

Gilbert as Disrupter: Modes (of Many Sorts) in the Theory of Argument

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Abstract: Michael Gilbert’s multi-modal theory of argument challenges earlier accounts of arguing assumed in formal and informal logic. His account of emotional, visceral, and kisceral modes of arguing rejects the assumption that all arguments must be treated as instances of one “logical mode.” This paper compares his alternative modes to other modes proposed by those who have argued for visual, auditory, and other “multimodal” modes of arguing. I conclude that multi-modal and multimodal (without the hyphen) modes are complementary. Collectively, they represent an important attempt to radically expand the scope of informal logic and the argumentation that it studies.

Résumé: La théorie multimodale des arguments de Michael Gilbert remet en question les réflexions antérieures sur l'argumentation supposées dans la logique formelle et non formelle. Sa description des modes d'argumentation émotionnelle, viscérale et kiscérale rejette l'hypothèse selon laquelle tous les arguments doivent être traités comme des instances d'un « mode logique ». Cet article compare ses modes alternatifs à d'autres modes proposés par ceux qui ont plaidé pour des modes d'argumentation visuels, auditifs et autres « multimodaux ». J'en conclus que les modes multimodaux et multimodaux (sans le trait d'union) sont complémentaires. Collectivement, ils représentent une tentative importante d'élargir radicalement la portée de la logique non formelle et de l'argumentation qu'elle étudie.

Keywords: multi-modal argumentation, multimodal argumentation, informal logic, emotional arguments, kisceral arguments, visceral arguments, visual arguments, auditory arguments

1. Introduction

It is often said that we live in an age of “disrupters.” Usually, those who talk this way refer to individuals who have radically changed

our lives by inventing something: personal computers, the internet, cell phones, virtual reality, and on it goes. Disrupters in the world of scholarship go less noticed, though they too can radically change the way we interact from the point of view of arguing. If we think of science in a Kuhnian way, a disrupter is someone who challenges a firmly entrenched paradigm in a revolutionary way, making room for radically new ways of thinking.

Within informal logic and the theory of argument, Michael Gilbert stands out as a disrupter. His multi-modal theory of argument radically challenges the views of argument embedded in the history of philosophy, logic, and argumentation theory, proposing a profoundly expanded account of arguing. This essay discusses his multi-modal modes of argumentation and their relationship to other “multimodal” (without the hyphen) modes of arguing proposed by argumentation theorists who have advocated for the recognition of visual, auditory and other alternative modes of arguing. It reconciles multi-modal and multimodal accounts of modes, arguing in favour of their radical expansion of our conception of arguing, suggesting that it is an important trend in the evolution of informal logic as a field of inquiry.

2. Modes and modes

One persistent trend which has characterized the development of informal logic is a move toward a more expansive view of arguing. This is rooted in the beginnings of informal logic, which arises as an attempt to develop a logic of real-life argument which disrupts the narrow focus one finds in classical formal logic. The latter emphasizes arguments understood in terms of propositional logic, the predicate calculus, and other formal systems. In their attempt to expand the scope of logic and argument further, the founders of informal logic enlisted the help of, and borrowed from, fallacy theory, rhetorical accounts of arguing, dialectics (especially pragma-dialectics), and dialogical views of argument.

More recently, accounts of multi-modal and multimodal “modes of arguing” have continued this expansion. Gilbert’s modes came first, proposing a radical alternative to the core accounts of argument previously assumed within informal logic,

formal logic, and philosophy. The latter understand an argument as a collection of propositions—with propositions understood as correlates of sentences. One of the propositions in an argument functions as its conclusion, the others as premises that support it. Arguments in this sense are logically successful when they incorporate true premises and a valid inference that establishes a conclusion as true or likely true. The ideal argument progresses like proofs do, from initial premises to a conclusion in a step-by-step fashion which can be understood as a series of logically justified inferences.

Gilbert agrees with the suggestion that arguments function as a way to address and overcome disagreement. Successful arguments achieve the “coalescence” of the views of those who disagree. One way to achieve this end is via the “logical” mode of argumentation, but there are other possibilities. To make room for the latter, Gilbert’s theory, first elaborated in Gilbert 1994 and 1997, suggests three additional modes of arguing: the emotional, the visceral, and the kisceral. These three modes of arguing fundamentally challenge previous conceptions of argument, suggesting that the logical mode is only one of a number of ways to be rational, and that argument is a much broader endeavour than philosophers and logicians have traditionally imagined.

Within mainstream discussions in and outside of the informal logic community, Gilbert’s conception of modes has been resisted and often ignored, though interest in his views has grown in recent years (Gilbert 2019 provides a useful overview of his theory’s standing). In the intervening years, other argumentation theorists have suggested other modes of arguing which can be usefully compared to those that Gilbert has proposed. This independent discussion begins with the account of “visual” arguments one finds in Groarke (1996). It is founded on the observation that many attempts to resolve disagreement rely on photographs, visual depictions, and other kinds of non-verbal seeing (usually, but not always, in conjunction with verbal claims). Like Gilbert’s modes, the defence of the visual mode of arguing challenges the traditional assumption that arguments are verbal entities which consist of sentences and the propositions that they refer to.

Like Gilbert's modes, the idea that there is a visual mode of arguing was strongly rejected by sceptics who defended traditional accounts of argument, but gained traction in the work of many other commentators (beginning with Birdsell and Groarke 1996 and Blair 1996). Jens E. Kjeldsen (2015) provides a good chronicle and overview of this discussion and debate. When the visual mode of arguing became a standard item in conferences, essays and scholarly anthologies, informal logicians entertained the notion that there are other non-verbal modes of arguing that play an important role in real-life argumentation. Groarke (2015) suggests that arguers use such modes when they argue in ways that employ tastes, olfactory sensations, music, non-verbal sounds, and experience in a broader way. Kišiček (2014), Eckstein (2017), and then Groarke (2018) argue that there are auditory modes of argument that are used when non-verbal sounds are key components of an argument. Kišiček emphasizes the profound ways in which oral arguments often depend on their prosodic features—tone of voice, rhythm, pitch, etc.—rather than the words used.

The discussion of multimodal modes takes a further step in Tseronis and Forceville (2017). In their important anthology, they tie modes of arguing to semiotics and the distinctions it makes between different modes of communication. According to the account of modes that results, there are nine modes of arguing which may be employed: written language, spoken language, visuals, music, non-verbal sound, gestures, olfaction, taste and touch (the “haptic” mode).

Like Gilbert's multi-modal theory, this broad account of multimodal modes radically expands traditional accounts of arguing.¹ Like Gilbert, its defenders suggest that arguers continually mix modes as they perform acts of arguing (mixing verbal, visual, auditory, and other elements). This implies that the major modes can be understood as general classes of argument which contain sub-modes that can be more narrowly defined. Kjeldsen (2017) demonstrates the latter in the case of the visual mode of arguing,

¹ I have focused on non-verbal modes of arguing in this discussion, though it is worth noting that there are other significant ways in which recent studies of argument have broadened the scope of argument. One of them is the study of the role of narratives in argument (see Olmos 2017).

studying arguments that rely on photography and, even more narrowly, news photography.

Both multi-modal and multimodal modes expand logic and argumentation theory in a way that opens the door to the study of a much broader range of reasoning and argument within real-life acts of arguing. This raises the question how multimodal modes are related to Gilbert's modes and what this implies for informal logic and its study of arguments. In the remainder of this essay, I will try to shed light on this question by considering the relationship between these two kinds of modes. In the process I will attempt to reconcile them in a manner that recognizes them as complementary attempts to push the study of arguing in a similar direction.²

3. Modes of rationality: The logical and emotional

Arguers use the logical mode of arguing when they build arguments as they have been understood in the history of philosophy, logic and science. This is a context in which arguing is seen as an exercise in reason *rather* than emotion. Considered from this point of view, emotion *interferes* with reasoning, rationality and the "objectivity" they demand. One result is the traditional idea that appeals to emotion are inherently fallacious.

As Gilbert points out, this view of argument makes little sense when one is trying to understand how argumentation operates in real-life contexts—contexts in which arguments are a primary vehicle we use to navigate our way through our personal, social, professional, and political lives. It goes without saying that there are times and places in which the logical mode plays a useful role in this regard, but emotion is an equally important—and pervasive—feature of our arguing. In many situations, this means it needs to be understood in terms of emotional impact—not as (or

² I remember an early e-mail from Michael Gilbert after I had presented a paper on modes of arguing at a conference. He politely asked me "Are these my modes?" I answered no, though the question made me wonder about the relationship was between his modes and the non-verbal modes in question. This paper is a better attempt to answer that question.

not only as) dispassionate appeals to propositions claimed to be true.

The problems with the traditional view of argument stem from its assumption that “an argument has one goal: to convince the listener of the truth of the conclusion” (Gilbert 1997, p. 45). The end result is an approach to the analysis of an argument in which “Extraneous material such as emotional content, power relationships, and the social consequences of argument are separated from its text or transcript in order that the *argument* itself can be examined” (48). At its core, Gilbert’s multi-modal approach to argumentation can be understood as an attempt to better recognize the role that such elements play in argument, in a way that makes them a subject for study and analysis.

Consider one of Gilbert’s examples.

Paula is sitting in Professor Tome’s office. She is pleading for an ‘A’ in his logic course. “Don’t you see,” she explains plaintively, tears in her eyes. “If I don’t get an ‘A’ in your course I won’t make medical school, and my life will be ruined. I won’t have anything left to live for.” (1997, p. 83)

In many ways, this is an argument in the classic sense. For it is a case in which Paula is providing a reason why Professor Tome should give her an A. But the reason is best described, not as an appeal to what is true in some objective sense, but as an emotional appeal for sympathy and compassion (an appeal that includes non-verbal as well as verbal elements).

I suspect that anyone who has worked as a professor has been presented with arguments like Paula’s. It is not hard to see why the argument is a weak one – for a student’s grades should reflect their academic accomplishment (or the lack of it), not their pleas and cries for better marks. This shows that there can be weak emotional arguments, but not that there are no good emotional arguments (or, even more implausibly, no emotional arguments at all). It is not difficult to imagine other situations in which emotional arguments like Paula’s are credible and convincing.

Many courts permit the victims of a crime to make an oral statement recounting the effect that a criminal act had on their lives. This is a legal process premised on the notion that sentenc-

ing should reflect the seriousness of such consequences. In such a case, a tearful account of how the murder of someone's husband has ruined a wife's life is a relevant reason to consider whether a convicted murderer should be given a longer sentence.

When we consider real-life contexts in a general way, the view that emotional arguments are inherently mistaken is peculiar. It suggests that appeals to sympathy, anger, pity, compassion, disgust, loyalty, love, etc. are irrelevant when we consider arguments to the conclusion that we should think about something (or do something) in a way an arguer has proposed. As Gilbert eloquently says, "an argument can serve many purposes, one of which may be to persuade the opposer by purely logico-rational means to the designated conclusion. It may instead (or as well) be intended to alert one's partner to certain difficulties, concerns, wonderments, anxieties, and so on. Certainly an argument can be intended to persuade, but it also may be intended to irritate, provoke, test, explore, undermine, upstage, hurt, and so on" (1997 p. 45). In many of these situations, we cannot fully understand an argument without recognizing it as an instance of Gilbert's emotional mode.

I call the emotional mode a "mode of rationality" because it connects reason and rationality to emotion. In one fell swoop, this undermines a fundamental distinction that has characterized the study of argument for thousands of years. It is hard to overstate the significance of the move in this direction. In this essay, the important question is the relationship between this move and multimodal modes of arguing. I would summarize it by saying that the multimodal modes are, in many cases, instances of arguing which must be understood and assessed as emotional arguments.

The distinction between the emotional mode and multimodal modes can best be understood by recognizing the latter as "material" modes defined *in terms of the materials that arguers use when they perform an act of arguing*. According to the traditional view, the constituent materials from which arguments are constructed are propositions and sentences that refer to them. This makes the construction of an argument the assembly of a sequence of propositions. The multimodal modes expand the materials from which arguments are made so that they include non-verbal phenomena – instances of seeing, non-verbal sounds, pictures, smells, experi-

ences of some sort, and so on. In the latter cases, the role traditionally played by verbal claims can be played by pictures, gestures, music, some sequence of sounds, and other non-verbal entities. The result is acts of arguing in which non-verbal visual, auditory, olfactory, etc. entities play the role of premises and conclusions.

Looked at from this point of view, multimodal modes are material modes used to construct arguments in different ways. In contrast, the logical and emotional modes are broader modes of rationality which dictate how arguments should be assessed – by logical or emotional criteria. Visual arguments which are instances of the logical mode are used in science, in cases in which visual evidence is used to prove some empirical hypothesis (and must, in view of this, meet the demands of scientific proof). In other cases, visual arguments are better described as instances of the emotional mode, and are used to convey or elicit emotions in some important way. The aim of a photographic essay on the plight of migrants may be an empathetic response that convinces viewers that they should help their cause. Images of this sort (conveyed in photographs or videos or virtual reality productions) are often used in acts of arguing because they have a powerful emotional impact. Advertising and political campaigning are argumentation genres which exploit (positively and negatively) visuals in this way.

Sometimes commentators on emotional argument write as though the emotional mode is a material mode, suggesting that emotions are the material from which emotional arguments are constructed. While they are in some way the fount that gives rise to emotional arguments, this way of speaking is misleading. For emotions are internal, private mental states that cannot be used to *convey* an emotional argument. The material emotional arguments consist of is not emotions themselves, but *expressions* of emotion which others can observe. In the case of Professor Tome and Paula, it is Paula's verbal remarks and, equally importantly, her tears, facial expressions, and shaky voice.

In interpersonal arguing, the importance of non-verbal modes in emotional arguments is evident in visual and auditory cues which purposefully or instinctively convey or elicit emotions. As many of Gilbert's examples demonstrate, this may include raised eyebrows and the rolling of one's eyes, an angry look, an enthusiastic

thumbs up, sobs and tears, laughter, a sarcastic tone of voice, and so on. As Gilbert himself points out repeatedly, one of the problems with the traditional approach to argument is the way it overlooks these elements of exchange, for “the emphasis is invariably on verbal reasoning as the core of the process. Beyond that, non-verbal communication or contextual ramifications tend to be included only insofar as they are linguistically explicable.” (1997, p. 76). In contrast, multimodal analysis makes such elements a key part of argument analysis, in some cases recognizing them as the most important components of an argument.

4. Material modes: Visceral arguments and multimodal modes

I have classified the logical and emotional modes as modes of rationality. Both are relevant to the analysis of multimodal arguments that employ nonverbal (and, of course, verbal) modes of arguing. The connection between multi-modal and multimodal modes is even stronger in the case of Gilbert’s visceral mode, for it is a material mode which can be included within the collection of multimodal modes that have been identified and studied. Its identifying feature is physical action which is the material content of an act of arguing that produces an argument in favour of some point of view.

In this case it may be useful to begin with an example I have previously used in discussions of visual argument. It occurred in a situation in which I was sceptical of one of my children’s claims that he could juggle four balls. He responded by taking four oranges and (proudly) juggling them in front of me. No words were ever spoken, but this was a classic case of arguing—his physical actions functioning as a response to our disagreement, in a way that provided evidence for the claim that he could juggle as he claimed. It is notable that his argument provided compelling (essentially, definitive) evidence that his boast was true. This evidence was not provided in words and sentences, but via a physical action which more convincingly proved what he could do. The result was a convincing visceral argument in which a non-verbal physical action successfully supported a conclusion. As Gilbert says of these kinds of situations more generally, “in an argument

over who is the faster runner, swiftest swimmer or strongest person, the evidence ‘speaks for itself,’ and does so physically” (1997, p. 86).

In the literature on multimodal arguments, visceral arguments (and gestural arguments, which can be understood as instances of the visceral mode) have often been treated as visual arguments. For there are many cases in which it is what one *sees* when one views a physical action that provides a compelling reason to accept a conclusion. Such arguments are both visual and visceral. In many cases, they can also be classified as instances of the logical mode of arguing which provide compelling logical evidence for a conclusion.

In other cases, visceral arguments are instances of other multimodal modes at the same time that they are instances of the emotional mode of rationality. Gilbert’s own discussion suggests some cases of this sort. Consider, to take a plausible scenario, a situation in which we feel (literally and emotionally) someone touching us in a way that is meant to convince us that they love and support us at some difficult time. In this case, an action is appropriately described as a visceral argument, a tactile argument, and an emotional argument. As is often the case, this illustrates how different modes of arguing often overlap.

We employ a visceral argument which is an instance of the logical mode and the tactile mode when we conclude that a role of silk is of extraordinary quality by touching it and feeling its silky smoothness. This is important visceral reasoning which has, for thousands of years, played an essential role in the silk trade. It continues to do so.

Musical auditions are another venue for visceral arguments. In a particular case, a trombone player playing for the judges aims to prove that he or she can play well enough to join a band or symphony. The extent to which their demonstration is convincing depends on what one hears when they play, making this a visceral argument which can also be classified as an instance of the auditory (and musical) modes of arguing.

Outside the discussion of Gilbert’s multi-modal theory, visceral arguments have not been well studied as a class of argument. This is unfortunate. In this essay, it will suffice to say that current dis-

cussions can and should be extended in this way (a good place to start is with the kinds of insights Claudio Duran shares in his contribution to this special issue). Their intersection with other kinds of material modes—verbal and non-verbal—is one topic that merits our attention. As Gilbert notes, there is something true and profound buried in the common notion that actions speak louder than words.

5. The kisceral mode

As Christopher Tindale notes in his contribution to this issue, Gilbert's kisceral mode of argument is the most controversial multi-modal mode. This is not evident in attempts to controvert it, but in the way that argumentation theorists have treated it as "unworthy of scholarly discussion"—possibly "deterred by examples of hunches and intuitions" (or, ironically, their *own* hunches and intuitions).

Like the emotional mode, I will classify the kisceral mode as a mode of rationality rather than a material mode. As Tindale points out, the intuitions or other convincing mental states that they are founded on are private mental states. In view of this, public kisceral arguments are not made up of these states, but of reports that describe them. While this raises difficult epistemological questions I cannot address, I agree with Tindale—that the kisceral mode is a common form of argumentation in real-life arguing. It frequently arises in ordinary contexts—when we rely on vague feelings to direct beliefs (to decide whether we should move to Portugal, retire early, spend a certain amount of money on a house, etc.). And in extraordinary contexts—when mystical experiences, premonitions, dreams, etc. guide our thinking (as they guided Socrates and were a basis for his beliefs).

In a discussion of modes, it is notable that the fundamental convictions that have guided the development of philosophy, logic, ethics, aesthetics and epistemology are not premised on arguments that are instances of the logical mode (and are better described by William James as "dumb" convictions). One has to begin building one's beliefs and point of view from somewhere. In practice that means one has to begin with convictions that are not

justified in this way. This is, in many ways, the lesson we learn from ancient scepticism.

As Gilbert and Tindale both point out, the major challenge the kisceral mode poses is the question of how to distinguish strong kisceral arguments from weak ones. I must leave the epistemological issues this raises to them. In a discussion of modes, the important point is that the kisceral mode of arguing is frequently appealed to in circumstances in which it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to establish what to believe or do through other modes of argumentation. This is an important point in the case of multimodal modes, for non-verbal modes of thinking – employing visuals, sounds, and experiences of many sorts – play an important role in many instances of kisceral arguing. This can usefully explain how visual art, music and other forms of non-verbal expression inform us. To take just one example, it may be Emily Carr’s haunting paintings of the British Columbia forests (or the totem poles she features in paintings of traditional Indigenous villages)—or our experiences walking through such forests – that are the basis of a difficult-to-explain kisceral recognition of the importance of these forests and the flora and fauna they sustain.

Multimodal modes are especially important in this context, for our need to turn to kisceral arguments frequently arises when we bump into the limits of language and it is unable to capture reality in words (and logical arguments). In such situations, non-verbal visual, auditory, olfactory, taste, etc. modes of arguing may help us capture and convey what we cannot fully capture in words. As is the case with Gilbert’s other modes of rationality, this suggests an important way in which multimodal modes of arguing complement his multi-modal theory.

6. Some concluding remarks

I have understood Gilbert’s multi-modal theory as a theory that proposes three modes of rationality – the logical, the emotional, and the kisceral. I believe that the expanded notion of arguing they imply is a ground-breaking step toward a more comprehensive account of reasoning and rationality. I have argued that Gilbert’s fourth mode—the visceral—is a material mode that can itself be

treated as a multimodal mode of arguing which overlaps with many other modes of this sort.

I think that the best word to use to describe the relationship between the non-verbal material modes and Gilbert's modes is "synergy." From a Gilbertian point of view, the latter are important because instances of the emotional and kisceral modes are frequently tied to multimodal modes of arguing. As he repeatedly notes, following Charles Willard (1981), an understanding of the (disruptive) elements of rationality he recognizes must recognize non-discursive, non-verbal elements of argument which argumentation theory has persistently resisted.

Today, it can be said that argumentation theory contains a significant exception to the standard refusal to take such elements seriously. It is found in theories of multimodal argument – theories which have gone where traditional accounts of argument refused to go, recognizing non-discursive modes of arguing that must play a key role in our understanding, analysis, and assessment of real-life instances of argument.³

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³ In this paper I have tried to respond to Gilbert's multi-modal theory in a general way that situates it within general trends evident in informal logic and the theory of argument. It goes without saying that there are many more specific aspects of his views that warrant comment (and argument). In particular, I would point to his remarks on argument assessment, and the issues that modes of arguing raise in this regard. But that is a matter for discussion that I must leave for elsewhere.

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