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J. Anthony Blair

University of Windsor, Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric

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The Persuasive Ineffectiveness of Arguing and Arguments

J. ANTHONY BLAIR

*Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric
University of Windsor
Windsor, ON
Canada N9B 3B4
tblair@uwindsor.ca*

Abstract: Arguments intended to persuade have a chequered success record. Quite aside from failing to resolve deep disagreements, they are an inefficient means of persuasion in commerce and politics, and the persistence of competing schools of thought in numerous fields of scientific and scholarly theorizing despite argued advocacy also raises questions about arguing's persuasive effectiveness. Yet humans are irredeemably reason-expecting and reason-giving creatures. This paper offers some possible explanations of this paradoxical situation.

Keywords: advertising, argument, cognitive effort, concept of argument, concept of persuasion, disagreement resolution, effectiveness of argument

1. Introduction

By an argument I mean a claim (positive or negative) about an assertion or a prescription (or proscriptio) or commendation or condemnation, together with a set of considerations—grounds—that are adduced, or alleged, or taken to support it. Arguments in this sense are what are used in episodes of *arguing*, and such episodes are also called “arguments.”¹ I will try to be clear about which sense of ‘argument’ I am using at any given time.

Here is Daniel O’Keefe on ‘persuasion’:

These shared features of exemplary cases of persuasion can be strung together into something that looks like a definition of persuasion: *a successful intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom*. But it should be apparent that constructing such a definition would not eliminate the fuzzy edges of the concept of persuasion. (O’Keefe 2002, p. 5; my italics.)

As O’Keefe’s definition makes clear, ‘persuasion’ is a “success” word. To persuade someone is to succeed in influencing them; and to be engaged in the activity of persuading someone is to be en route to successfully influencing them. ‘Argument’ denotes either a kind of meaningful entity, or else an episode of a certain type of interactive communication. While to persuade is to accomplish one’s goal, to argue is to participate without the assurance of realizing one’s objective. Can we agree, then, that persuasion and argument (in either sense) are different concepts, even if they overlap? Not all persuasion is by means of arguments. Nor, going by this definition of persuasion, are all arguments attempts to persuade, since some are used to do other things than attempt to influence another’s mental state. For instance, some are constructed to reassure oneself, others to

¹ See D.J. O’Keefe (1978, 1983) for the classic account of this distinction.

show that a decision has not been arbitrarily arrived at, others to indicate the reason one has for making a claim (see Aristotle, *passim*).

To be sure, one can stipulatively *define* ‘argument’ and ‘persuasion’ in such a way as to make them analytically connected—so that (as the song goes) you can’t have one without the other. One can stipulate any definitions one likes. That does not establish *the* meaning of the concept defined. It just entails that what can be correctly predicated of arguments in any theorizing based on that definition is limited in its applications to arguments so defined.

All that agreed to, in this paper I am interested in the use of arguments to attempt to persuade using evidence and other kinds of reasons. By the way, by using the word ‘reasons’ here I am not implying anything about whether there is a “faculty” of Reason or that “reason” is distinct from emotion (so that reasons for claims cannot be such things as fear or pity.) I can easily imagine situations in which, for example, the ethos of the arguer is a good reason for taking what she says to be true. Reasons, in my lexicography, are sets of premises; often two or more premises comprise one reason.² My thesis, or to be more accurate, my hypothesis, is that arguments are, perhaps surprisingly, not terribly effective as a means of persuasion. By “the use of argument” I mean the appeal to reasons that one alleges support a contention to gain the assent of one’s target audience to that contention. This is an empirical claim. Its truth or falsehood is to be established by appeal to the facts revealed by observation and experience.

Before setting out evidence for the hypothesis, let me acknowledge at the outset that there are many, many cases in which arguments are used successfully as means of persuasion.

For instance, judges and juries are regularly persuaded by the arguments of advocates in pleadings in court that a particular judgement is the correct one in the circumstances. Even if you grant that judges and juries can be influenced by irrelevant factors, the testimony and evidence presented in court is recorded and kept, and it is expected to be what justify the rulings issued by the judge.

In the social sciences, where the evidence gathered and the methodology used in a study constitute the premises of an argument, and the findings appropriately qualified, its conclusion, fellow scientists will often be persuaded by the arguments. The evidence is the great extent to which social scientific claims are based on the citations of others’ research.

Moreover, in daily life we are as likely as not to be persuaded by arguments, both concerning what to do and what to accept (or to believe), from our intimates, our friends and our trusted colleagues. Everyone can provide examples. “There’s a conference reception tonight. Hans Hansen told me, *and he* [as the conference organizer] *should know!*”

So, I do not mean to imply by my title that arguments are never persuasive. On the other hand, I do think that the ineffectiveness of arguments is not limited to the failed attempts to use them to resolve deep disagreements. (See Fogelin 1985 for the *locus classicus* on the topic of deep disagreements.) I will set those cases aside. There remain interesting situations in which the use of arguments to try to persuade is problematic. In the next section I will describe some of these. Following that I will venture some speculation as to why they are not effective, when they are not. The paper ends with an attempt to account for why we persist in arguing even when it seems quite predictable that we will not succeed in persuading.

2. Arguments can be a poor means of persuasion

² E.g. of an argument with two premises and one reason: “My client isn’t the murderer, for it’s been established that the murderer was right-handed and my client is left-handed.” = [C: My client isn’t the murderer. P1: the murderer was right-handed, P2: my client is left-handed.]

Several examples are available to support the hypothesis. I will discuss the use of arguments to persuade in advertising, political campaigns, scholarly disputes, and religious conversion.

2.1 *The case of advertising*

The evidence that arguments are not a successful means of persuasion in advertising is the fact that advertisers do not rely on them to sell products and services. Companies spend a lot of money on advertising, so they want their advertising to be effective. Before launching a national advertising campaign, ad agencies will test their commercials in small market segments. The testing of commercials and ad campaigns has become a science.³

So, the TV commercials we see have been crafted and tested for their effectiveness in achieving their objectives. And the objectives of advertising can be many—one website lists 11 different possible objectives of ads.⁴ The point is that if arguments were the most effective way of achieving their objectives, commercials would consist of arguments, but commercials frequently do not consist of arguments (Wrighter), and a case might be made that the most effective advertisements in achieving their objectives do not employ arguments. For instance “Coke is it”, “Share a Coke” (Coca Cola), “Just do it” (Nike), “Think small” (Volkswagen Beetle), “Absolut New York” (Vodka)—all hugely effective ad campaigns, but—“Where’s the beef?”—none of them is an argument.

When I have made this point in the past, I have frequently encountered the objection that ads are by definition arguments, for they are attempts to persuade by giving reasons. We need to clear away the obviously *fallacious* form of the objection, which runs as follows:

Sellers rely on various means of attempted persuasion.
Arguments are attempts at persuasion.
Hence, sellers rely on arguments.

This argument has the same form as the following obviously invalid argument.

Vegetarians eat various kinds of nutritious food.
Meat is a kind of nutritious food.
Hence vegetarians eat meat.

The *valid* form of the objection runs as follows:

Sellers rely on various means of attempted persuasion.
Attempts at persuasion are arguments.
Hence, sellers rely on arguments.

³ See http://www.dobney.com/Research/ad_testing.htm, accessed 9 February 2020.

⁴ Introduce a product, introduce a brand, awareness creation, acquire customers, differentiation, brand building, positioning, increase sales, increase profits, create desire, call to action. (<https://www.marketing91.com/objectives-of-advertising>, accessed 9 February 2020)

The second premise is vague: does it refer to all attempts at persuasion or just to some? Are all attempts at persuasion arguments? The contention that they are contradicts the assumption to which I sought your agreement at the outset of the paper. Consider the following counterexamples.

1. Although you excuse yourself from dessert because of your diet, someone attempts to persuade you to have some dessert anyway by giving you a teaspoon of it to taste.
2. Someone attempts to persuade others that they are wealthy by renting an expensive car and pretending that they own it.
3. Someone attempts to persuade you to think they like hockey by talking knowledgeably about the games.
4. One country attempts to persuade another to accept its exports by threatening a tariff war if it doesn't.
5. Someone attempts to persuade you that they like you by treating you with affection.
6. You walk past a bakery and the scent of freshly baked bread wafts out a window, left open deliberately to attempt to persuade passersby to come in and make a purchase.

These are all attempts to *cause* a commitment, belief or action by means other than presenting considerations directly inviting the persuadee to accept the conclusion because they accept the premise and they believe the premise supports the conclusion.

The case of advertising is complicated by the fact that sometimes commercials include arguments so as to appear to appeal to the customer's reason. However, they also include such components as handsome or beautiful actors, cute children, cute animals, lovely landscape, expensive-looking houses and cars, and various other devices that in the context offer no reason to like or purchase the product, but appeal to the consumer's self-image or aspirational identity. Such appeals tend to be far more powerful persuasive devices than attempts to persuade using reasons. If the text alone were enough to persuade, why would commercials include all these expensive props?

I do not mean to suggest that the non-verbal elements in advertisements cannot be arguments. My point is not at all that there cannot be visual or other non-verbal arguments; in fact, I have argued that there can be (see Blair 1996, 2004). Moreover, some purely visual advertisements are good examples of arguments. Nor do I mean to suggest that the emotional appeals cannot be rational. Appeals to fear, or to pity, for instance, on the contrary, can constitute reasonable arguments, and be used as such in commercials, although at the same time there can also be irrational pity and fear, and commercials that conjure up false fears or use pity to advance bogus causes, are not rational appeals to emotions. But granting all of these concessions, I nonetheless contend that there remain commercials that succeed by arousing unconscious feelings of empathy, or by invoking deeply seated human motivations such as our self-images. We can like a commercial because it is clever, amusing, or sexy and have that attitude transfer to the brand without our realising it. And when such commercials are overlain with verbal arguments, we can deceive ourselves in thinking we are persuaded by the arguments.

To be sure, if one defines argument so that *any* attempt to persuade by *any* means counts as an argument, then the above examples would then not serve as counterexamples. However, it would then be necessary to distinguish two types of arguments: those intended to persuade by appealing to good reasons, and those intended to persuade by using other means. This paper is about the former.

2.2 *The case of political argument*

Politics, one would think, would be a natural home of arguments used to persuade. After all, it is the forum in which policies are debated, and debate consists of the exchange of arguments. It has to be recognized that arguments thrive in the habitat of politics. Even so, the most influential national political campaigns are driven by personalities more than by arguments over policies. A nationally elected president or a party leader and aspiring prime minister represents a vision, an aspiration, an ideal, a personality (or some combination of these) for the country, which cannot be parsed as an argument.

“Make America great again” was obviously a successful slogan. What does it mean? One can create arguments that are possible interpretations, but none of them captures the strong feelings that the slogan tapped into: the fear and hopelessness of having lost a comfortable and secure way of life, with no prospects; the yearning for a return to job security; the anxiety about the future; the longing for the reassurance provided by the brief period after the breakup of the USSR when American was the unchallenged most powerful nation in the world, and more.

In legislative debates, it is true that the specific policies of each party are argued for; but the arguments rarely convince the other parties to support legislative proposals. If a compromise is hammered out, it usually due to horse-trading rather than to conceding the merits of the arguments supporting it.

2.3 The case of scholarly disagreements

One might have thought that at least among scholars, arguments would be effective means of persuading colleagues of a thesis or a point of view, and yet in academic scholarship differing schools of thought continue to emerge and to be maintained. Think of the different theoretical positions that are kept alive in psychology and in philosophy. Within Western philosophy, besides broad differences in methodology between analytic and continental philosophy, within each branch of philosophy such as ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics, there are contending schools of thought whose differences resist the force of vigorously contending arguments. Although possibly some of these differences are due to so-called “deep disagreements”, many are disputes over fine-grained details within a shared theoretical perspective.

2.4 The case of religious differences

The differences between Islam, Judaism and Christianity for example, might with reason be classified as due to deep disagreements, but the differences within each “faith” are less plausibly so characterized. The plethora of Protestant sects is a case in point. Yet rarely, it seems, are arguments even tried in defence of one sect over and against the others. *The Watchtower* magazine sponsored by Seventh-Day Adventists stands out as a striking exception.

These four examples constitute evidence supporting the hypothesis I am defending, namely, that arguments are surprisingly ineffective in persuading people to adopt beliefs and other attitudes or to endorse actions or policies. Why is that so? That is the next question.

3. Why are arguments ineffective at rational persuasion?

Here are two speculations about what causes arguments to be ineffective.

3.1 Relative effectiveness

In some situations, although arguments might persuade, other means of persuasion are more effective. I have already expanded on advertising as case in point. Here is another example. It is far more likely to persuade someone to be a follower of a religious sect to have that person as a child raised by a family who believe that it is the one true version of the religion, to educate the child in a school system that constantly reminds the child of the truth of that sect's beliefs, and to have the child pass through a series of rituals marking his or her acceptance into full adult membership in the sect—it is far more likely to persuade someone to identify with a particular sect in these ways than it is to approach the person as an adult who does not adhere to the sect in question and present arguments for joining it. In such situations, to attempt to persuade a person to adopt a competing belief or attitude runs up against a firewall that is extraordinarily effective.

3.2 Cognitive costs

Then there is the cognitive expenditure involved in being open to persuasion by argument. Just think of what being persuaded by an argument entails!

First, you have to understand and accept the argument's premises. For that to happen, you might have to accept *other* arguments first, namely those that support the premises of the argument in question that you might otherwise find problematic. You have to trust the source of the premises to be accurate, knowledgeable, and truthful. The premises have to cohere with your other beliefs. They might compete, or appear to compete, with other claims and these tensions have to be resolved.

Second, you have to believe that the premises support the conclusion of the argument. You can't believe that there are facts or plausible considerations consistent with the premises but incompatible with the conclusion. You might need to be satisfied that the inference from the premises to the conclusion is appropriately hedged by qualifiers such as "probably", or "for the most part," or "in the circumstances"—and so on.

Third, you mustn't firmly disbelieve the conclusion at the outset. If that condition were not met, then no matter how convincing you find the argument, you might, reasonably, withhold your assent to it. For instance, suppose someone told you that a bull moose with a huge rack of antlers was seen this morning in early June wandering the streets of Windsor, and in reply to your expression of doubt, said it was reported on the news and confirmed by several citizens who witnessed it. Suppose further that you know that moose habitat in Canada is in the forests hundreds of kilometres north of the farmland of southern Ontario where Windsor is located, and, moreover, that moose shed their antlers in late winter or early spring and have not fully grown new ones until late August. You would not be convinced by the argument. It is notoriously hard to convince someone who is invested in contrary views.

Fourth, you cannot believe that there is a more convincing argument for some position that is contrary to the conclusion.

Fifth, you cannot harbour such doubts about the argument as that it is too neat and simple not to harbour trickery, or that it is too complicated for you to understand and assess.

Sixth, and perhaps most important, you have to trust argument as in principle a reliable a conveyor of truth or acceptability; you won't be persuaded by an argument if you are wary of reason-giving.

In sum, for an argument—any argument—to win a person over, there is a set of fairly high fences to be cleared. That can require a big expenditure of cognitive resources and energy. Given these conditions, it is to be expected that arguments are much more effective in reinforcing existing beliefs and other attitudes than in changing them or introducing new ones. The latter can entail shifting and restructuring attitude and belief systems—and these aren't necessarily worldview-deep considerations (an example would be changing loyalties from the Leafs to the Red Wings).⁵ So, arguments directed at persuading someone to alter their beliefs or change their behaviour can be a major imposition, one that people understandably resist. It is far less cognitively taxing to read newspapers and newsmagazines, and watch TV stations whose political and social views one shares than to make the effort to expose oneself to a broad range of sources. For understandable reasons, then, arguments that challenge comfortable views are unlikely to be given a careful hearing, let alone be greeted by an open mind.

4: Why do we argue anyway?

A striking thing about using arguments to try to persuade is that we continue to do so even when the conditions for success are absent; even when we have no reasonable expectation of persuading our audience. One perfectly reasonable explanation is that we tend not to be aware of the conditions required for successful attempts to persuade using arguments, and it seems likely that we sometimes do argue to try to persuade when it is futile to do so and we ought to know better.

But this assumes that when we use arguments in circumstances in which we have bleak prospects of persuading those we address it is always our intent to use reasons to try to persuade them of the truth or acceptability of the argument's conclusion. There is reason to question that assumption, for there are equally or more plausible explanations of why we produce arguments in those situations in which successful persuasion is not a good prospect. I mentioned three of these at beginning of the paper.

1. Some arguments are constructed to reassure oneself.
2. Others show that a decision has not been arbitrarily arrived at.
3. Others indicate the reason one has for making the claim.

I will say a few words about each of these in turn.

1. When you make assertions to others describing or explaining something, in situations in which you expect to be challenged, or even just questioned, you want to have confidence in their truth or acceptability—their reasonableness. Thus, it is natural in such cases to make explicit to yourself or rehearse the grounds that justify such assertions in your own mind. In expressing these grounds, you are offering an explanation why you think the assertions are sound, and of course they constitute arguments for them. This might be termed *the reassuring use* of arguments.

2. In law, it is customary, if not obligatory, for judges to write up their reasons for their decisions. (At a certain level, initial drafts might be prepared by law clerks.) These are often written

⁵ The Toronto Maple Leafs and the Detroit Red Wings are historical archrivals in the National Hockey League in North America. Leafs fans who move to Detroit and Red Wings fans who move to Toronto can feel like aliens.

after their ruling, and as such can be functioning as rationales for decisions originally based on experience or legal instinct, or on the persuasive arguments made by counsel in court. The requirement to write a rationale for a decision in court cases or tribunal hearings creates the burden of *having to have a justification* for the decision, thereby making for less arbitrariness in the decision making. These reasons for rulings, in the case of legal argumentation, are not arguments intended to persuade. They can provide grounds for appeals and they might serve to guide judgments in future cases, but since they appear after the fact of the trial or hearing to which they refer they have no persuasive role in influencing the cases that give rise to them. This might be termed *the rationale use* of arguments.

3. For a third use of arguments, consider the following famous paragraph from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Now such a thing [that which is complete without qualification.... {namely} that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else] happiness is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every excellence we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general for anything other than itself. (1097^a35 – 1097^b7)

In this short paragraph, Aristotle offers (1) a reason why happiness is considered complete without qualification (“Now such a thing happiness is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else”); (2) a reason why happiness alone among the virtues is always chosen for itself and never for the sake of anything else (“Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general for anything other than itself.”); (3) the evidence showing that we choose every excellence or virtue for itself (“honour, pleasure, reason, and every excellence we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them)”) ; and (4) the reason why we choose the other virtues for the sake of happiness (“but we choose them [honour, pleasure, reason] also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy”). That’s four arguments in an 88-word paragraph.

In many of his works, Aristotle seems to have given a reason for nearly every second assertion. Each assertion-supported-by-a-reason is an argument. Was Aristotle giving arguments to persuade? No doubt occasionally he was, for instance when he was taking issue with Platonic doctrines. For the most part, however, it is implausible to think he was anticipating doubt about or disbelief of every second sentence he wrote. My guess is that a case could be made for taking Aristotle’s arguments to perform many functions, including—as we have just seen in the passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*—explaining his claims and justifying them. In other words, he was setting out his reasoning as he wrote. I would call this the *explaining one’s reasoning* use of arguments. I submit that Aristotle is not unique in setting out his reasoning as he wrote, and that is not just because others were copying his style.

In short, there are other functions for which we use arguments that do not presuppose that in doing so we are trying to persuade our audiences to accept our claims, using reasons. This position has been defended by numerous scholars in the speech communication community, where it has

long been recognized.⁶ Goodwin (2007) has gone so far as to say that argument does not have a function, and although she is talking about *arguing* rather than *arguments*, I take her to mean that arguments can be used in arguings designed to serve any number of quite different purposes. It turns out to be hardly surprising that arguments abound in situations in which using them to try to persuade is inappropriate. The diversity of uses of arguments helps to explain their only partial intersection with persuasion.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that arguments are not persuasive in many situations when we nonetheless use them. Their ineffectiveness as a means of persuasion in such situations can be understandable, given that there can be much more effective means of persuasion available and also given the major cognitive investment that persuasion requires of the persuadee. But so too can our persistence in giving arguments be understandable, for arguments can be used for many other purposes as well as to try to persuade.

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⁶ See the work of the scholars who endorse what has been called the “design” approach: Sally Jackson, Scott Jacobs, Jean Goodwin, Beth Innocenti, Fred Kauffeld, among others.