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# Commentary on: Scott Jacobs's "Manipulation as breach of arguer responsibility in *Welcome to Obamaville*"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: WHY THE PAPER IS IMPORTANT

With his analysis of Rick Santorum's political campaign ad *Welcome to Obamaville*, Scott Jacobs provides an important reflection on the ethical dimensions of election campaigning in the United States and the way some politicians treat their electorate. Far from being the kind of open, honest, and argument-based deliberation on which the idea of democracy is based, we see in this ad—as Scott Jacobs shows in detail—a piece of manipulative demagoguery that works, even though on a much higher level of technical and psychological sophistication, with the same tricks that have been used by Leni Riefenstahl and Veit Harlan who directed *Jud Süß*, probably the most anti-Semitic and demagogic movie produced in Nazi-Germany.

Being born and raised in Germany, I use these stark comparisons deliberately. There is something at stake here. If the Santorum ad is not only a rare outlier that can be explained, as Jacobs suggests at one point, by pure desperation of a campaign that soon after dropped out of the race, then we should be worried—very worried—about the ramifications of this sort of communication for the political culture in the United States.

What exactly is the problem here? Why is the Santorum ad worrisome? Jacobs is absolutely right when he points out that individual autonomy is a central value in democratic societies, and that ethical principles, and responsibilities that can be derived from these principles, are crucial for the possibility of democracy. "People have a responsibility," he writes in his conclusion, "to see to that those who deserve treatment as rational agents are so treated."

However, even though I completely agree with Jacobs's overall assessment of the ad and its significance for a reflection on political culture and its ethical foundations, I think there are a few weaknesses in his argument. I would like to point out two elements that I do not find convincing. My intention with this critique is to strengthen his position.

## 2. A FIRST CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

I think there is no question that the Santorum campaign produced and published the ad *Welcome to Obamaville* with the intention to manipulate. Even though the thing is only 64 seconds long, looking at Jacobs's long list of detailed observations about how it was made excludes the possibility that all this happened by chance. But is this really a case that shows us something about "arguer responsibility" as the title of Jacobs's paper suggests? Jacobs looks at the Santorum ad and another one as "real-life cases of manipulation in argument." What I doubt is that there is any argument at all.

I am not sure how Jacobs would define an argument, but it is clear that the Santorum ad can only be used as evidence for "manipulation in argument" if there is indeed an argument. I would think, talk about an "argument" makes only sense if there is *at least* something that can be interpreted as a "reason."

Given a definition of argument that requires something that can be identified as a reason for a claim, any claim that there is an *argument* in the Santorum ad can only be justified by pointing at anything in the ad that could work as a reason for a claim. There is no question that the ad is full of claims, or that it repeats the same dreadful position over and over again, but the whole point of this piece of demagoguery seems to be that it deliberately uses only sublime means to paint a certain picture of a future Obama presidency without providing anything that could support the claims made. Jacobs acknowledges this problem, but only partly:

The interpretive problem seemed to be that the images did not really function as evidence or proof of the narrator's assertions. Rather, they seemed designed to grab the audience's attention, to activate and amplify what Santorum supporters already intuited, to reinforce viscerally held associations, to evoke feelings and provoke action. Illustrations of claims can serve as a sort of clarification of emotional meaning—but much of the imagery didn't illustrate claims at all. It seemed only to give presence to emotion ungrounded in any claim.

Yes, exactly this seems to be the point. But there is a difference between saying that not "much" supports the claims and, as I would say, there is nothing at all. I would assume that everybody who *intends* to provide an argument in the sense of providing reasons for a claim will be motivated to make very clear what the claim is and what the reasons are. Nothing of this seems to be the case here. The overall goal is disguise and obscurity, and to be as vague and unspecific as possible. So I would encourage Scott Jacobs to clarify in which sense there is indeed an "argument" in the ad.

## 3. A SECOND CRITICAL QUESTION: CAN ARGUMENTS BE MANIPULATIVE?

According to my reading, there seems to be a certain ambivalence in Scott Jacobs's central thesis. The paper starts with the following sentence: "One fundamental value on which rests the rationale for argumentation is respect for the autonomy of persons." In the conclusion, he highlights as a "constitutive principle of the act of argument: One's audience is an autonomous agent who engages in rational decision-

making. This principle,” he continues, “stands as a pragmatic precondition for argument.”

Both statements are similar, first, in stressing the autonomy of persons and, second, in characterizing this “value” or “principle” either as a “precondition for argument” or something on which the rationale for argumentations “rests.” But I am not quite sure what this actually means. Does it mean that anybody who argues *should* respect the autonomy of the audience, or does it mean that any argument *qua* argument is in itself an expression of respecting this autonomy?

I guess the answer to this question depends again on how one conceives an argument. My own position to this question is again based on the traditional and somewhat narrow understanding of an argument as a set of statements in which the functions “claim” and “reason” are clearly distinguished. Based on this understanding of an argument, I think, any argument whatsoever respects the autonomy of the audience at least to a certain degree. The reason is that the practice of justifying claims by reasons in itself is an expression of respecting those whom the argument addresses because it leaves it to them either to accept or to criticize by counterarguments both the reasons provided and the alleged relation between reasons and claim. By revealing the argumentative structure, that is: by clearly distinguishing reasons and claim, the arguer always opens up a set of elements that can be criticized if the addressee of the argument chooses to do so.

Based on these considerations I would say that every argument *qua* revealing the assumptions on which a position is based respects the autonomy of persons. *As long as its elements and structure* are clearly enough revealed, every argument can be criticized. And opening up the possibility to criticize the elements and structure of an argument is the same as offering the addressee the freedom to do so. Arguing *per se*, I would claim, is respecting the autonomy of persons.

The manipulator, by contrast, does not have any intention to reveal what he or she is doing. The success of manipulation depends on secrecy regarding the methods used, and often even regarding someone’s true motives. While the arguer is ready to provide reasons if asked to do so—*λογον διδοναι* , as Plato famously put it—the manipulator must have every intention not to be caught and revealed as the morally appalling figure he or she is. This, I think, is the main reason why there is no argument in the Santorum ad. Arguing and manipulating are going into different directions regarding openness and secrecy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Taking my two critical comments together, my main question is how Scott Jacobs would define an “argument.” According to my definition that simply focuses on providing reasons for a claim, there is not much of an “arguer’s responsibility” because if somebody *is* an arguer, this person—by definition—is ready to provide reasons for claims and fulfils thus much that can be expected from an ethical point of view.