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Commentary on “Acts of Ostension”

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1. Introduction

Professor Hubert Marraud’s paper, *Acts of Ostension*, develops an intriguing and, in my view, well-argued case that ostensive acts can be acts of arguing. Since acts of ostension are directives, it follows—*contra* a traditional view that regards premises to be, exclusively, declarative statements—that imperatives can play the role of premises in certain arguments.

First, I am going to provide a brief overview of Marraud’s case for understanding some imperatives to be premises. A principle motivation for Marraud’s theoretical analysis of imperatives as premises is to address some alleged deficits in an alternative approach to the role of visual evidence in argument due to Ian Dove (2012). Given the central role that the arguments against Dove’s alternative approach play in Marraud’s dialectic, my commentary will focus on raising some challenges for Marraud’s case against Dove’s analysis.

2. The view

Marraud contrasts two different *scenarios*, which I call scenario-1 and scenario-2, respectively. Scenario-1 exemplifies an argument that employs a visual component, but whose premise is a declarative statement. Scenario-2 exemplifies an ostensive argument, with a visual component, but whose premise is an imperative.

(Scenario-1).

“Nicholas and Martin are arguing about whether The Gargantua is a restaurant properly speaking, or is it just a café. Nicholas says: ‘There are white linen tablecloths, hence it is a restaurant.’”

(Scenario-2).

“Nicholas and Martin are arguing about whether The Gargantua is a restaurant properly speaking, or is it just a café. . . . 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.’”

Marraud represents the argument in scenario-1 with a declarative statement as the argument’s sole premise,

(Reconstruction-1).

P1: The Gargantua uses white linen table clothes.

W: White linen tablecloths are a reliable indicator of the quality of a restaurant.

C: The Gargantua is a (classy) restaurant.

However, according to Marraud, the argument in scenario-2 is best represented with the directive, used by Nicholas in scenario-2, in the following manner:

(Reconstruction-2).

P1': Look at the tablecloths in The Gargantua.

W: White linen tablecloths are reliable indicator of a higher category restaurant.

C: The Gargantua is a classy restaurant.

On Marraud's view the imperative in reconstruction-2 is a reason for the conclusion. The imperative, thus, serves as a genuine premise of the argument made in scenario-2. Why should we understand the imperative to be a reason? Roughly, Marraud's thought appears to be that the imperative, "Look at the tables," prescribes an action that, if preformed, will justify the belief in the conclusion of the argument. Presumably the reason the action justifies belief in the conclusion is a result of the perception of the tablecloths that would be induced as a result of looking at them.

According to Marraud, the strength of reconstruction-1 "is a function of the extent to which the perception of *O* is a reason for accepting *C*." The imperative, "Look at the tablecloths" is 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" (Marraud 2016, p. 10). On the contrary, according to Marraud, the strength of (1) lies in a different principle. The assertive, "The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths" is a reason for the conclusion 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" (Marraud 2016, p. 10). Further, Marraud points out, that the use of imperatives can facilitate the achievement of the goal of argument which, following Pinto (2001), Marraud understands to be generating an inference in the addressee of the argument. Through drawing the addressee's attention to a perception, the imperative serves to invite the addressee to infer the conclusion.

On these bases Marraud contends that acts of ostention can be reasons for conclusions. Such acts can serve as genuine premises in an argument. In particular, the use of imperatives can facilitate the achievement of the goal of argument which, following Pinto (2001), Marraud understands to be generating an inference in the addressee of the argument. One motivation that Marraud invokes for adopting this view is certain deficiencies that he identifies in Dove's (2012) analysis of the role of visual evidence in argument.

3. An alternative view

According to Marraud, Dove (2012) would offer a different analysis of the argument in scenario-2. According to Marraud, on Dove's analysis, the arguments in both scenarios are identical. For Dove the perception of white linen tablecloths is evidence for the assertive, "The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths." The evidential relationship between *P1* of reconstruction-1 and this visual evidence is, however, to be kept separate from the argument proper. Presumably, the imperative in scenario-2, on Dove's analysis, is some means, appropriate to the context, of implicating, or of otherwise *expressing*, a commitment to *P1*. On this view, the actual perception of The Gargantua's tablecloths is evidence for *P1*, evidence that is not part of the argument itself. Thus, on Dove's view, the argument expressed within scenarios-1 and 2 are the same, and are properly reconstructed as reconstruction-1.

Marraud thinks that there are at least two problems with Dove's analysis of scenario-2. First, Dove's analysis "introduces a premise that does not appear in the text." The problem with introducing such a premise, according to Marraud, is that one does not immediately move from the perception of The Gargantua's tablecloths looking like white linen to the claim that *the restaurant is classy*. In order for a perception to provide evidence for a claim one must move immediately from the perception to the claim itself. The more immediate inferential move from the perception of The Gargantua's tablecloths is to the claim that the tablecloths look like white linen. From that claim one can infer that the claim that the tablecloths used at The Gargantua are white linen. On this basis, Marraud contends, that reconstruction-3 below captures, better than reconstruction-1, the role that the perception of white linen tablecloths plays in the argument expressed in scenario-1 and 2.

(Reconstruction-3).

P1: The Gargantua's tablecloths look like white linen.

W: If something looks like white linen, then it is white linen.

C1/P2: The Gargantua uses white linen tablecloths.

W2: White linen tablecloths are a reliable indicator of a higher category of restaurant.

C2: The Gargantua is a classy restaurant.

The problem with reconstruction-3 is supposed to be that it "credits Nicholas and Martin with a degree of philosophical sophistication that they probably lack."

I want to register some skepticism with the thought that reconstruction-3 is too philosophically sophisticated to attribute to ordinary speakers. Of course, whether reconstruction-3 is or is not too sophisticated for ordinary speakers is, in part, an empirical issue. However, it is worth noting that significant implicit commitments and contextual information is commonly involved in the background of an argument. It is far from obvious to me that the argument in scenario-2 does not involve Nicholas adopting a series of implicit commitments that can be read off of features of the context of scenario-2.

Suppose someone were to ask for further information about the nature of Nicholas's argument in scenario-2. In particular, imagine that in response to Nicholas's imperative Martin asked, "Why are the tablecloths relevant?" Here Nicholas would likely respond by saying something like, "white linen is typically an indicator of a higher category of restaurant." Supposing that Martin grants this, and seeks further clarification, he might say, "ahh, so you are claiming that these tablecloths are white linen?" In such circumstances it would be odd—in fact,

verging on a kind of Moorean oddity—for Nicholas to respond by saying “no.” Indeed, when uttering “look at the tablecloths” in scenario-2 Nicholas does appear to take on a commitment to the claim that there are white linen tablecloths in The Gargantua. For Nicholas to deny such commitment in the context of scenario-2 is verging on incoherence. Further suppose that, given Nicholas’s commitment to *P2*, Martin pressed him on his reasons for *P2*. It would be natural for Nicholas to reply by saying, “Well, they certainly look like white linen to me! Do they not to you?”

Given the presence of these sorts of background commitments in scenario-2, it strikes me that reconstruction-3 does not attribute an unreasonable level of philosophical sophistication to Nicholas. Rather, it seems that something like reconstruction-3 emerges when we consider the position to which Nicholas appears to be committing himself in scenario-2, and the position he is inviting Martin to adopt. And, it is worthwhile being clear, I don’t mean here that reconstruction-3 is only used only for the purposes of logical evaluation, as Marraud, following Wenzel (2006), puts it. Rather, reconstruction-3 is, plausibly, the argument that Nicholas had in mind, even if only implicitly. On this view, Nicholas’ imperative utterance in scenario-2 employs various features of the context in order to represent Nicholas as committed to reconstruction-3.

However, introducing a premise not in the text is not the most serious difficulty that Marraud raises for Dove’s analysis of scenario-2. The more serious problem is that, Marraud contends, Dove’s analysis ends up confusing “the object of ostension with the act of ostension itself.” That is, Dove’s analysis confuses the imperative, “Look at this” with the evidence to which attention is being brought *via* the imperative. Marraud says,

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 . . . 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, but the relation an imperative (“Look at this”) bears to an assertion (“Ian was here”). (Marraud 2016, p. 7)

I confess to not being entirely clear, at this point, as to why Dove should be understood as confusing object of ostension with act of ostension. On Dove’s view, presumably, the act of ostension is Nicholas’s imperative and the object the tablecloths. The imperative is used to draw attention to a fact about the tablecloths; that they are white linen. This characteristic of the tablecloths is a marker of a higher category of restaurant. But I don’t yet see why Dove’s analysis results in confusion on these points. As explained, Nicholas’s speech act expresses a commitment to the claims and warrants in reconstruction-3, and the evidence for *P1* of reconstruction-3 is one’s actual perception of the tablecloths. This perception immediately supports the claim that the tablecloths look like white linen. So, Martin is invited to infer *C2* from *P2/C1* on the basis that the belief in *P2/C1* gives good reason to believe *C2*. Martin is invited to believe that *P2/C1* on the basis that belief in *P1* provides a good reason to believe in *P2/C1*. Finally, the belief in *P1* is immediately supported by perceptual evidence. The *mode of presenting* such invitations to Martin is by means of an imperative and perhaps also, if needed, by means of further claims and conversation that highlight commitment to reconstruction-3.

However, I am unclear why there must be a confusion of act and object of ostension in this analysis. The analysis is consistent with the tablecloths being the object and the imperative being the action. It's even consistent with Dove's analysis, I think, to contend that the invitation to inference is made *via* imperative. This is possible because the imperative's argumentative purpose is to present a case, namely reconstruction-3, that invites Martin to infer the conclusion of reconstruction-3 on the basis of premises that are, ultimately, grounded in visual evidence.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I want to note that, as mentioned at the outset, I find Marraud's case that imperatives can play the role of premises to be intriguing and not obviously false. In the later sections of the paper, after the critique of Dove's analysis, Marraud develops a theoretical account of how imperatives can come to serve as premises. Imperatives can play the role of premises because imperatives invoke actions that, if preformed, provide justification for believing a claim. For instance, the act of perceiving something can provide a reason to believe something, or, perhaps, the act of grasping the meaning of 'conjunction' can provide justification for the belief that it is self-evident that a conjunction's conjuncts follow immediately from the conjunction. Marraud's views here have much to offer in my opinion. Furthermore, I do not take the challenges that I raise for Marraud's case against the Doveian analysis to be definitive. I think that plausible answers to these challenges could be developed. However, I would find some further working out of the problems with the Doveian analysis helpful. This is especially the case given that the principle motivation for the theoretical analysis of imperatives as premises is the alleged failures of the Doveian approach.

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