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Commentary on “A Case Study of Exhortation and Principled Action: The Call for Firm Resolve in Lincoln’s ‘Cooper Union Address’”

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In service of an analysis of Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address, Kauffeld and Innocenti offer an account of the speech act of exhorting. Exhorting, they say, occurs in situations marked by conflicted principles, and an appeal to high-mindedness is a defining feature of the speech act. I wish to offer a small amendment that would extend the analysis to some objects of study that are far less admirable than Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address.

The amendment is a more generalized notion of exhorting. Exhortation does seem to occur only where some sort of conflictedness is expected, but the conflictedness may be of varied kinds, just some of which involve a clash between two principles. Exhortations may have a very wide range of content, including content that appeals not to people’s highest principles but to their basest motives. We can exhort one another to behave in a high-minded way, but we can also exhort one another to behave in an expedient way, and we can even exhort one another to behave in small and mean ways. We exhort one another to pursue self-interest, to exclude people different from ourselves, and to take risks that no rational calculation would support.

Often, but not always, exhortation involves some form of strong emotional appeal, whether positive (such as reverence) or negative (such as fear or greed). But emotional appeal is not a constitutive feature of exhorting; rather, emotional appeal is content that can make an exhortation more or less effective in achieving its goal. We can exhort one another without stirring the emotions at all, and of course exhorting, like any other speech act, can succeed in conveying meaning without achieving the speaker’s purpose.

Exhorting is like requesting, suggesting, and commanding in predicating a future act by the addressee and expressing the speaker’s intention to influence the addressee’s performance of that act. Exhorting differs from these closely related speech acts in the amount of pressure exerted on the addressee, in the source of that pressure, and in the burdens of proof a speaker incurs with each act. An exhortation is a high-pressure speech act, but one where the pressure does not originate in the speaker’s authority over the addressee, and where the speaker takes on a rather serious burden of proof.

The idea that speech acts can be differentiated by looking at contrasts on features like these is not new (Hancher, 1979). Searle and Vanderveken (1985) suggest that illocutionary forces are made up of combinations of “components” like “the mode of achievement of the illocutionary point” (p. 40) and “the degree of strength of the illocutionary point” (p. 41). Any natural language may or may not contain a verb that refers to a particular combination of attributes. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) do not give explicit attention to exhorting, but they closely examine directing, requesting, asking, urging, telling, requiring, demanding, commanding, ordering, forbidding, prohibiting, enjoining, permitting, suggesting, insisting, warning, advising, recommending, begging, supplicating, entreating, beseeching, imploring, and

praying. Of these, urging is most like exhorting: it has “a greater degree of strength” than requesting, but “neither the authority nor the power” of commanding. And it has a special preparatory condition “that the speaker has reasons for the course of action urged” (Searle & Vanderveken, p. 200), creating a specific burden of proof similar to those analyzed by Kauffeld (1998) for accusing and proposing.

As I read Kauffeld and Innocenti, they would distinguish exhorting from a speech act like urging on the basis of what kind of reason the speaker gives for the action. To count as an exhortation, the reason must be “high-minded.” The amendment I propose is that the reason given must have to do with the addressee’s conflictedness, whether that conflictedness is over principles, over desires, over fears, or over strictly practical concerns. The reason must indicate which of the conflicting impulses should prevail—so the highest principle when principles are in conflict, or the most prudent decision when goals are in conflict.

In a way, this is about the meaning of the English verb “exhort.” I don’t think high-mindedness is part of its meaning. But the reason I choose this as the focus on my commentary is that exhortation is such a prominent fixture in contemporary public discourse that we really do need to think about it and try to understand how it works. An obvious place to devote critical attention is to serial exhortationist Donald Trump. He exhorts people often, and is so characterized in the press, but the conflictedness he addresses typically has nothing to do with principle. For example, he famously exhorted his Iowa supporters to go to the caucuses even if they didn’t feel like it, even if they were sick, even if they had just suffered losses or setbacks.

Exhortation appears with great regularity in the vaccination controversy, which is the subject of my own current work. Parents who refuse to vaccinate their children are increasingly exhorted by editorialists. But anti-vaccination activist groups also engage in exhortation, not only exhorting their own members to “think for themselves,” but also exhorting the medical science research community to behave more like scientists. For example, in these remarks at an Institute of Medicine workshop on Autism and the Environment, activist Mark Blaxill (in Institute of Medicine, pp. 273-274) exhorts the scientists present to fulfill a burden of proof that is required of them as scientists. He is talking about the argument that a recent increase in cases of autism is an artifact of changed diagnostic standards; when he says “we” should do actions, he means the scientific community, of which he himself is not a member.

I want to talk a little bit about the burden of proof on time trends. I would make the suggestion that given the increases that we have seen, the notion that the reported increases are an artifact is a hypothesis, and it is a testable hypothesis.

I’ll just take California as an example, because there is a pretty good surveillance system there, better than other parts of the country. A child born in California in the early 1980s had less than a 5 in 10,000 chance of becoming autistic. By the late 1990s, that rate was closer to 40 for 10,000, so that is roughly a 10-fold increase in about 15 years.

The notion of that increase being artifactual has been tested in a lot of natural experiments. There is a hypothesis of diagnostic substitution that has been tested and falsified. There is the hypothesis of diagnostic expansion, that somehow we are changing the quality of the diagnoses. . . .

Then I would ask the question in terms of studies, I think we should pursue studies to clarify uncertainties, but I would urge us to consider changing the burden of proof. Rather than saying the burden of proof is to demonstrate that all

this is real, I would say the burden of proof is to demonstrate that it is artifactual.
(Institute of Medicine, pp. 273-274)

What's interesting about exhortation, to me, is the way it demands either compliance or defense—unlike suggestions, which can simply be rejected, and requests, which can simply be refused. The forcefulness of exhortations needs more analysis. A promising target for theorizing is the kind of conflictedness that leads a speaker to exhort instead of simply to propose. I won't attempt any theoretical analysis here, but just point to relevant variation in a few convenient examples.

The Cooper Union Address is complicated, because Lincoln had a live audience present, and a larger audience not present. He may have been exhorting each of these audiences assuming a different conflictedness for each. I am assuming that *at* Cooper Union the conflict Lincoln expected his live audience to feel was between a desire to see an end to slavery and a fear that actively opposing slavery would lead to disunion. I don't like to ignore the long section of the speech aimed at Stephen Douglas, but it really does not seem to me to be part of, or preparation for, the exhortation to the live audience. The key passages of the exhortation, at least as I read it, are those that explicitly argue that Republicans should not allow the fear of disunion to keep them from voicing their conviction that slavery is wrong.

In the vaccination controversy, one form of conflictedness that activists like Mark Blaxill attribute to scientists is between a pursuit of truth and a pursuit of means to gain public compliance. No doubt we could find many contemporary cases of exhortation that picture the addressees as wavering between humanitarian impulses and selfish ones. In Trump's exhortation to Iowa supporters, the conflictedness attributed to the audience is between two rather puny impulses: a desire to stay home tending to one's own needs versus a desire to help Trump win the Iowa caucus.

A very important point to notice, and it will be my last point, is that the conflictedness at the heart of both Kauffeld and Innocenti's account, and of mine, is a conflict that the speaker assumes to exist in the thoughts or feelings or goals of the addressee. When a speaker exhorts an addressee to put aside one set of their own considerations in favor of another set of their own considerations, the speaker has not only attributed both sets of considerations to the addressee, but has also implied that these are the only considerations relevant to the action. These attributions are part of the disagreement space around an exhortation, and we should expect to find that they are often the basis for objections. Anything a speaker attributes to an addressee is rhetorically risky—and we can learn both from those who get it right and from those who get it very wrong.

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