

# Arguing as Trying to Show That a Target-claim is Correct

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ABSTRACT: In *Giving Reasons*, Bermejo-Luque rightly claims that a normative model of the speech act of argumentation is more defensible if it rests on an internal aim that is constitutive of the act of arguing than if it rests, as she claims existing normative models do, on an aim that one need not pursue when one argues. She rightly identifies arguing with trying to justify something. But it is not so clear that she has correctly identified the internal aim of arguing as showing that a target-claim is correct on the basis that a reason offered in its support is correct. First, if arguing is as she claims an attempt to justify, it is best construed as an attempt to justify the action or emotion expressed in its conclusion. Second, it is doubtful that qualified reasons and conclusions can always be reasonably reconstructed as unqualified claims, and even more doubtful that non-constative reasons and conclusions can always be reasonably reconstructed as indirect claims. Third, she needs to explain and justify her introduction of the concepts of showing and correctness in her analysis of the act of arguing.

Keywords: arguing; argumentation; correctness; justification; normative model; showing; speech act; speech-act schema.

RESUMEN: En *Giving Reasons*, Bermejo-Luque sostiene correctamente que un modelo normativo del acto de habla de la argumentación es más defendible si se basa en un objetivo interno constitutivo del acto de argumentar, que si se apoya en objetivos que que uno no necesita perseguir cuando argumenta, tal como, en su opinión, sucede con otros modelos normativos. Ella identifica correctamente argumentar con intentar justificar. Pero no está claro que haya acertado al identificar como objetivo interno de la argumentación el mostrar que una afirmación de referencia es correcta sobre la base de que las razones ofrecidas en su apoyo son correctas. En primer lugar, si argumentar, tal como ella defiende, es un intento de justificar, la mejor manera de interpretarlo es como intento de justificar la acción o emoción expresada en la conclusión. En segundo lugar, es dudoso que razones y conclusiones calificadas puedan siempre ser reconstruidas razonablemente como afirmaciones no calificadas, y más dudoso aún que razones y conclusiones no-constatativas puedan siempre ser reconstruidas razonablemente como afirmaciones indirectas. Más dudosos aún es que podamos reconstruir razones y conclusiones no-constatativas como tesis indirectas. En tercer lugar, necesita explicar y justificar su introducción de los conceptos de mostrar y corrección en su análisis del acto de argumentar.

Palabras clave: argumentar; argumentación; corrección; justificación; modelo normativo; mostrar; acto de habla; esquema de acto de habla.

## 1. Introduction

These days, airline passengers may encounter arresting factoids as they deplane at international airports. “Over 500,000 people are in the air right now.” “Two-thirds of the people who ever lived to the age of 65 are alive today.” One might wonder what data were used to arrive at the latter claim. But, as I once remarked in conversation with some friends, the claim must be true, because it was written on a wall.

The remark prompted the hoped-for smiles. I had used the argument as a humorous device, not for any of the usual purposes that theorists attribute to arguers: intensification of the audience’s adherence to a thesis (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969/1958, 14), defence of an assertion (Toulmin 1958, 12), convincing an addressee to adopt one’s own attitude to an expressed opinion (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 48), persuading one’s addressee(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons that support it (Johnson 2000, 168). My example shows that arguments can be used for at least one other purpose than these.



The central claim of Lilian Bermejo-Luque's *Giving Reasons: A Linguistic Approach to Argumentation Theory* is that one of the purposes for which arguments may be used is not (or not just) an external aim that their authors adopt but is intrinsic to the complex speech act of arguing. To argue, she contends, is to try to show that a target-claim is correct.

Bermejo-Luque's approach to the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of arguments unfolds naturally and almost inevitably from this conception of what it is to argue, which we might call the correctness-showing conception. So it makes sense to examine it.

## 2. *Arguing as attempting to justify*

Bermejo-Luque starts from what she takes to be our pre-theoretical conception of argumentation, or arguing, as a certain type of communicative action: attempting to justify. "Aiming at justifying is what makes a certain communicative behavior argumentation" (2011, 39; all page references below are to this book). It follows, she claims, that good argumentation is argumentation that succeeds in this aim. "... 'arguing for *p*' is equivalent to 'trying to justify that *p*' and, consequently, ... 'justifying that *p*' is equivalent to 'arguing well for *p*'" (p. 40). Thus the goal of justifying is internal to the communicative act of arguing in two senses. First, one cannot argue well for something and fail to justify it. Second, one cannot justify something without arguing well for it.

There is something odd about this identification of the communicative action of arguing *for p* with trying to justify *that p*. Take an example. Suppose that a Christian apologist is arguing in a public debate *for* the existence of God. Would we be inclined to say that she is trying to justify *that* the existence of God? The locution is odd, rebarbative, solecistic. It is more idiomatic to identify her action of arguing for the existence of God with trying to justify *her claim that* God exists, or with trying to *establish* or *prove* the existence of God. Similarly for other examples of arguing for *p*. Acts of arguing would seem to be directed towards propositions (if one speaks of arguing *that p*) or towards nominally expressed states of affairs corresponding to them (if one speaks of arguing *for p*), whereas attempts to justify are directed towards actions or emotions. Attempts to establish or prove something, on the other hand, seem to be directed to the same sort of entity as acts of arguing, namely to propositions or to nominally expressed states of affairs corresponding to them.

Explication of arguing as attempting to justify something becomes more plausible when we consider acts of arguing for conclusions other than constatives: arguing for directives (e.g. arguing in support of a request for an explanation or of a request that one's addressee do something), for expressives (e.g. arguing in support of an exclamation of surprise), for declaratives (e.g. arguing in support of one's own judicial verdict), or for commissives (e.g. arguing in support of a promise). As I have argued elsewhere (Hitchcock 2006), one can find seriously meant pieces of discourse in which a constative is followed by the word 'so', followed by any of these four main types of non-constative speech acts. On the face of it, such communicative acts should count as acts of arguing. Here the concept of justifying fits much better than the concepts of establishing or proving. Those who argue for a directive are trying to justify the re-

quest that they make in articulating it. Those who argue for an expressive are trying to justify the emotion that they express in their conclusion. Judges who give supporting reasons for their verdicts are trying to justify those verdicts. Those who argue for commissives are trying to justify the making of the commitment. On the other hand, it makes no sense to speak of establishing (or proving) a request for an explanation or for an action, or to speak of establishing (or proving) an emotion, establishing (or proving) a verdict, or establishing (or proving) a promise; requests, emotions, verdicts and promises are not the sorts of things that can be established (or proved). Only propositions (or the states of affairs that they represent) can be established (or proved).

Thus we need to modify Bermejo-Luque's starting-point. The communicative act of arguing, which she also calls 'argumentation', is better described as an attempt to justify some action or emotion of the arguer – namely, the action performed or emotion expressed in the arguer's conclusion. The goal of justifying that action or emotion seems to be internal to the act of arguing in both of Bermejo-Luque's senses: it is impossible to argue well without justifying the action performed or emotion expressed in uttering the argument's conclusion, and it is impossible to justify an action or emotion without arguing well for it. One might object, however, that one can justify a claim ostensively without arguing for it. For example, one can justify the claim that a microwave will heat up plates with no food on them by putting an empty plate in a microwave, turning the microwave on for 30 seconds, then taking out the plate and handing it to the skeptic. Similarly, one can justify an emotion ostensively. For example, one can justify compassion for small children dying of malnutrition by playing a videotape of their arrival in an emaciated state at a refugee camp. To accommodate such cases, I shall assume that heating up the plates and playing the videotape are acts of arguing in the circumstances described, thus preserving the equivalence of justifying an action or emotion with arguing well for it. Bermejo-Luque herself seems to make a similar assumption (p. 60, n. 4).

### *3. The advantages of internalism over instrumentalism*

Bermejo-Luque claims that an appeal to the internal goal that is constitutive of arguing is the only way to defend a normative model of argumentation against skepticism. The alternative is an instrumental approach that treats argumentation as an instrument for the achievement of some goal external to it. A goal is external in this sense if someone can argue for something without aiming at this goal. For example, the goal of rational persuasion, taken by Ralph Johnson (2000) as the basis of his normative theory of argumentation, is external in Bermejo-Luque's sense because someone can argue for something without aiming to persuade her audience. It does not matter, according to Bermejo-Luque, whether the postulated external goal of argumentation is taken to have intrinsic value or to be of value as a means to some further goal. In either case, a problem of circularity arises when one tries to justify to a skeptic, or to a proponent of some alternative instrumentalist basis for a normative model of argumentation, one's choice of one's favored goal as the goal that arguers should be pursuing when they argue. To be consistent, the defender of an external goal of argumentation should aim

to argue for it in a way that itself achieves the postulated goal, and should regard their argument as successful if the aim of achieving the postulated goal is fulfilled. But the skeptic, or the proponent of an alternative instrumental basis for a normative model of argumentation, will rightly decline to regard achievement of the postulated goal as a basis for accepting the argument, since what is in question is whether achievement of the postulated goal is the right basis for a normative model of argumentation.

One might raise objections to this wholesale argument against existing attempts to construct a normative model of argumentation. First, one might be able to argue dialectically against someone who proposes a rival normative model of argumentation that, even on that rival model, one's own favoured model should be adopted. For example, a rhetorical approach that identifies good argumentation with effective argumentation that succeeds in persuading its intended audience might imply that arguers should aim at *rational* persuasion, eschewing irrational rhetorical tricks, if empirical research showed that rational persuasion was actually more effective than irrational rhetorical tricks. Second, one might put forward a normative model of argumentation as appropriate only where the context indicates that the external goal of argumentation on which the model is based should be pursued. For example, one might appeal to the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion only in contexts where the participants in a discussion agree to resolve their difference of opinion rationally. Third, one might defend an existing normative model of argumentation on the ground that in fact it appeals to an internal goal of argumentation rather than to an external goal. For example, the goal of justifying a standpoint is internal to the illocutionary act of argumentation as Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 43) conceive of it. Nevertheless, if there is an internal goal that is constitutive of the act of arguing, then it provides a firm basis for the interpretation and evaluation of such acts, independently of whatever external goals an arguer might or should be pursuing by arguing.

#### *4. Justifying as showing that a target-claim is correct*

Hence the recognition that arguing is constitutively an attempt at justification is an important contribution to the understanding of argumentation. But, as Bermejo-Luque herself points out (p. 40), it is merely a schematic and empty claim that arguing well consisting in justifying that for which one is arguing. One needs to look at the structure of the communicative act of arguing to see what justifying one's conclusion would amount to. According to Bermejo-Luque, arguing is a second-order speech act complex, in the sense that it consists of more than one illocutionary act, each of which is a first-order illocutionary act that takes on a secondary character in virtue of its relationship to the other components of the complex. In particular, arguing consists of two second-order speech acts, an act of adducing a reason and an act of concluding a target-claim. Each of these second-order speech acts is directly or indirectly a first-order constative. What makes stating a reason *r* an act of adducing and making a claim *c* an act of concluding is an implicit inference-claim whose content is the proposition that if *r* then *c* (p. 61).

One can raise several doubts about this analysis of the communicative act of arguing, most of which the analysis can accommodate.

First, someone arguing for a claim can adduce more than one reason in support of it. However, if the person adduces two or more reasons as jointly justifying a target-claim, one can treat the conjunction of those reasons as a single reason adduced in support of the claim. If the person adduces two or more reasons as separately justifying a target-claim, the person has in fact argued more than once for the same conclusion. And more complex situations, as when a person adduces two reasons as jointly justifying a target-claim and a third reason as justifying it independently of those two reasons, can be accommodated analogously.

Second, someone adducing a reason in support of a claim can in turn argue in support of the reason. In that case, we have two acts of arguing, the argumentation in support of the claim and the argumentation in support of its supporting reason.

Third, both claims and reasons can be qualified, for example by adverbs like ‘probably’ or ‘perhaps’. Someone who says, “It’s probably going to rain, so perhaps we should stay home”, is neither stating that it’s going to rain nor stating that we should stay home. Bermejo-Luque proposes (p. 62) to transform qualified statements into canonical claims by reformulating them. Thus the reason in the example just given might be regarded as the statement that it is probable that it will rain, and the conclusion as the statement that we should consider staying home. Such transformations are controversial, particularly when they embed an epistemic qualifier of a conclusion, like the ‘perhaps’ in the example just given.

Fourth, as previously mentioned, and as Bermejo-Luque herself recognizes, conclusions need not be constatives. She gives the example of someone arguing, “I promise I’ll take care, so don’t worry” (p. 61). She handles such cases by reconstructing the conclusion as an indirect constative. In her example, the act of advising the addressee not to worry is to be reconstructed as an indirect statement, e.g. ‘you should not worry.’ Such reconstructions are in my view problematic. It is one thing to issue a directive (advice, request, command, etc.), another thing to make a statement about what someone should or should not do. Saying that we should invite some friends to dinner has less force than proposing to invite them to dinner.

To the extent that one can sustain the last two doubts, concerning qualifiers and non-constative conclusions, to that extent Bermejo-Luque’s analysis of the speech act of arguing as a complex of second-order speech acts of adducing and concluding would have to be regarded as limited in application, or as needing to be re-interpreted in such a way that adducing and concluding are second-order speech acts that can supervene on a variety of first-order speech acts, including not just constatives but qualified constatives (in the case of both adducing and concluding) and non-constatives (in the case of concluding).

Bermejo-Luque uses to powerful effect the speech-act schema proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979) as the form of reasoning by which utterances of speakers get interpreted as illocutionary acts. The schema has four steps, which I paraphrase here in their initial simplified form (Bach and Harnish 1979, 11):

1. Speaker *S* is uttering expression *e*. (from hearing *S* utter *e*)
2. *S* means ... by *e*. (from 1 + linguistic presumption + mutual contextual beliefs)
3. *S* is saying that  $*(\dots p \dots)$ . (from 2 + linguistic presumption + mutual contextual beliefs)
4. If speaking literally, *S* is  $F^*$ -ing that *p*. (from 3 + communicative presumption + mutual contextual beliefs)

The linguistic presumption used at steps 2 and 3 is the mutual belief in the linguistic community to whose language *e* belongs that its members share this language and that anyone in the community who hears a member of the community utter an expression of the language can identify what the speaker is saying, if the hearer knows the meaning of that expression in the language and is aware of the appropriate background information. The communicative presumption used at step 4 is the mutual belief in the linguistic community that any member who says something in the language to another member is doing so with some recognizable illocutionary intent. The mutual contextual beliefs used at steps 2 through 4 are *beliefs* shared by speaker and hearer that are relevant to and activated by the *context* of utterance of *e* (including the utterance itself) and are *mutual* in the sense that speaker and hearer both have the beliefs and believe the other believes both have the beliefs. The ellipsis ‘...’ at step 2 represents what the speaker means by the expression *e*. The notation  $*(\dots p \dots)$  includes an indicator ‘\*’ for the sentence type of *e*, a variable ‘*p*’ for a proposition, and the ellipsis ‘...’ to indicate that the proposition is a function of the intended meaning ‘...’ of *e*. The notation ‘ $F^*$ ’ indicates an illocutionary force *F* whose propositional content is the same as the proposition in the locutionary act inferred at stage 3. (Bach and Harnish 1979, pp. 5, 7, 9, 11)

Bermejo-Luque extends the four-step speech-act schema of Bach and Harnish to nine-step schemata for inferring that a speaker is adducing a reason or drawing a conclusion. She works out the nine steps separately for adducing and concluding in terms of the example, “I’ll take care, so don’t worry.” But, since the five subsequent steps for adducing and concluding are parallel, they can be represented abstractly in a single schema with occasional variations, as follows:

5. *S* has implicitly made the claim (with ontological pragmatic force  $\varkappa$ ) that, if it is correct that *r*, then it is correct that *c*. (from argumentative presumption)
6. *S* could not merely be  $F^*$ -ing that *r* [resp.  $G^*$ -ing that *c*]. (from 4 + 5 + communicative presumption + mutual contextual beliefs + argumentative presumption)
7. Under the circumstances, in  $F^*$ -ing that *r* [resp.  $G^*$ -ing that *c*], *S* could also be claiming (with ontological pragmatic force  $\gamma$  [resp.  $\varkappa$ ]) that *r* [resp. that *c*]. (from 6 + communicative presumption + mutual contextual beliefs)

8. *S* is claiming (with ontological pragmatic force *y* [resp.  $\chi$ ]) that *r* [resp. *c*].  
(from 6 + 7 + linguistic presumption + communicative presumption + mutual contextual beliefs + 5)
9. *S* is adducing [resp. concluding] (with ontological pragmatic force *y* [resp.  $\chi$ ]) that *r* [resp. *c*]. (from 5 + 8 + linguistic presumption + communicative presumption + mutual contextual beliefs)

Here the crucial argumentative presumption at step 5 is the mutual belief of hearer and speaker that the speaker has implicitly claimed that if *r* then *c*, where *r* is the propositional content of the (possibly reconstructed) constative *R* that is a second-order act of adducing and *c* is the propositional content of the (possibly reconstructed) constative *C* that is a second-order act of concluding (p. 62). Step 7 is required to accommodate non-constative speech acts that are reconstructed as constatives. Bermejo-Luque does not make entirely clear how the linguistic and communicative presumptions and mutual contextual beliefs enter into the inferences at steps 6 through 9 of her schemata. More importantly, she seems to provide no rationale for rephrasing the inference-claim of an act of arguing in terms of the correctness of propositions *r* and *c*. Nor does she make clear what difference if any there is between claiming that if *r* then *c* and claiming that if it is correct that *r* then it is correct that *c*.

The two schemata for adducing and concluding are combined into a schema for arguing. Each of the first four steps of the schema for arguing is a conjunction of the corresponding steps of the schemata for adducing and concluding. Step 5 is identical to step 5 of the schemata for adducing and concluding; it attributes an inference-claim to the speaker. Step 6 is the conclusion that the speaker is adducing that *r*, corresponding to step 9 of the schema for adducing. Similarly, step 7 is the conclusion that the speaker is concluding that *c*, corresponding to step 9 of the schema for concluding. (In combining the schemata, Bermejo-Luque collapses the reasoning to the conclusions about adducing and concluding.) Finally, in step 8 the conclusions at steps 6 and 7 that the speaker is adducing that *r* and concluding that *c* are used as a basis for concluding that the speaker is *arguing* (with *epistemic* pragmatic force  $\chi$ ) that the claim (with *ontological* pragmatic force *y*) that *c* is correct since the claim (with *ontological* pragmatic force *x*) that *r* is correct (pp. 67-69<sup>1</sup>).

Missing from Bermejo-Luque's account, as far as I can see, is any explanation or justification of her introduction into the schema for arguing of the concepts of correctness and of showing. In cases of arguing where the reason and the conclusion can each legitimately be interpreted as claims (i.e. unqualified constatives), it is reasonable to interpret the act of arguing as an act of justifying one's conclusion to an audience by adducing the reason. That is, in such cases, to argue is to try to defend one's claim that *c* on the basis that *r*, where *c* is the propositional content of the act of concluding

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<sup>1</sup> In these pages, Bermejo-Luque actually provides two nine-step schemata, for the cases where one speaker gives a reason to show that another speaker's target-claim is correct and where one speaker provides a target-claim for which another speaker's claim is used as a supporting reason. The extra step involves concluding that the second speaker is endorsing the claim made by the first speaker. I have ignored this complication in my exposition.

and  $r$  is the propositional content of the act of adducing. But why should we interpret an act of defending something on some basis as an act of showing? And why should we import the modal phrase 'it is correct that' into our characterization of the acts of adducing and concluding of which the complex act of arguing consists? What difference does it make to Bermejo-Luque's subsequent chapters on the logical, dialectical and rhetorical aspects of arguing that the concept of arguing is characterized in terms of showing and correctness?

These are questions to which I have not worked out an answer. I invite Bermejo-Luque to do so in response to this reflection.

### 5. Summary

To sum up: Bermejo-Luque has made a distinctive and valuable contribution to the normative study of argumentation by distinguishing the internal aim that is constitutive of the act of arguing from a recommended external aim that arguers may or may not pursue when they argue. She has rightly pointed to the fragility in the face of skepticism and disagreement of attempts to base a normative model of argumentation on any such external aim. But it is not so clear that she has correctly identified the internal aim of arguing as showing that a target-claim is correct on the basis that a reason offered in its support is correct. First, if arguing is as she claims an attempt to justify, it is best construed as an attempt to justify the action or emotion expressed in its conclusion. Second, it is doubtful that qualified reasons and conclusions can always be reasonably reconstructed as unqualified claims, and even more doubtful that non-constative reasons and conclusions can always be reasonably reconstructed as indirect claims. Third, she needs to explain and justify her introduction of the concepts of showing and correctness in her analysis of the act of arguing.

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