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# Comment on David Hitchcock, “Transsubjectivity”

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## Introduction

First I want to thank David Hitchcock for this admirable presentation of the peak of my philosophy of argument and also for allowing me to function as a commentator. I am not sure, despite his accurate work, that the idea is understandable without a profound study of my book. Therefore I will try to expound three aspects of the theory a bit more. These are: (1) The general theoretical design, (2) The role of subjectivity in argument and (3) The nature of the Principle of Transsubjectivity. After this I will say something about the comparison with religion.

## 1. The general theoretical design

“The Concept of Argument” is not meant as a full-blown theory of argument – but rather as a philosophically grounded sketch, offering mainly key concepts, distinctions and basic ideas.

The first and most basic idea is the localization of argument in human life. There is a consensus that arguing is an integral part of men’s cognitive activity. What is its specific concern? This seems not evident so that different views are on stage. My answer is: It is our need for orientation, for its maintenance and development.

Let me explain this. Human beings are, as long as they live, in activity. Even if they are “doing nothing”, or when they are contemplating, they pursue their life. And as their life is – to a certain extent – self-determined, they are in need of orientation. The question is always: How to go on? Basic orientation is granted in social upbringing (viz. by evolution). It is an amalgam of knowledge and practically confirmed beliefs, tied together by emotions (feelings of rights and wrongs). On basic orientations we can stay in normal situations for a while. But every now and then we are confronted with its limits. This is when knowledge and habitual cognitive activity don’t suffice any longer. I have called this situation an “orientation gap”, and I consider it the systematic vantage point for argument.

At this point all the orientation which was working until now is “old theory”, I call it “epistemic theory”. In order to bridge the orientation gap, new theory has to be generated. This I call “thetic theory”. Its first step is the raising of a thesis. So this is the pragmatic function of what we do when we claim a thesis: We attempt to close an orientation gap. Obviously the mere claiming is not enough. A thesis has to be substantiated with a justification. Such a justification is a very specific thing. Its task is to connect the thesis with epistemic theory i.e. with theory that is already proven in its orientation function. (For this task all kinds of inference forms and argument schemes are used.)

Thesis and justification, however, are brought about by a specific person and can insofar be biased or mistaken. In order to critically control the steps of the justification a second speaker can be conceived so that we get a dialogical setting of proponent and opponent. Sometimes a

thesis can be justified in such a way that the opponent cannot lance any objection which would damage the justification. In such a case the thesis stays “free from open objections”. In my view this is the target quality of a justified thesis. I have named it “validity”. (The word may appear awkward, but as it was also used in the English translation of Habermas’ work, I thought I might take it.) In order to furnish this validity with a tendency towards universality the concrete dialogue has to be taken as an instance of a “forum of arguments” – which opens up at every time when a new argument (a new step in the justification or a new objection) appears.

I hope that it is visible from this short overview of the theoretical design, that the main function which argument has to bring about, is trust: trust that the thesis – it shall restore lost orientation but it surpasses our knowledge and is no more than a product of our creative intellect – that this thesis, if taken as a “new orientation”, can be trusted. Also it should be noted that “orientation” is meant in the above mentioned and all-encompassing way, i.e. not only for the next action, but also for deliberation and for any further dealing with the issue.

## **2. The role of subjectivity in argument**

In Hitchcock’s explanations subjectivity is mainly determined as being committed to one’s own orientations. Maybe it fosters the understanding if the nature of these commitments is a bit more elucidated. The book contains a whole chapter of 33 pages about subjectivity. I found it important to develop some concepts and ideas about the subjective “conditions of possibilities” (in Kant’s terms) of insight. Why: Whatever criteria for good or correct arguing we might establish, it will ultimately be a subject, an individual, who accepts or refuses an argument, viz. a conclusion. In general, we accept, what bestows us with an insight; and we refuse, what we don’t understand or mistrust.

How this? In the course of our lives we acquire a great amount of orientations from learning as well as from personal experience or research. These do not represent a chaotic collection but they form a system, shaped by the person’s habitual ways of perceiving, thinking, acting, preferring. This is, what I call, an “orientation system”. Roughly spoken people accept arguments that fit with their orientation systems. Very often this is not a conscious decision, but a kind of immediate reaction, activating subconsciously the frame structures which are characteristic for their orientation systems. Persuasion (in the traditional sense) makes conscious use of those unconscious reactions.

What else has to be noted, that is, that this system is “reflexive”. It contains, among opinions and theories about all the relevant issues in the world, a model of itself, a “self-understanding”. It is this reflexive structure that provides the chance for argumentation to be more than an exchange or a clash of (more or less) immediate reactions to appearing sentences. The reflexive structure, namely, brings about the chance for change, i.e. for becoming freely convinced – and not only persuaded – by an argument.

## **3. The nature of the Principle of Transsubjectivity**

It is most important to realize that this principle is meant not as a rule that can be arranged and even less as a kind of supernorm, which is imposed by the pundits of argumentation theory. In my view it is a tendency which is integral in the process of felicitous argumentative activity. Hitchcock has correctly mentioned that I have characterized it as a kind of framing argumentation. This could be counter-intuitive if framing is mainly understood as a subconscious

form of “seeing as”. I think, however, that we should consider the possibility of its becoming manifest and thus the subject of a conscious decision.

The crucial issue is, that people in modern times, where “enlightened egoism” is taken as a cultural achievement, follow, as if it were natural, what could be called the “principle of subjectivity”: As far as possible they act out their acquired orientations (including their wishes and preferences). Following one or the other of the two principles is – in my view – not so much a result of a different choice, so that e.g. the stockbroker would chose subjectivity and the student of philosophy would chose transsubjectivity. It is rather a different degree of self-awareness. The willingness to put up my orientations for consideration with regard to its compatibility with yours means being aware that I am not an island, but that we both participate in some basic cognitive and emotional unity that makes us human. Seen like this transsubjectivity is an attitude emerging in the reflection on what I want and what I can expect in argument practice. Not being proclaimed by an external authority it is rather my own clarified intention and interest to see my arguing governed by the Principle of Transsubjectivity (PT).

Usual argument has to bring about the trust that a justified conclusion is suitable for orientation in life. With regard to the PT, that trust reaches a new level. Not only can we rely on a certain good argument, but we can trust reason in argument as being the ultimate authority for the determination of our life and wellbeing. This is, what I call “deep trust” in reason. It replaces religion in the secular age.

#### **4. The Comparison with Religion**

Hitchcock has found a wonderful wording for my intentions concerning this point. He writes that “in reasoning together we manifest a trust in the power of reason that is akin to the trust of the religious believer ... and we aim for a transcendence of our subjectivity that is a horizontal analogue of the vertical transcendence of religion”. Despite this fine grasp he doubts the warranty of my comparison of trust in reason with religious belief. Two main differences are depicted: In religion there is a promise of personal salvation and there are rituals anchoring faith in the solemn shaping of prominent events like birth, marriage and death.

I readily admit that the comparison is daring. And I will not discharge myself with the easy excuse that I have indeed spoken not of a religious, but only of a quasi-religious belief. Instead I will grant, that it is my specific pragmatic concept of religion which encourages me to this comparison. Hitchcock has correctly summarized that in my view the substance of religion is the trust that mankind is in good hands viz. that the world is ultimately good and right. This is again “Deep Trust”. Then we can define a traditional religion as a concrete form of cultivating deep trust. With this view there appears the following argument for the (certainly contestable) comparison:

The practice of argument is the peak of human reason. Since the age of enlightenment human reason has taken over the throne of the superhuman power that granted the fate of man and world and was the subject of our deep trust. Meanwhile reason has become the highest authority.

Human beings are now, due to manifold technological means, able to keep or destroy the human world. How these technologies are applied and how the life of future generations is affected by their present applications is decided by our present political, economic, juridical, scientific and cultural elites. Their decisions are taken on the basis of arguments and these arguments usually outrun all available knowledge.

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Consequently we cannot know, that they are right. At the same time we are not playing around. We have no choice but to put our lives and the lives of our descendants on the reason incorporated in those decisions. Insofar as we submit our deep trust, we have won a quasi-religious faith in human reason.

What about the two mentioned differences? Personal salvation is promised in religion not simply for everyone but for those who follow the purging paths. A secular analogue might work also with reasonable argumentation. As long as we sincerely care for theses that are free from open objections, we have done the best that we can do. Thus, we are discharged from the burden of personal responsibility for the consequences of our actions, considering ourselves to be borne by human reason.<sup>1</sup> As to rituals it is rather true: There are none. Still we have e.g. the ceremonial debates at some traditional universities (Oxford, Paris, Prague); and there was the “fête de la raison” during the French Revolution. Maybe this lack of rituals is partly due to today’s meagre estimation of argument; so that conditions could change with an increase of respect for this crucial practice.

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<sup>1</sup> I gratefully take this argument from Katharina Stevens’ remark during the discussion of Hitchcock’s paper.