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Commentary on Groarke

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In Response To: Leo Groarke's [Seduction as deduction: against the persuade/convince dichotomy](#)

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Professor Groarke's major claim is that informal logic's distinction between persuading and convincing, or alternately between persuasion and argument, is misconceived: misconceived because it cannot be applied with suitable precision and is useless as an analytical or evaluative tool. In his words it is "simplistic and untenable," and its application "counterproductive" (4). To show that the distinction is common, Groarke cites Gilbert, as well as Johnson and Blair's textbook account of advertising as using psychological persuasion rather than "rational" persuasion (e.g., convincing argument).

To show the inadequacy of the distinction, Groarke proposes two counterexamples, the non-verbal persuasive techniques of Jamie, a young stud on the prowl on Saturday night, as well as the similarly non-verbal argument of an armed robber who holds Jamie captive. Both Jamie's careful sartorial preparation for an evening of conquest and the robber's emphatic gesturing with his firearm, Groarke shows, can be fairly easily translated into standard argument patterns, one an illustration of the "argumentum ad baculum", the other a species of argument that I would describe as a generalization from signs.

With the major outlines of Groarke's case, and with his conclusion, I essentially agree. In fact, as a writing teacher and rhetorician who dabbles in logic, I don't find the argument controversial. In my field, the distinction Groarke critiques isn't held, although the two terms ("convincing" and "persuading") are sometimes used to represent a quite different dichotomy, one I find equally problematic. In order to verify that my perception of my own field was not an aberration, I examined several of our major, recent textbooks designed for first-year writing courses on argument. Three of the five books indeed used the terms "persuade" and "convince" in tandem. But for them, the distinction is that "convincing" means getting an auditor to agree with one's viewpoint, whereas "persuading" means getting that auditor not only to agree but to take some action based on the agreement. Thus persuasion is the greater goal and achievement. Crusius and Channell, for example, in "The Aims of Argument", present sequential chapters entitled "Making Your Case: Arguing to Convince," and "Appealing to the Whole Person: Arguing to Persuade." The distinction has some similarities to the one made by Blair and Johnson, in that "arguing to convince" is essentially based on rational movement from premises to conclusions, whereas "arguing to persuade" must involve "more than" rational argument.

While convincing primarily requires that we control case-making, persuasion asks us to make conscious decisions about three other appeals as well. One, we must gain our readers' confidence and

respect through the deliberate projection of our good character. Two, we must touch our readers' emotions. And, three, we must focus on language itself as a means of affecting people's thoughts and behavior. The writer who aims to persuade integrates these other forms of appeal with a well-made case. (Crusius and Channell 114)

Similarly Nancy Wood, in "Perspectives on Argument", notes in passing that "A common distinction between argument and persuasion is that argument results in agreement or conviction and persuasion results in action or changed behavior" (379).

In our newest argument textbook, Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz "acknowledge" what they take to be

a common academic distinction between **argument** and **persuasion**. In this view, the point of argument is to discover some version of the truth, using evidence and reasons. Argument of this sort leads audiences toward **conviction**, an agreement that a claim is true or reasonable, or that a course of action is desirable. The aim of persuasion is to change a point of view, or to move others from conviction to action. . . . writers or speakers argue to find some truth; they persuade when they think they already know it.

But they go on to remark that "this distinction between argument and persuasion can be hard to sustain". (5)

Frankly, I don't find the field's sometime distinction between convincing "someone to "believe" X" and persuading someone "to "act" on a belief" any more useful than Groarke does the more-or-less analogous distinction in non-formal logic.¹

In fact, the two most commonly used texts in courses in written argument do not include any similar distinction. A sentence from Annette Rottenberg's widely used "Elements of Argument" is revealing in its mixing of the two terms: "Even when our audience is unknown, we write to "persuade" the "unconvinced", to acquaint them with good reasons for changing their minds" (4, emphasis supplied) (see also Ramage and Bean).

To me the most useful way of dealing with the essence of the dichotomy that Prof. Groarke is concerned with is first to avoid the attempt to pair and distinguish the terms "convincing" and "persuading." Let us simply accept those terms as synonyms.

Yet, I find the pairing of "argument" with "persuasion" to be moderately useful for analytic purposes, as long as they are not conceived as dichotomous but as representing the relation of a set to a subset. I see "persuasion" as an umbrella term for all attempts to influence an auditor's beliefs, and "argument" as a major subset. To put it another way, "All argument is persuasion," but "not all

persuasion involves argument." One could visualize the relationship as a pair of circles, with argument, the smaller, falling inside.

In that case, what distinguishes whether a piece of persuasion falls inside the subset argument? The answer is the traditional one based on discourse form: an argument is any piece of persuasion that includes an articulated claim and reasons for believing it, what Crusius and Channell call "case making" (chap. 6), and what Ramage and Bean call "The Core of an Argument: A Claim with Reasons" (chap. 4) Needless to say, in first-year writing courses, we want students to write arguments that are persuasive, rather than persuasion without argument.

What would such a perspective suggest about Groarke's two representative cases? Basically, I think, the response would be that Groarke's argument analysis is essentially accurate but that it leaves out much of what is happening. We do not have "just" argument going on; we also have extra-argumentative persuasion. When preparing for his Saturday night on the town, for instance, Jamie probably does present, through his choice of clothing, an argument that he has a great body. But in itself, that won't achieve his objective. He might be flattered at someone's remarking, "Wow, great buns!" and going on, but he has more in mind. He is, as we say, "looking for action." And to that end, we suspect that he will be concerned not just with his body, but with how he augments it. He might consider carefully the colors of his clothes, even though the colors probably don't make a difference as to his "having a great body." No doubt, he will wear a "tempting" after-shave, and a haircut that he judges "attractive," perhaps a cool belt and shoes, along with shades. Maybe even a designer jacket, sending a message that he is not only well built, but well-heeled, suave, altogether a man with taste.

My point is not to lessen the value of the analysis of the argumentative dimensions of Jamie's preparation for an evening of amour, but to stress how much such an analysis simply ignores in terms of persuasion. (At this point, I concede that it will take only a little ingenuity to interpret these other behaviors as yet further premises in his non-verbal argument for the claim that "you should sleep with me.")

Once Jamie falls into the clutches of the pistol-toting robber, we might do a similar analysis. We could discuss the robber's size, his clothing, his voice, his facial characteristics, and the weapon itself, as features of the persuasive situation. If our robber is small and frightened, and gestures with a small-caliber pistol, when Jamie makes his move toward the phone, the argument would be identical to that in Groarke's case, but it might not be so persuasive. Or suppose our small and nervous robber gestures Jamie away from the phone, using his finger in the universal gesture of a play gun. Jamie might find the same non-verbal argument so unconvincing as to continue with his actions. The robber's non-verbal argument remains equally valid or strong, but not so persuasive.

Some might ask whether it isn't possible to take any piece of persuasion and

show, as Groarke has done, that underlying it is a propositional argument, a claim plus premises. If so, then all persuasion becomes argument *mutatis mutandis*. I have pondered that issue (see my "Teaching Writing as Argument") and concluded that a great many persuasive procedures cannot be appropriately turned into propositional argument, although that doesn't mean a skilled analyst would be unable to explain how the persuasion functions.

I'll mention three examples. (1) Like Jamie, I am conscious of the persuasive effect of my appearance, what in my field would be called the rhetoric of clothes. So I ponder what to wear on the first day of class, what to wear when I go to the theatre in the city, even what to wear at a conference. But I would say my clothes selection doesn't qualify as argument, since I don't have a particular claim I want my appearance to send. (2) A good deal of advertising is in fact aimed at increasing name or symbol recognition, and as such can operate without any argument attached. The Budweiser Frogs on American television until recently were a good example. They were funny animated characters, who took part in a humorous developing plot over whether they or a group of lizards would be chosen as spokescreatures for the brewing company. They repeat the name Budweiser a lot.² And (3) I recall seeing an ad for Mercedes automobiles once that simply took a full page color picture of Marilyn Monroe's face, and placed a tiny Mercedes logo on her cheek as a beauty mark. As Vance Packard pointed out long ago, there are totally subconscious and non-propositional ways of moving consumers, such as the use of certain shapes, colors, and packaging techniques, which will shape behavior but can't in the furthest stretch be made into arguments.

Endnotes

¹I was surprised to learn that the usage panel of professional writers for the "American Heritage Dictionary" enshrines the distinction in a usage note at "convince." They indicate a semantic distinction reflected in a syntactic one: "According to a traditional rule, one "persuades" someone to act but "convinces" someone of the truth of a statement" (320).

²For a discussion of television advertising as non-propositional, see Postman.

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