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# Commentary on: Christian Kock's "Virtue reversed: Principal argumentative vices in political debate"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is little to criticize in Christian Kock's presentation. Contemporary political argumentation often falls far short of displaying the virtues we ideally would like to see. Sometimes, as Kock asserts, the absence of these virtues actually counts as vice. Claims put forward as arguments, or for which arguments are required, often stand as unsupported assertions. Debaters present as deductive entailments what really are inductive, probabilistic arguments, for which Kock's stipulated standards of accuracy, relevance, and weight are appropriate. And advocates often ignore counterarguments.

## 2. IDEALS AND REALITIES

The norms Kock elucidates are, in my opinion, wholly unobjectionable as statements of what political debate ought to be. They take their place alongside Habermas's ideal speech situation, van Eemeren's rules of critical discussion, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's universal audience, and other counterfactual situations from which we might derive norms to which to aspire.

To say this, however, is also to suggest a problem in using Kock's criteria to evaluate actually existing political debate, and it is on this problem that I wish to focus my remarks. I share with Kock the primacy of a rhetorical perspective on argumentation, according to which arguments are grounded in beliefs and values of the audience. Kock rightly begins by saying, "we should assess the virtues of political argumentation from the point of view of citizens," but he posits that what citizens need is a "basis for making choices." That is *some* of what *some* citizens need. But we know, for example, that most viewers of political debates already have decided for whom they will vote, at least provisionally. What they need from the argumentation is reinforcement of their beliefs, or motivation to act on them by turning out to vote, or rehearsals of refutation that they might use in response to friends or co-workers who disagree with them. And for those who *are* using political argumentation as a basis for making choices, some will make a choice on the balance of considerations of all the major issues of the campaign, some on the basis of a single issue or a small group of key issues, and some on the basis of the ethos or likeability of the candidates. Some will decide on the basis of what is congruent with their self-

interest and some may decide on the basis of a transcendent appeal that may even run counter to their own self-interest (Frank, 2004). It is, in short, a mistake to assume that the audience for political argumentation is composed entirely of *tabulae rasa* who are prepared to make their choices on the basis of criteria such as Kock proposes. Some are, but to posit that as the model case for political argumentation is as limiting as it is to posit the analytic deductive syllogism as the model for argumentation in general.

The point is that politics is not about *logos* alone. Decisions about policies and choices of candidates are holistic matters that also involve *pathos* and *ethos* and are set against a background of existing social and cultural knowledge.

### 3. REVIVING THE ENTHYMEME

Does this mean, then, that political discourse cannot or should not be evaluated as argumentation? Not at all. But the tool that may warrant more attention is the enthymeme, the rhetorical syllogism in which one or more premises is drawn from the beliefs and attitudes of the audience and therefore need not be stated by the speaker. Kock writes that “debaters who seek our adherence should do so by explicitly offering arguments.” I take issue with the word “explicitly.” What may look on the surface like the avoidance of argument through an emotionally charged word or phrase – what I elsewhere have called “argument by definition” (Zarefsky, 1998), such as Kock’s example of the term “death tax” – may actually be a telescoped form of argument that invites unpacking or challenge.

This is true not only of mundane contemporary examples but even of the great debates of the past. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, for example, Stephen Douglas complained that Lincoln objected to certain resolutions only because they were not adopted “on the right spot.” His supporters also gave the name “Spot” to the “living dog” referenced in Lincoln’s quotation from Ecclesiastes. The use of “spot” might have seemed only a casual reference, or perhaps gentle ridicule, to those who did not know better. But it also evoked memories of the unpopular “spot resolutions” Lincoln had introduced in Congress during the Mexican War, raising questions not only about Lincoln’s ability to focus on the main issue but also about his patriotism. But the links were left for the audience to make implicitly.

A contemporary example may be relevant here. In Copenhagen in January, while attending a conference graciously co-hosted by Professor Kock, I encountered many Europeans who simply could not understand how there could be opposition to gun control in the United States after the massacre last December at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I agree with them that the arguments against gun control are weak, but that is because I am not persuaded of a set of unstated premises that are widely shared in my country: that the government is the enemy, not the agent, of the people, and that the people must be empowered to defend themselves against governmental tyranny. Those were the ideological underpinnings of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and that document – the closest thing we have to a sacred secular scripture – takes on life and force of its own. With these premises filled in, the argument is not decisively resolved either way, but it is easier to see how there could be a controversy.

How, then, from this perspective should argumentation scholars examine political discourse? We must perform what van Eemeren and his colleagues call a “maximally argumentative analysis” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans, 2002) and practice what others have labelled the principle of charity. That is, we should take statements that look like incomplete arguments, or nonresponsive arguments, or non-arguments, and strive to reconstruct them into the form of more complete arguments – filling out the enthymeme – and only then subject them to analysis and critique. The process involves making explicit what may have been left implicit or incomplete. Argument scholars undertake this step because, as Klugeff recognizes, “Everyday debates rarely live up to the ideals of reason and soundness of argumentation,” but that what seem to be “violations of deliberative ideals” are “vital elements of debate, helping to shape *presence*, structure argument, form opinions, and constitute an engaged and reflective audience” (Klugeff, 2012, p. 101). Charitable reconstruction prior to analysis also helps to counteract what I think is a tendency to find vices of argument far more in the discourse of people with whom we disagree than in that of our political or ideological soul mates. I am not sure that this difference is entirely a matter of the soundness of the argument.

#### 4. DIALECTICAL OBLIGATIONS

I want to single out for special attention Kock’s third concern, the failure “to sincerely hear and answer counterarguments.” I think he is right in identifying this as a widespread problem that neither politicians nor citizens are trained to deal with effectively. I am in the midst of a study of the 2012 U.S. presidential debates (Zarefsky, 2013a, 2013b) and I observe that repetition of arguments while ignoring counterarguments is a frequent practice. It could have gone unnoticed in earlier years when politicians addressed discrete audiences with little overhearing. In an age when offhand and even off-the-record remarks can “go viral” in an instant, the skill of extending arguments in response to refutation is all the more important. When it is not practiced, argument scholars and other politicians should call the violator to account. There should be a rhetorical consequence for failure to meet one’s dialectical obligations.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Some years ago I published an essay (Zarefsky, 2008) arguing that democratic rhetoric has two distinct faces. One is an invitation to dialogue and deliberation; the other is the engineering of consent through techniques that actually short-circuit deliberation. To permit the first, we must be open to the second, even though it potentially can undermine deliberation and democracy itself. It is the job of argument critics to help keep the two faces in equilibrium and especially to thwart the second from overpowering the first. I much agree with this thrust of Kock’s paper. Our difference, if there is one, is only that I think that argumentation scholars should begin their work grounded in the actual practice of political discourse, not in a counterfactual and perhaps overly simplistic normative ideal.

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