verbal and non-verbal elements. Let us consider next a possible example of an argument from ostension.

3. The adventure of the two tablecloths

I have noted on several occasions that, in the absence of other data, a white linen tablecloth is, compared with a red and white checker tablecloth, a sign of a higher category restaurant. This a topic in Aristotle’s sense, an endoxon. Let us consider three different situations involving this endoxon.

(1) Nicholas and Martin are arguing about whether The Gargantua is a restaurant properly speaking or it is just a café. Nicholas says: “There are white linen tablecloths, hence it is a restaurant.”
(2) The same discussion but now Nicholas and Martin look at the dining room of The Gargantua from the street. Nicholas says “Look at the tablecloths: this is a restaurant,” or simply pointing to the tables: “Look, it’s a restaurant.”
(3) This time Nicholas is the restaurant owner and Martin a potential customer. Nicholas is acquainted with the topic of white linen tablecloths and he uses white linen tablecloths to make his customers believe that The Gargantua is a classy restaurant.

Now in which cases does Nicholas use an argument? Case (1) seems uncontroversial: Nicholas is arguing. Presumably he is advancing what is usually classified as an argument from sign:
The second case is similar to the first case. The difference is that the declarative sentence *There are white linen tablecloths* which provided the premise in Nicholas’ argument has been replaced with the directive pro-sentence *Look at the table clothes*. Taking for granted that Nicholas is still arguing, an explanation is needed of how a directive pro-sentence can work as a premise. This could be achieved through indirect speech-acts: even if it looks as a directive, in fact it is an assertive with the same content as *There are white linen tablecloths*. If Nicholas is performing an indirect speech act, the two utterances will express the same statement.\(^2\) The alternative is to explain the notion of a good inference without resorting to truth-transmission since directives are not susceptible of truth-value attribution. I will come back to this later on.

In case (c), unlike cases (a) and (b), Nicholas is not arguing. Instead Nicholas is trying to induce a belief in Martin, taking advantage of the mental habit (as Peirce would say) to move from the perception of white linen tablecloths to the belief that The Gargantua is a classy restaurant. But, as Johnson claims, an argument is an exercise in manifest rationality, a patent and open exercise of giving reasons. It follows that for Nicholas to be arguing, he should have the communicative intention that Martin realized that with his behaviour he was trying to persuade him that The Gargantua is a classy restaurant. Even worse: probably Martin’s recognition of the intention that leads Nicolas to use white linen tablecloths would diminish the intended persuasive effect. Case (c) is not even a case of inferential communication for although Nicholas intends to induce some belief in Martin, he does not intend to make manifest that intention.

The idea that argument is an open and deliberate attempt to persuade rationally, i.e. by giving reasons for some claim, can be developed drawing upon Grice’s intentional analysis of meaning. After all, argumentation is a sort of communication and according to Grice expression and recognition of intentions is an essential feature of most human communication. Here is a preliminary sketch.

\[
S \text{ argues that } C \text{ on the grounds that } P \text{ if and only if for some audience } A, \text{ S said } P \text{ intending thereby}
\]

1. that A recognizes P as a reason for C,
2. that A forms the belief that C on the basis of (1),
3. that A recognizes that that’s what he intended to do.

Perhaps the difference between cases (b) and (c) can also be explained resorting to Pinto’s distinction between inferences and proto-inferences. Pinto defines an argument as an invitation to inference.

\(^2\) A statement is what is said by a declarative utterance when it is used in a speech act with the force of an assertion and the speech act has all the ingredients to provide the context dependent parts of the sentence with content (Frápolli 2011, p. 230; my translation).
…an argument is best viewed as an invitation to inference that it lays out grounds or bases from which those to whom it is addressed are invited to draw a conclusion (2001, p. 68).

Pinto goes on to tighten up his definition by distinguishing inferences from proto-inferences (2001, pp. 39-40). A proto-inference is a causal transition from belief in premises to belief in a conclusion, dependent somehow on the presence of a recognized pattern that embraces the premises and the conclusion. What distinguishes inferences from proto-inferences is that in an inference the transition from premises to the conclusion is open to critical reflection. We could then say that in case (b) Nicholas is arguing so far as he is proposing an inference, while in case (c) he is not arguing for he is proposing a proto-inference.

4. What does visual mean?

One might object that case (2) of tablecloths is not even an example of visual persuasion in the relevant sense. In “Logic, Art and Argument” – a foundational milestone in the study of visual argumentation – Leo Groarke defines visual arguments as those “which are communicated with non-verbal visual images” (1996, p. 105), pointing out in a footnote that “In many cases, such arguments incorporate verbal and visual images.” As a result of this and other similar definitions, it has become customary to identify a visual argument with an argument wholly or partially formed by images. Although usually there is not an explicit definition of image, its extension is fixed pointing out that it encompasses photos, videos, x-rays and the like (Dove 2012, p. 226). Therefore by visual argument it is usually meant an argument employing visual representations. However the Webster’s 1913 Dictionary acknowledges the following two senses of “image”, among others:

(1) An imitation, representation, or similitude of any person, thing, or act, sculptured, drawn, painted, or otherwise made perceptible to the sight; a visible presentation; a copy; a likeness; an effigy, a picture; a semblance.

(2) Opt. The figure or picture of any object formed at the focus of a lens or mirror, by rays of light from the several points of the object symmetrically refracted or reflected to corresponding points in such focus; this may be received on a screen, a photographic plate, or the retina of the eye, and viewed directly by the eye, or with an eyeglass, as in the telescope or microscope; the likeness of an object formed by reflection; as to see one’s image in a mirror.

While Groarke’s definition and the current examples refer to images in the first sense, the tablecloths examples involve images in the second sense. Since “visual” means of or pertaining to sight, it is natural to refer to the suasive use of perceptual images as visual persuasion. Moreover in the tablecloths examples the use of optical images is unessential, and one can replace them with representational images:

(2') Nicholas and Martin are arguing about whether The Gargantua is a restaurant properly speaking or it is just a café. In search of evidences they access its Website. Then pointing at a picture of the dining room Nicholas says: “Look at the tablecloths: this is a restaurant.”
5. Premises and evidence

I contend that in (2) Nicholas offers a visual argument that can be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Look at the tablecloths in The Gargantua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White linen tablecloths are a reliable indicator of a higher category restaurant: So</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gargantua is a classy restaurant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To argue is to present something as a reason for another thing; i.e. to exhibit, offer for examination or lay before someone’s cognizance something as a reason for another thing. Drawing the attention of Martin to the tablecloths by means of an imperative, Nicholas is presenting them as a reason to believe that The Gargantua is a restaurant. Dove (2012, p.224) claims that visual arguments have to be characterized in terms of the mode of presentation, and says that “An argument is visual if it presents some element of an argument visually.” In the present case we rather have an argument which presents verbally a visual element.

The tablecloths argument is very similar to Walton’s “classic example” of argument from sign (Cf. Walton 1996, p. 47; 2006b, pp. 113-114; Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008, p. 172).

Let's take a case in which Helen and Bob are hiking along a trail in Banff, and Bob points out some tracks along the path, saying, “These look like bear tracks, so a bear must have passed along this trail.” (Walton et al., 2008, p. 9)

However in Walton’s example Bob’s utterance is an assertive, not a directive. Dove admits that such examples show that visual components can play a relevant role in the act of arguing without being thereby a component of an argument. To be a part of the argument images must be capable of playing the role of premise or conclusion, which is not the case in the bear track and the tablecloths examples.

The role I think these images can play in argumentative situations is evidentiary. That is, photographs and diagrams may verify, corroborate or refutes some claim. This relation is different from that of logical support. For, in the case of logical support the truth of some claim is a function of the truth-value of some other claim or set of claims. [...] In one sense, logical support is a kind of evidentiary relation; though the converse isn’t true. Evidence is the broader category. It need not involve claims. To see this, consider the case of fingerprints. A fingerprint is evidence that the fingerprint’s depositor was at the location of the fingerprint’s deposit. The discovery of Ian’s fingerprint at the bank is evidence that Ian was at the bank, but it isn’t an argument that Ian was at the bank (2012, p. 226).

Notice that in the last line Dove uses “argument” for premise or reason, not for the compound of a reason and a claim. In our example, Dove will hold that in cases (1) and (2) Nicholas is offering the same argument; viz.
White linen tablecloths are a reliable indicator of a higher category restaurant:

The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths

So

The Gargantua is a classy restaurant

It is important to note that as reconstructed, the image doesn’t play any role whatsoever in the argument. However the image will play an important role in assessing the argument, as an evidence verifying or corroborating the premise.

Still, I don’t see how the picture would fit into the argument any better than with a simple exhortation, “see!” At this point the arguer invites the recipient of the argument to see for himself or herself the visual evidence. Hence, it is probably better keep the evidential relation separate. (Dove 2012, p.232).

Thus, according to Dove, when Martin sees the tablecloths, he doesn’t infer the truth of the premise but he perceives it (2012, p. 228).

Dove’s analysis of (2) presents some difficulties. The first is that he introduces a premise that does not appear in the text. Why does he do that? Dove can’t say that when Martin sees the tablecloths he perceives the truth of the conclusion, since between this and the perceived image there is an inference guided by the topic a white linen tablecloth is a mark of a higher category restaurant. Evidential support, however, requires immediacy, in fact the kind of immediate relationship connecting the perception of the tablecloths with the premise “The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths.”

Walton (Walton 2006a; Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008, pp. 255 and 345) describes an argumentation scheme, which he dubs “argument from appearance”, inviting an inference from observational data.

If something looks like an X, then it is an X: 

This object looks like an X

por tanto

This object is an X

To illustrate this scheme, Walton turns to an example from Pollock: looking red is a *prima facie* reason for an object to be red. This scheme suggests a different and more complex reconstruction of the tablecloths argument:

The Gargantua’s tablecloths look like white linen

So

The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths

So

The Gargantua is a classy restaurant
The connection between the perception of the tablecloths and the assertion *The tablecloths look like white linen* is more immediate than the one between that perception and the assertion that *The tablecloths are white linen*. Thus this reconstruction seems better than Dove’s. Nevertheless the new reconstruction credits Nicholas and Martin with a degree of philosophical sophistication that they probably lack.

According to Wenzel (2006, p. 17) there are four versions of an argument involved in its analysis:

(a) the version of the argument that exists in the mind of the speaker;
(b) the version of the argument that is overtly expressed in speech or writing;
(c) the one that comes into being in the mind of the listener; and finally
(d) there is the version of the argument reconstructed for purposes of logical evaluation.

Dove’s words suggest that he is thinking of (d), but it may be objected that what we are discussing is the use of images in argumentative practice, so that the relevant versions here are (a)-(c).

A second and more serious difficulty is that in order to negate that images are part of the argument, Dove seems to confuse the object of ostension with the action of ostension itself, with the action of pointing out that object.³ An evidence is anything presented in support of an assertion. Evidences can consist of objects, documents, photographs, recordings, etc. It is clear, by their very nature, that evidences cannot be premises. Tablecloths and fingerprints are evidences, but the utterance of the pro-sentence “Look at this” is not an evidence but part of (the performance of) a speech act. It is in this speech act where the premise should be sought. Fingerprints are evidence that Ian was at the bank; pointing them to convince someone that Ian was at the bank is to give a reason. Hence what should be discussed is not the relation that an object (a fingerprint) bears to a statement (“Ian was here”), but the relation an imperative (“Look at this”) bears to an assertion (“Ian was here”).

Inferring and arguing are quite different things, as Pinto (2001) has shown convincingly. Inference is the mental act or event in which a person draws a conclusion from premises, or arrives at a conclusion on the basis of the consideration of a body of evidence, while argument is the communicative act of presenting to somebody something as a reason for something else, usually with the intention of persuading her. Both actions are linked for the typical goal of an argument is to effect an inference in the person to whom it’s addressed. When Bob finds some bear tracks and goes on to conclude that a bear has been there, he is not arguing but making an inference. He is arguing when he shows the tracks to Helen to convince her that a bear has been there.

In our case, we should distinguish between (a) the action of presenting the tablecloths as a reason to believe that The Gargantua is a classy restaurant, and (b) the act of inferring that The Gargantua is a classy restaurant from the vision of the tablecloths. Notice that it is Nicholas who performs action (a), and if his attempt is successful, Martin will perform action (b). Both arguments and inferences have premises and have conclusions, but the premises of the argument may be

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³ Curiously some versions of Walton’s classic example of argument from sign apparently make the same mistake: “Travis and Lisa are walking along a hiking trail in Jasper National Park and they see some imprints on the trail. Travis examines them closely and says he recognizes them as bear tracks, saying, “A bear has been here.” Lisa replies, “How do you know those imprints are bear tracks? They don’t look big enough to be bear tracks.” Travis replies, “They are the tracks of a small bear. In fact, they are the tracks of a small grizzly bear, as we can see by these very long claw imprints” (Walton 2006b, pp. 112-13).
different from the premises of the invited inference. The vision of the tablecloths is a premise of the inference but it is not a premise of the corresponding argument. On the contrary, the (content of the) act of ostension performed by Nicholas saying “Look” is a premise of the argument, but it is not a premise of the proposed inference.

6. Imperative premises

Despite all, Dove could reaffirm that “logical support is about the flow of truth values or truth-like values from a reason or set of reasons to a conclusion” (2012, p. 228). Even if directives, unlike evidences, are not objects, they are not truth-value bearers either, and thus they cannot serve neither as premises nor as conclusions. This reply is similar to the objection that images lack propositional content already discussed in the introduction, and it can be answered along the same lines. However this does not exempt us from the need of giving a detailed account of how directives can work as premises in an argument, elucidating whether this working can introduce images or other non-verbal elements as components of an argument.

We must distinguish the action of arguing from its products, namely the arguments. Acts of arguing can be described as speech complexes, as do pragma-dialecticians, Hitchcock and Bermejo-Luque. But it is obvious that speech-acts don’t have the properties that we usually associate with the premises or the conclusion of an argument. One can question a premise or to deem it as false, but one cannot do the same for a speech-act. Rather the argument as product is abstracted from the argument as process, usually for evaluation purposes, and its components are usually taken to be the content of the corresponding speech-acts.

What are then the components of an argument? If we assume that the same argument can be cast in different forms, its components cannot be linguistic units. The traditional answer is that an argument, in the logical sense, is a set of statements or propositions. Now, what is a statement?

A statement is what is said by a declarative utterance when it is used in a speech act with the force of an assertion and the speech act has all the ingredients to provide the context dependent parts of the sentence with content (Frápolli, 2011: 230; my translation).

To account for the occurrence of directive acts in argument, I propose, paraphrasing Frápolli, the following definition of an imperative:

An imperative is what is said by a directive utterance when it is used in a speech act with the force of a directive and the speech act has all the ingredients to provide the context dependent parts of the sentence with content.

Directive acts are not the only type of non-assertive speech acts that can provide the premises of an argument. A hypothetical argument is an argument in which at least one of its premises is a supposition. Suppositions are typically introduced by phrases such as “let us suppose,” “let us say,” “suppose,” “imagine,” etc. or more rarely “suppose for the sake of argument.” It is clear that “Suppose that X” is not used to assert X, even if some linguists seem to think of supposition as a sort of weak assertion. This is clear when we come to consider reductio ad absurdum, in which the arguer may suppose for the sake of argument something she considers false or dubious. Bach and Harnish introduce a category of speech acts that they call suppositives:
We have reserved the separate categories of suggestives and suppositives for constative utterances that express not even a weak belief that P, but only the belief that there is reason to believe that P or that (because it is possible or plausible that P is true) it is worth considering the consequences of P (1979, p. 45).

And they go on to analyze suppositives as follows:

In uttering e, S supposes that P if S expresses:

1. the belief that it is worth considering the consequences of P, and
2. the intention that H believe that it is worth considering the consequences of P.

Although Bach and Harnish classify suppositives as a subcategory of constatives (i.e., acts expressing the speaker's belief and his intention or desire that the hearer have or form a like belief), I contend that the illocutionary intent of suppositives is twofold: to invite the addressee to behave in a certain manner and to commit the addressee to do the same. It is important to realize that the expectations of the addressee and the addressee reinforce each other. The commitment of the addressee is a reason for the addressee to behave in that manner, and the expectation that the latter will do it is one of the reasons why the addressee commits herself. But if a supposition is not an assertion, what it expresses is not a statement either, and the usual structural definition of argument does not hold for suppositional arguments. I propose then, for a suitable analysis of this kind of arguments, the following definition of supposition:

A supposition is what is said by a suppositive utterance when it is used in a speech act with the force of a suppositive and the speech act has all the ingredients to provide the context dependent parts of the sentence with content.

To sum up: the components (premises and conclusion) of an argument are the contents expressed by the speech acts that are part of the act of arguing from which the argument results.

If arguing is to present to somebody something as a reason for (or against) another thing, it is quite natural to define a good argument as one that gives or presents a good reason. In order to specify what is it to be a good reason for something I propose to use the epistemic notion of justification. Justification, as I see it, is not a relation between statements, but a relation between mental states (at least from an internalist perspective). For the more common and simplest type of argument, a theoretical argument with constative premises and conclusion, characterization goes like this:

A statement S expresses a good reason for a conclusion C iff the belief that E justifies the belief that C.

This definition can be easily adapted to accommodate imperatives:

An imperative Do X expresses a good reason for a conclusion C iff the result of the action X justifies the belief that C.
An imperative *Look at O* expresses a good reason for a conclusion C iff the perception of O justifies the belief that C.

Let us turn again to arguments (1) and (2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gargantua is a (classy) restaurant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>White linen tablecloths are a reliable indicator of a higher category restaurant:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look at the tablecloths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gargantua is a (classy) restaurant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are different arguments for the legitimacy and the strength of the inferences they invite rest upon different principles, and therefore they should not be evaluated in the same way. According to the previous account, the strength of an ostensive argument is a function of the extent to which the perception of O is a reason for accepting C.⁴

*Look at the tablecloths* expresses a reason for the conclusion *The Gargantua is a classy restaurant* iff the perception of the tablecloths justifies the belief that *The Gargantua is a classy restaurant*.

Regarding (1), its strength lies in the following principle:

*The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths* expresses a reason to believe that *The Gargantua is a classy restaurant* iff the belief that *The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths* justifies the belief that *The Gargantua is a classy restaurant*.

7. Arguments from ostension

The situation in which Nicholas is trying to convince Martin that *The Gargantua is a classy restaurant* by pointing to its tablecloths is a paradigm of visual ostensive argument. This argument pattern was already recognized by Quintilian:

[6] … many other things have the power of persuasion, such as … some sight unsupported by language, when for instance the place of words is supplied by the memory of some individual's great deeds, by his lamentable appearance or the beauty of his person.

[7] Thus when Antonius in the course of his defence of Manius Aquilius tore open his client's robe and revealed the honourable scars which he had acquired while

⁴ Given the example taken from the *Summa*, that will be analyzed in the last section, it would be better to talk of “apprehension” rather than of “perception”.
facing his country's foes, he relied no longer on the power of his eloquence, but appealed directly to the eyes of the Roman people. And it is believed that they were so profoundly moved by the sight as to acquit the accused (Quintilian, 1920. II.15.6-7).

Even a skeptic like Fleming acknowledges the existence of such arguments while pointing out that “Rhetorical theory has been often uneasy with such ‘direct’ evidence” (1996, p. 20).

The key of my analysis is that in an argument from ostension one of the premises is a directive:

| Look at O | So C |

The proposed inference will be justified insofar as the perception of O is a reason for C, and if this is the case, the argument will be cogent. When, as in the present case, the verb to look is used, it is a visual argument from ostension. The example of visual argument that Barceló (2012, p. 358) takes from Stainton is of the same kind:

Suppose Alice and Bruce are arguing. Bruce takes the position that there are not really any colored objects. Alice disagrees. A day or so later, Alice meets Bruce. Having just read G.E. Moore, she offers the following argument. She picks up a red pen, an says “Red. Right?” Bruce, guileless fellow that he is, happily agrees. Alice continues, “Red things are colored things. Right?” Bruce nods. At which point, Alice springs her trap: “So, Bruce, there is at least one colored thing. This thing.’

Visual arguments from ostension can exemplify different argument schemes. The tablecloths argument is an argument from sign while Alice’s argument is an argument from example. But both arguments have in common that visual elements occur as contents of acts of ostension.

Argument from ostension rests on an appeal to perception, something that relates it to Walton’s (2006a) argument from appearance and to Walton, Reed and Macagno’s (2008, p. 345) argument from perception:

Premise 1: Person P has a φ image (an image of a perceptible property).
Premise 2: To have a φ image (an image of a perceptible property) is a prima facie reason to believe that the circumstances exemplify φ.
Conclusion: It is reasonable to believe that φ is the case.

Such arguments from ostension are irreducibly visual (or better, perceptual) for “This kind of evidence cannot be translated into language because the whole point of the evidence is its non-linguisticality, its closeness to the way the material world looks, used to look, or will look (Fleming 1996, p. 20).

Aural, olfactory, gustatory and tactile varieties of arguments from ostension are easy to conceive. But ostensive argumentation is not constrained to the senses, as the following example from Aquinas’ Summa Theologica shows.
HUBERT MARRAUD

... those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher (1 Poster. iii) says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the word “God” is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this word is signified that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, since as soon as the word “God” is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition “God exists” is self-evident. (Part I, Quest.2, Art. I “Whether the existence of God is self-evident?” Object. 2).

Borrowing a well-known distinction from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it could be said that in this passage the ontological argument is shown, not said.⁵ The conclusion of the ontological argument, as it is well known, is that God exists, not that the existence of God is self-evident. The latter allegedly follows from the apprehension of the ontological argument itself.

We can say roughly that $S$ has the intuition that $C$ if and only if it intellectually seems to $S$ that $C$. Intuition and perception are basic sources of rational belief. It has been held that having a percept with content $C$ is a *prima facie* reason to believe $C$. Likewise, having an intuition with content $C$ is a *prima facie* reason to believe $C$. Thus Objection 2 in the *Summa* states an intuitionistic argument from ostension.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having an intuition with content $C$ is a <em>prima facie</em> reason to believe $C</th>
<th>So</th>
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<tr>
<td>As soon as the word “God” is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually.</td>
<td>So</td>
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<tr>
<td>Those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known:</td>
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<tr>
<td>The proposition “God exists” is self-evident</td>
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Thus in this case the object of ostension is the ontological argument, a proof. The argument appeals to intuition, making the legitimacy of the inference step dependent upon the apprehension characteristics of that proof. Could we say that, in this case, the ontological argument is evidence for the claim that the existence of God is self-evident?

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⁵ “The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says, that they do so stand” (TLP, 4.022).
Acknowledgements: This work has been made possible by funds provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness through the Research Project FFI2014-53164-P, “The construction of argumentative agents in the practices of public discourse”.

References


