

# On the norms of visual argument: A case for normative non-revisionism

DAVID GODDEN

*Department of Philosophy  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan  
U.S.A. 48824  
Email: [dgodden@msu.edu](mailto:dgodden@msu.edu)  
[www.davidgodden.ca](http://www.davidgodden.ca)*

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**ABSTRACT:** Visual arguments can seem to require unique, autonomous evaluative norms, since their content seems irreducible to, and incommensurable with, that of verbal arguments. Yet, assertions of the ineffability of the visual, or of visual-verbal incommensurability, seem to preclude counting putatively irreducible visual content as functioning argumentatively. By distinguishing two notions of content, informational and argumentative, I contend that arguments differing in informational content can have equivalent argumentative content, allowing the same argumentative norms to be rightly applied in their evaluation.

**KEYWORDS:** argument appraisal, argumentative content, autonomy thesis, entitlement preserving inference, incommensurability, information, normative independence of the visual, normative revisionism, normative non-revisionism, visual argument, visual-verbal evaluative equivalence, visual-verbal incommensurability

## 1 Introduction

In our increasingly information-saturated environments, people are constantly subjected to persuasive forces—predominately these are visual in nature. Although few would deny that images have persuasive force, affecting our beliefs and influencing our decisions, quite a different question concerns whether pictures persuade rationally—by offering reasons. To date, the locus of debate about visual arguments has focused on the theoretical question of whether images are, or can be, arguments. Yet, from a normative perspective, a far more important question concerns how the persuasive operation of images ought to be evaluated.

This paper assumes that there are visual arguments.<sup>1</sup> I don't take this assumption to

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<sup>1</sup> Following Dove (2011: 4) I will take a visual argument to be “any argument in which at least one of the elements is conveyed visually” (cf. Blair 2015: 218). As such, included in the category of visual arguments,

be controversial, despite the long-standing debate between visionaries (innovators) and enthusiasts (early adopters) (e.g., Groarke) on the one hand, and skeptics (or laggards) (e.g., Johnson) on the other.<sup>2</sup> While it may turn out that there are far fewer visual arguments than the enthusiasts would have us admit, or perhaps that the cases are far less interesting—a Venn diagram rather than a salacious advertisement or scandalous political cartoon—I don’t take it to be a far stretch to say that there are at least some visual arguments.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps interpreting some images as arguments strains credulity; yet in other cases it seems both entirely plausible and eminently practical. Certainly they are not impossible. That said, I do not want to argue about particular examples, and I definitely don’t want to worry about how to properly ‘read,’ ‘interpret,’ or ‘analyze’ visual images as arguments. I am willing to grant that there might be special interpretative tools (concepts, theories, or methods) required in order to properly *extract* (Dove 2013a: 14) the argumentative content of visual arguments. And, whatever these turn out to be, they are not the topic of the present paper.

So, assume there are visual arguments and we have a suitable way to identify and extract their argumentative content. More important than the question of whether there are visual arguments, it seems to me, is the question of why should we care? What does it matter whether or not there are visual arguments? Besides the obvious point about how we should approach or treat visual media, there is another point about the normative significance of visual arguments. Does the existence of visual arguments require the revision of our normative theories, methods, criteria, or standards? (I will use expressions like “ways of argument appraisal” and “evaluative ways” to refer collectively to the theories, methods, criteria, and standards of argument appraisal, broadly understood.) As I see things, this is the most important theoretical issue arising from the debate over the existence visual arguments. On the one hand, the existence of visual arguments would be normatively significant if it called for any revision of our existing ways of argument appraisal. On the other hand, if the existence of visual arguments does not require any revision of our evaluative ways, then considerably less hangs on the question of whether there are any.

The present paper offers three main contributions to the theory of visual argumentation and its appraisal, in addition to the position it argues for in conclusion. Following some working assumptions I articulate in section 2, in sections 3 and 4 I make two distinctions that together map out a range of positions one might take on the evaluation of visual arguments. The first distinction, between *normative revisionism* and

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as they are discussed in the paper, are arguments of mixed-modality, or multimodal arguments, where at least one of the elements of the argument is conveyed visually.

<sup>2</sup> Here I employ, with a neutral connotation, the language of the “innovation lifecycle”—a sociological model intended to map the adoption of some change (frequently technological) within some group. The model, known as the *diffusion process* (Bohlen and Beal 1957; Beal, Rogers and Bohlen 1957; Rogers 1962), postulates that the acceptance of some change, or the adoption of some innovation, within a population typically occurs according to a normal distribution that can be divided into the following rough groups in order of adoption: enthusiasts (innovators), visionaries (early adopters), pragmatists (early majority), conservatives (late majority), and skeptics (laggards). Here I adapt the use of these terms to group argumentation theorists according to their relative acceptance of visual arguments.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for a proof that there are visual arguments.

*non-revisionism* concerns the aptness, or fitness, of our existing ways of argument appraisal for evaluating visual arguments. The second distinction, between *evaluative equivalence* and *non-equivalence*, concerns whether content-equivalent arguments presented in different modes should receive the same rational evaluation. Having made this survey of the theoretical terrain, I proceed to the critical section of the paper, which provides the second contribution to the theory of visual argumentation. In section 5 I argue that our commonsense intuitions about the differences between visual and verbal arguments do not tend to support inclinations towards revisionism or even non-equivalence. In sections 6 and 7 I provide refutations of two views that can inform normative revisionism: first, that visual and verbal arguments are incommensurable, and second that visual arguments have ineffable yet argumentatively relevant content. These refutations occasion the third main contribution of the paper, in section 8, where I offer a neutral account of argumentative content, analyzed in terms of information, that explains the differences between visual and verbal arguments while retaining their descriptive and normative commensurability. The central idea here is that arguments can have different informational content and yet have the same argumentative content. These three contributions open the conceptual and theoretical space to articulate a position of normative non-revisionism that nevertheless allows for an evaluative non-equivalence, such that the mode of presentation of an argument can make a difference to the rational evaluation it should receive. The paper concludes, in section 9, by drawing out the consequences of the position of the paper for the analysis and evaluation of visual arguments. If the visual elements of visual arguments are informational in nature, they are neither incommensurable with the verbal nor are they intrinsically ineffable. As such, visual and verbal arguments can be compared and potentially equated with respect to their argumentative content. The falsity of a universal visual-verbal content non-equivalence entails the falsity of normative revisionism. Yet, normative non-revisionism leaves open the possibility of an evaluative non-equivalence between content-equivalent visual and verbal arguments, and prescribes a method for determining whether the presentational mode of an argument can make a difference to the rational evaluation it should receive.

## **2 Preliminary matters: Some working assumptions about arguments and norms**

Before addressing the topic of visual arguments and their proper norms, I want to clear a bit of space in which to work. To do so, I will set out two assumptions about arguments and norms that inform the work to follow. Though I motivate these claims, I will presume their acceptability. While I don't find these assumptions to be objectionable, I recognize that, like the assumption that there are visual arguments, they may be controversial and not universally shared. As such, they may be taken to demarcate the theoretical space in which I wish to work. The two assumptions are: (i) *the rational nature of argument*, and (ii) *the rational appraisal of argument*.

## 2.1 *The rational nature of argument*

Minimally, argumentation has three ontological constituents: “actors (arguers and audiences), arguments (the things that are transacted between arguers and their audiences), and arguing[s] (the activities by which arguments are transacted)” (Godden, 2015c). Without taking a position on the ontological or conceptual priority of these items, it might be granted that the natural, causal order is that arguers, in the process of arguing, offer one another arguments. This paper will focus on those offerings—i.e., arguments as products, understanding argument products as artefactual types that can be instantiated on different, situationally specific, occasions, typically in the course of some extended event which, in turn, is understood as an instance of a broadly defined activity type—arguing.

There has been some debate concerning how arguments are to be defined or identified, as though the matter as to whether there are any visual arguments could be settled by terminological fiat (e.g., Johnson 2003; Roque 2009, 2012). While I think that this way of construing the nature of the debate is mistaken and misleading (cf. Blair 2004: 45; Groarke 2007), it reveals what I find to be an important truth. As Johnson (2003: 10) has put it: “of course, not everything is an argument.” If everything ends up counting as an argument, then the concept is vacuous. For the category of argument to be useful it must distinguish those things that are arguments from those that are not.

For example, Flemming (1996: 11) considers a number of conceptions of argument, such as Hesse’s (1992) “any discourse which is productive of belief,” and Willard’s (1989: 109) “interaction around incompatibility,” that I consider to be manifestly inadequate. Not all disagreements involve argument, and not all discursive means of influencing beliefs or behavior are argumentative (cf. Blair 1996: 23; 2004: 42-43). Contrariwise, arguments (either 1 or 2) (O’Keefe 1977) needn’t be occasioned by, or even involve, any disagreement, nor need they result in any changes in our cognitive comportment (Godden 2010), and (perhaps more controversially) nor need they occur discursively—at least insofar as that means “by communication of thought by words, talk, or conversation.”<sup>4</sup>

What, then, are the distinguishing features of arguments? One of them is that arguments necessarily involve or employ reasons, a claim that I will identify as *the rational nature of argument*.

### *The rational nature of argument*

Arguments (whatever else they are or do, and however they are presented) necessarily involve (contain, express, or convey) reasons.

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<sup>4</sup> On this last point, consider, for example, the following silent exchange between two parties, Pro and Resp.

Pro: points to Resp and then to the door

Resp: shakes his head and raises his hands, palms-up, in an upward, shrugging motion

Pro: points to her watch

Resp: raises an eyebrow and shrugs again

Pro: holds up a pair of tickets from the mantle

Resp: smacks forehead with palm, grabs the tickets from Pro and rushes to the door.

Whatever arguments are (in the first instance), be they communicative acts or meaningful artifacts, one of the things that distinguishes arguments from other acts and artifacts is that arguments contain or express reasons. As Blair wrote:

If you use the word *argument* in a different way, so that it is not tied down to reason having and reason giving ... then you lose contact not only with argumentation scholarship but also with the way the concept of argument has functioned historically and the way it works in standard English, or in any corresponding language. You are then really talking about something different from argument in anything but a stipulated sense of the concept. (Blair 2004: 45)

Reasons, in turn, are offered in support of claims, such that arguments are claim-reason complexes (Willard 1989: 77). (As should become clear later, I do not find this essential characteristic of argument either to require, or even to privilege, a verbal conception of claims or reasons.)

Whatever the uses to which arguments can be put, the means by which arguments—as opposed to anything else—accomplish those ends is by way of reasons. As such, I take the rational nature of argument to be a structural thesis that is functionally neutral. That is, I do not take it to depend on, but instead to allow for, any particular purpose or end to which arguments can be put. No matter whether an argument functions to manage a disagreement, assess the rational acceptability of a standpoint, ascertain truth or knowledge, or persuade an audience—whatever the goal of argumentation, arguments approach and potentially achieve this goal by way of reasons.

Finally, whatever the manner by which arguments may be presented, expressed or recorded, what is so presented, expressed or recorded must include reasons. If reasons are not among *what* is presented, then—no matter *how* it is presented—it is not an argument. The methodological focus of argument identification, then, must include a search for reasons and the claims they purportedly support. If this is correct, then viewing images as arguments requires understanding images as conveying reasons.

## 2.2 *Argument appraisal as the rational evaluation of argument*

It should be granted that there are a variety of ways that anything, arguments included, can be evaluated. Arguments can be evaluated aesthetically or morally, for example. More relevantly to our purposes, arguments can be evaluated rhetorically, where a rhetorical appraisal could include evaluating arguments according to their effectiveness in persuading, or gaining the adherence of, an audience.

One dimension of a rhetorical evaluation of *argument*—as opposed to the rhetorical evaluation of non-argument—involves evaluating the efficaciousness of the argument in gaining the adherence of an audience *by means of reasons*. If an argument is used to brow-beat an audience into acquiescence, or brainwash them by repetition, then persuasion is not achieved *by argumentative means*, and it is not the rhetorical effectiveness *of the argument* that is being evaluated. Instead, the rhetorical effectiveness of brow beating or repetition should be evaluated. To be persuaded by a reason is to base one's acceptance of a claim or conclusion on the reason such that there is a justificatory and explanatory relationship between one's acceptance of the reason and one's

acceptance of the claim. Indeed, this idea of basing our beliefs on reasons is at the very core of our notion of rationality (Godden 2014, 2015a). Siegel (1988: 32) puts it this way: “To be a rational person is to believe and act on the basis of reasons” (cf. Brown 1988: 38; Siegel 2004: 598).

Next it must be recognized that the persuasiveness, or force, of reasons occurs in at least two dimensions that are not equivalent. First there is a descriptive dimension: is the audience persuaded by the reason? Second is a normative dimension: ought the audience to be persuaded by the reason? These are manifestly different, since there can be clear cases where the audience was persuaded yet they ought not to have been, and others where they ought to have been persuaded but weren’t. So there is no necessary or causal connection between the two dimensions of a reason’s persuasiveness or force. To preserve this distinction, we might call an argument that ought to be persuasive to some audience a *cogent* argument.

I use “cogent” to mean *well-reasoned*. A cogent argument meets some situationally appropriate standard of reason-giving. Cogency is generally analyzed as premise acceptability, relevance, and inferential sufficiency, where sufficiency is understood to include dialectal adequacy such that an argument’s primary reasons (1) outweigh countervailing considerations and (2) withstand or answer objections (Johnson and Blair 1994; Govier 2005: 63-76). For present purposes this can be understood as equivalent to Blair’s standard of probative goodness, which he defines as follows:

An argument will be probatively good just when the person or group to whom it is addressed, or who ascribe it, justifiably endorses its reasons and those reasons are good reasons for them to endorse the contention alleged or taken to be thus supported (with whatever qualifications are attached). (Blair 2015: 218)

The question now is, when evaluating an argument, with what dimension of persuasion should we be concerned? From the audience’s perspective, the answer to this question seems clear. As audience, I should be concerned with whether I ought to be persuaded by the reasons in the argument. I should want to avoid being persuaded by things that ought not to persuade me, just as I should want to be persuaded by those things that ought to persuade me. Thus, as audience, my evaluative interest should be in the normative dimension of persuasion and thereby with the cogency of argument. More generally, I should want to be *rational*—I should want to be persuaded always and only by those things that ought to persuade me. That is to say, *I should want to rightly respond to the reasons given in the argument*.

What is it to rightly respond to reasons? Siegel (1997: 2) explains it this way: “to say that one is appropriately moved by reasons is to say that one believes, judges, and acts in accordance with the probative force with which one’s reasons support one’s beliefs, judgments and actions.” Thus, insofar as my aim is to be rational, I should strive for an *evidence proportionalism* such that my degree of commitment to my beliefs accords with the probative strength of the reasons I have for them (Engel 2000: 3; Godden 2014, 2015a; Pinto 2006: 287). Thus, the evaluation of arguments involves assessing the probative or rational support claims are provided with by reasons, a thesis I will identify as the *rational appraisal of argument*.

*Rational appraisal of argument*

The evaluation of argument involves assessing the probative or rational support claims are provided with by reasons.

Now the question is: how, and by what standards, ought this to be done?

**3 Ways of argument evaluation: Revisionism and non-revisionism**

Examining the literature, it would seem that there can be at least two schools of thought concerning the evaluation of visual arguments. *Normative non-revisionism* claims that visual arguments can be properly assessed using existing (or at least non-specialized) ways of evaluation. *Normative revisionism*, by contrast, claims that visual arguments require their own evaluative ways, often on the grounds that visual arguments are incommensurable with, or inexpressible as, non-visual ones.

*Normative revisionism (NR)*

Visual arguments require their own evaluative ways.

That is, visual arguments require their own normative theories, methods, criteria, or standards of evaluation. The negative aspect of normative revisionism involves the rejection of existing evaluative ways, which properly apply only to non-visual, specifically verbal, arguments. Normative non-revisionism, by contrast, claims that our existing ways of appraising arguments work for visual arguments also.

*Normative non-revisionism (NNR)*

Visual arguments do not require their own evaluative ways.

That is, visual arguments can be properly appraised using existing, non-specialized theories, methods, criteria, and standards of argument evaluation.

*3.1 Normative non-revisionists*

Groarke and Blair each countenance visual arguments. Groarke, an innovator and enthusiast, wrote that “Argumentation theorists need to develop a theory of visual argument because there are many arguments that cannot be understood, much less assessed, if we ignore the visual elements they contain” (Groarke 2003: 1). By the same token, when describing the means of assessment Groarke’s position is clearly conservative.

In making the case for the existence of visual arguments, Groarke (1996: 107) claimed that visual images are not mere instruments of (irrational) persuasion, but that they can indeed be instruments of (rational) convincing—and hence properly belong to the study of argument. Among the four reasons he offered for this claim, the fourth is:

Visual arguments can ... contain a premise-conclusion structure which is amenable to standard forms of argument analysis. Visual arguments can, therefore, be judged by

common standards of reasoned convincing, and in this way transcend the bounds of mere persuasion. (Groarke 1996: 107)

Groarke (1996: 108) went on to identify the chief impediment to understanding images as arguments as “a failure to adapt logical tools to visual contexts rather than the inherent nature of visual images.”<sup>5</sup>

Later in the same article, Groarke (1996: 114) proceeded to recommend a procedure for the evaluation of visual argument that is worth quoting in its entirety.

Once we have identified the structure of simple and extended visual arguments we can assess them by applying well-established theories of argument developed by logicians, rhetoricians and pragma-dialecticians. Among other things, these theories raise the questions:

1. whether a visual argument’s premises are acceptable;
2. whether a visual argument’s conclusion follows, deductively or inductively, from its premises;
3. whether a visual argument is appropriate or effective in the context of a particular audience or a particular kind of dialogue; and
4. whether a visual argument contains a fallacy or conforms to some standard pattern of reasoning (argument by analogy, straw man reasoning, *modus ponens*, and so on).

The application of such standards can profoundly change the way we look at many visual images, for it allows us to respond to them with something more than aesthetic appreciation, laughter or disdain. Much more appropriately, we can recognize visual arguments as moves in argumentative exchange and respond with the kinds of critical analysis arguments require. (Groarke 1996: 114)

Notice that Groarke’s evaluative procedure could just as easily apply to non-visual arguments merely by removing the word “visual” from each of the numbered steps. Indeed, Groarke’s assessment procedure for visual arguments explicitly recommends “applying well-established theories of argument developed by logicians, rhetoricians and pragma-dialecticians” (cf. Groarke 2002: 148). For example, in their textbook *Good Reasoning Matters!*, Groarke and Tindale (2012) apply argument schemes (Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008) to visual arguments when illustrating the schematic analysis and appraisal of arguments.

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<sup>5</sup> Birdsell and Groarke (1996: 9) identified a series of tasks that must be met by any theory of visual argument:

any account of visual argument must identify how we can (a) identify the internal elements of a visual image (b) understand the contexts in which images are interpreted (c) establish the consistency of an interpretation of the visual, and (d) chart changes in visual perspectives over time.

Importantly, all of these are interpretative tasks relating to the identification and analysis of images, rather than anything related to their evaluation as arguments. Nor were any such items added in their revised agenda (Birdsell and Groarke 2007). It would seem, then, that Birdsell and Groarke found the evaluative apparatus to be already in place.



Blair (1996, 2004, 2015) adopts a similar position.<sup>6</sup> While Blair is certainly an early adopter, his tone seems to be more that of the pragmatist. “Argument in the traditional sense,” he wrote (2004: 59), “can readily be visual.” Though on the question of assessment, Blair’s position, like Groarke’s, is conservative. Again, it is worth quoting Blair at length.

[T]hey [visual arguments] seem not to constitute a radically different kind of argument from verbal ones. ... [T]heir existence presents no theoretical challenge to the standard sorts of verbal argument analysis. They are easily assimilated to the paradigm model of verbal argument characterized by O’Keefe’s concept of argument.<sup>1</sup> (Blair 1996: 34)

More recently, Blair (2015) has published a “preliminary and exploratory” case study advocating normative non-revisionism. There (219) he asks the question “When one assesses the probative merits of visual arguments, are the criteria used for purely verbal arguments readily employed?” By considering four plausible examples of mixed-mode visual argumentation, Blair (231, 232) argues that “the visual properties of these arguments do not require different criteria or standards to assess their probative cogency,” and “the criteria for the logical cogency of verbal arguments are applicable to these ... visual arguments without modification.” Blair describes the way in which he appraised the visual arguments in his sample as follows. First, some interpretation, or “referring description,” was supplied for the visual arguments to serve as a “placeholder” for the visual argument itself (220). Then, of each interpretation, Blair (221) asked “does this argument make a probatively good case for its conclusion?” In describing how he answered this question for the different interpretations of his third example, Blair writes:

the criteria applied in judging the probative merits of the two arguments issuing from the different interpretations appear to be no different from those that would be applied to a verbal argument. Are the premises acceptable? Do they serve to justify the conclusion? Are there objections either to the premises or to the inference that would refute them unless successfully countered? Are there, independently, objections to the conclusion that would refute it unless successfully countered? (Blair 2015: 231)

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Blair (2015) agrees (at least in part) with my reading of Groarke as a normative non-revisionist. He (2015: 219) writes:

Groarke, in (1996: 114), argued that visual arguments can be held to the same standards as verbal arguments. At the time, ... his point was that there is no need for special dispensation for visual arguments—that no different standards are needed to admit visual arguments into the fold. ... In today’s light, Groarke’s point can be seen as asserting that the probative standards (or criteria) that apply to verbal arguments may be applied equally to visual arguments, but not as denying that there might also be other probative standards that are unique to visual arguments.

In the last phrase, Blair leaves open the possibility of a normative revisionism in Groarke’s position, saying that Groarke’s position does not commit Groarke to denying the possibility of probative standards unique to visual arguments.

While Blair's account explicitly allows that different interpretations of some visual argument may result in different assessments, the *way* in which those assessments are arrived at does not change.

Amalgamating these two positions, the general, non-revisionist view seems to be that visual arguments are not radically different in kind from non-visual arguments, and that, while some special tools and techniques might be required to interpret images for their argumentative content, no special norms or methods of evaluation are required to properly assess images as arguments. As Blair (2015: 233) writes "there is no distinctive visual logic."

### *3.2 Normative revisionists*

Contrast this kind of view with that of normative revisionism. Though I'm not entirely sure that there actually are any normative revisionists, there are several clear articulations of what such a position might be. The first of these is found in Johnson's autonomy thesis, and a second can be extrapolated from Gilbert's multi-modal argumentation.

#### *3.2.1 Johnson's autonomy thesis*

A first revisionist position can be found in the recent work of Johnson, who might well be among the more skeptical concerning the existence of visual arguments (2003).

In 2010, and in an effort to characterize another's views, Johnson articulated something he called the *autonomy thesis*, which he defined as follows:

##### *Autonomy thesis*

"Visual argument is a distinct and autonomous type of argument, and is not to be treated as an extension of verbal argument." (Johnson 2010: 2)<sup>7</sup>

Roughly, the autonomy thesis asserts the irreducibility of visual to verbal argument.

Importantly, Johnson claims that a consequence of the autonomy thesis is the normative independence of the visual, writing:

it seems to me to follow from this view [i.e., the autonomy thesis] that there are, or should be, distinctive criteria for the evaluation of visual argument; these criteria should not be transported over and adapted from the realm of verbal argumentation. (Johnson 2010: 5)

This gives us the normative independence of the visual which, following Johnson, might be articulated as follows:

##### *Normative independence of the visual*

There are distinctive criteria for the evaluation of visual argument that are independent of, and not reducible to, evaluative criteria for non-visual argument.

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<sup>7</sup> The source (Johnson 2010) is an unpublished conference paper that the author has graciously made available to me and permitted me to quote from.

This thesis entails normative revisionism, since our existing, non-specialized evaluative ways cannot properly be applied to visual arguments.

### 3.2.2. *Gilbert's multi-modal argumentation*

A second revisionist position would be one that takes Gilbert's (1994, 1997) multi-modal approach to argumentation (or some adaptation thereof) and which also counts the visual as a distinct mode of argument.<sup>8</sup>

A multi-modal approach to argumentation can be understood by beginning from the observation that the same informational content can be expressed in a variety of different ways (Gilbert 1997: 80-88; cf. Godden 2004: 224). Yet, Gilbert observes, in argumentation we respond not merely to *what* is said, but also to *how* it is said. Hence, communicative units are messages, where a message is a combination of informational content and presentational manner. Since the same content, presented differently, can have different rhetorical effects, not only is it worth incorporating these different presentational manners into theories of argument, but different presentational manners are not reducible to each other. Different modes of argument correspond to these different manners of presentation. When distinguishing different modes one from the next, it is not the content but the manner in which the content is presented that does the work.<sup>9</sup>

An important and controversial consequence of the multi-modal thesis is normative pluralism (Godden 2004: 225). Since content is *modal* (i.e., indexed to mode), all of the normatively significant components of arguments (such as claim, data, warrant, and backing) are similarly modal (Gilbert 1997: 80). Because the normative components of arguments are modal, Gilbert argued, so too are the normative properties of arguments. Since modes are categories of, for instance, kinds of backing and “[b]acking contains within it rules of conduct, procedure and argument ... [then w]hen a different mode of backing is the appropriate one, different rules and different forms of argument are relevant” (Gilbert 1997: 92). Standard evaluative criteria such as relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability are set internally to a particular mode. On the multi-modal view, the content of standards of argument “are delineated not by their internal characteristics, but by the mode in which they operate. In other words, each of the modes can define, for itself, relevance, sufficiency and acceptability” (Gilbert 1997: 97).

Working from the normative pluralism consequence of a multi-modal approach to argument, one need only add the claim that the visual is a distinct mode of argument to derive the normative independence of the visual. Although Gilbert himself has not taken this step, the kinds of reasons he offers to distinguish different modes seem to apply equally well to the visual. The same informational content can be expressed visually and sententially, and there may well be different rhetorical effects depending on how the content is presented. Hence, the visual can be seen as a distinct presentational mode.

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<sup>8</sup> Gilbert's (1994, 1997) work on multi-modal argumentation does not take a position on whether the visual counts as a mode of argument. Recent correspondence confirms that, while multi-modal argumentation is intended to be open to such a possibility, Gilbert has not taken a position on this question.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix B for a brief discussion of the nature of argument modality.

Initially, and as a heuristic, Gilbert identified four argumentative modes: logical, emotional, visceral (physical), and kisceral (intuitive) (Gilbert 1997: 75).<sup>10</sup> Insofar as I have the multi-modal thesis correct, the norms governing each of these modes are independent from the norms of other modes. Thus, if the visual qualifies as a presentational mode, then the normative independence of the visual follows as a consequence of Gilbert’s multi-modal approach to argumentation.

#### 4 Visual argument evaluation: Equivalence and non-equivalence

The question of normative revisionism concerns what I have called the proper *way* to appraise argument. A related but different question concerns the proper *result* of argument appraisal. In a sense, both questions concern *how* visual arguments should be appraised. Yet they are quite different. The former concerns the *ways* of appraisal—the *means* by which, and *tools* with which, appraisal (understood as an *activity*) should be conducted. The latter, by contrast, concerns *what* appraisal (understood as a *judgment*, or the *result of the activity of appraisal*) the argument should receive. Assuming for a moment that the same argument can be presented both visually and non-visually (say, verbally), can the presentational mode of the argument make a difference to the evaluation it should receive?<sup>11</sup> Non-equivalentists say “yes,” while equivalentists answer “no.”

The thesis of evaluative equivalence claims that the modal presentation of an argument makes no difference to the evaluation it should receive. So long as the content of any two arguments is the same, they should receive the same evaluation, regardless of how (the mode or manner by which) they are presented, *ceteris paribus*.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, that an argument presented one way (say, verbally) receives some particular evaluation (say, cogent or sound) entails that, *ceteris paribus*, the same argument presented another way (say, visually) should receive the same evaluation. Call this the thesis of *trans-modal evaluative equivalence*, and define it as follows:

*Trans-modal evaluative equivalence (EE)*

The same content-defined argument, no matter how it is presented, should receive the same rational or probative evaluation, *ceteris paribus*.

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<sup>10</sup> In identifying these as modes, Gilbert applies the concept of modality differently from the way it is applied in media, communication, and visual studies, where “mode” denotes a form of expression, and where, e.g., emotional and intuitive would not be considered modes.

<sup>11</sup> The question of whether the same argument can be presented in different modes, say visual and verbal, is discussed later in sections 5, and 8.

<sup>12</sup> Generally, the kinds of things to be held constant include everything but the specific presentational mode, e.g., the argumentative content and facts of the argumentative situation. Recognizing that there are practical limitations on the extent to which such factors can actually be held constant, it is not unreasonable to suppose that controlling for them is practically feasible at least to the extent that one could effectively experimentally test to see whether the modality of an argument made a difference to its rhetorical or probative effect on some audience. And, the limits of the “*ceteris paribus*” constraint cut both ways in the debate between normative equivalentists and normative non-equivalentists. The success of *either* case depends on our being able to hold other factors effectively constant.

The contradictory would then assert the following:

*Trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence (ENE)*

An argument, presented in one mode (e.g., visual) can properly receive a different rational or probative evaluation than the same content-defined argument presented in some other mode (e.g., verbal), *ceteris paribus*.

According to trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence, the presentational mode of an argument can be normatively significant—it can make a difference to the evaluation an argument should receive, even when all other relevant factors are held constant.

This I take to be the controversial sense of evaluative non-equivalence. Evaluative non-equivalence might also result when arguments differ in their argumentative content such that they present different reasons or claims. I take it to be non-controversial that different content-defined arguments can properly receive different evaluations. And, to anticipate a point that will come up later, in cases where content is mode-dependent such that no arguments differing in mode can be content equivalent, trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence would also result.

*4.1 Equivalence and revisionism: Entailments*

Several relations of consequence, inconsistency, and consistency between evaluative (non-)equivalency and normative (non-)revisionism can be specified. First,

- (1) Normative revisionism (NR) entails trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence (ENE).

So long as the evaluation an argument receives is the result of some application of the theories, methods, criteria, and standards of appraisal, then that two arguments cannot be appraised using the same evaluative ways entails they cannot receive the same evaluation. If normative revisionism is true, were some evaluative word (say, “valid” or “cogent”) to occur or be used in different normative theories, they would merely be homonyms, having a different meaning and application in each case. Conversely to (1),

- (2) Trans-modal evaluative equivalence (EE) entails normative non-revisionism (NNR).

Again, so long as the evaluation an argument receives is the result of some application of the theories, methods, criteria, and standards of appraisal, then that two arguments receive the same evaluation entails that they were appraised using the same evaluative ways. For the same reason, and since normative revisionism and non-revisionism are contradictories,

- (3) Trans-modal evaluative equivalence (EE) is inconsistent with normative revisionism (NR).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly,

- (4) Normative non-revisionism (NNR) is consistent with trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence (ENE).

That is, if two instances of same content-defined argument are evaluated by the same theories, methods, and standards, it needn't follow that they receive the same evaluation. Perhaps the manner or presentational mode makes a difference to the probative qualities of the argument, and hence to how those theories, methods, criteria, and standards properly apply to the argument in question. To motivate this point, consider that it is widely recognized that facts about the situation in which an argument is used make a difference to the evaluation it should properly receive. Perhaps the modality of an argument can similarly affect an argument's proper evaluation. (This position is further explored and argued for in the paper's conclusion.)

#### *4.2 Evaluative equivalentists*

The difference between evaluative equivalentists and evaluative non-equivalentists is that the evaluative non-equivalentist holds that the mode in which an argument is presented can make a difference to the evaluation it should receive, *ceteris paribus*. The equivalentist denies this. Although Blair does not articulate the issue in these terms, his (2015) case study can be read as asserting not only normative non-revisionism, but also evaluative equivalence. He writes:

In the four examples studied, the criteria for the logical cogency of verbal arguments are applicable to these static or quasi-dynamic multimodal visual arguments without modification. ... Whether one is entitled to accept the reasons, or whether one is entitled to infer the conclusion, are functions of the nature of the reasons and the inference, not of the mode in which they are expressed or communicated. (Blair 2015: 232)

The first sentence seems to deny that visual arguments require any changes to our evaluative ways, while the second seems to deny that the presentational mode in which a reason is expressed makes any difference to its probative merits.

Having surveyed the variety of positions one might take on the proper evaluation of visual argument, I proceed to consider possible motivations for the views of evaluative non-equivalence and normative revisionism.

## **5 Visual and verbal: Content and evaluation**

### *5.1 An intuition about visual-verbal content non-equivalence*

The kinds of cases that incline us towards revisionism—prompting us to think that reasons work differently in images than they do in words—are, it seems to me, ones where we find that *what is expressed* in the image is somehow different from *what is*

*expressed* with the words.<sup>13</sup> Somehow, the picture says something more, or less, than the sentences which attempt, albeit imperfectly, to capture the expressive content of the image. Or, perhaps the picture somehow fails to capture the full import, with the same degree of precision or evocative force, as the words. And it is on these grounds that the image must be evaluated differently from the set of sentences or collection of utterances.

Intuitions of this kind can be found throughout the literature on visual argumentation, and, interestingly, they appear on all sides of the debate. Skeptics have used these intuitions in support of the idea that visuals cannot be arguments at all, either because of some alleged categorical difference in content or content properties (Flemming 1996; Johnson 2010; Patterson 2010), or because of some putative insurmountable difficulty in specifying the argumentative content of the image (Johnson 2003; Patterson 2010). Enthusiasts, by contrast, have used these intuitions as reasons in favor of something like Johnson’s autonomy thesis and against “verbal repackaging” (Groarke 2013) or “linguistic imperialism” (Roque 2009; Groarke 2009) as a method of interpreting the argumentative content of visuals by “reducing” (Groarke 2007: 139), “translating,” or “converting” (Roque 2009: 5, 6) visual content to verbal content. For example, Blair (2004: 46) identifies, two skeptical reasons against visual arguments: the supposed non-propositionality of visuals, and the imputed inescapable ambiguity or vagueness of images, which Blair, taking an ‘enthusiastic’ view, argues against. By contrast, Groarke (2007: 145, 147), who also takes an ‘enthusiastic’ view, argues that images can be “more clear, more precise, and more complete than corresponding sentences,” such that visuals can often convey complex information better than words (on this point see also Roque 2012: 279-281; 2015). Sometimes these supposed differences in content are used to support the skeptical claim that visuals lack argumentatively normative properties, while at other times these same differences are used to argue for the enthusiastic claim that visuals can be more effective as argumentative and persuasive devices (Groarke 2007: 243 ff.; Kjeldsen 2013, 2015a). For example, Kjeldsen (2012; 2015a) claims that images affect our experience of the force of reasons by providing “presence” to, and “thick representations” of, issues, thereby making images resistant to any complete reduction to the verbal.

Blair, who once argued that “[t]hey [arguments] turn out to either to be propositional or else not arguments” (1996: 35) has since modified his position to claim that “images tend to convey information that cannot be exhaustively expressed in words. The attempt to capture the meaning of [some images] ... in words will tend to fall short” (2015: 220). Instead, Blair (2015: 220) argues that the verbal is not a *translation* of the visual, but a *placeholder* for it: “[a] verbal reconstruction rarely captures all that was expressed in the visual argument, but is a placeholder for it, and provides us with a reference for use in evaluating the cogency of the visual argument.” Here, verbal descriptions seem to function not as rational reconstructions of visual reasons, but as labels referring to a

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<sup>13</sup> Without knowing whether there actually are any self-avowed normative revisionists, this section will be speculative, seeking to articulate a set of folk assumptions and intuitions that might incline one towards a revisionist view, rather than to descriptively characterize anyone’s position. More generally, it is not relevant to the argument of the paper whether anyone actually subscribes to normative revisionism, the autonomy thesis, or the normative independence of the visual. Rather, what is important is that they are positions, with some apparent plausibility, within the spectrum of views one might take on the question of the relation between visual and non-visual (e.g., verbal) argumentation.

rational visual structure that has not been (fully or adequately) articulated in the verbal description.

*5.2 From content non-equivalence to evaluative non-equivalence: A mistaken inference*

While intuitions of this sort should not be especially surprising, we should be careful about what to make of them. For example, consider an inference from visual-verbal content non-equivalence to evaluative non-equivalence. On the grounds that properly non-reduced visual arguments express something different from their verbal reconstructions, one could rightly infer that visual arguments should receive a different evaluation than their verbal reconstructions.

Yet, if some visual and corresponding verbal arguments genuinely have different content, then it should not be controversial that they should (at least potentially) receive different evaluations. After all, it should not be controversial that arguments presenting different reasons, or arguing for different claims, can have different evaluative properties, and thus should receive different evaluations. Yet, this is not the claim of evaluative non-equivalence.

Rather, the claim of evaluative non-equivalence is that arguments with the same content presented differently can properly receive different evaluations. It turns out, then, that the question of argumentative content is a central point in debates about the proper evaluation of visual arguments, and one to which we shall return in section 8. Assertions of content non-equivalence, on their own, do not obviously support claims of evaluative non-equivalence. Instead, evaluative non-equivalence must be supported by showing that different instances of content-equivalent arguments presented in different modes, *ceteris paribus*, should receive different evaluations. And this requires an acceptable and workable means of extracting (specifying) and relating (equating) the argumentatively relevant contents of visual and verbal argument, so that the reasons and claims comprising the argument can be identified.

*5.2 From content non-equivalence to normative revisionism: Another mistaken inference*

More dangerous still is an inference that takes us from intuitions about visual-verbal content non-equivalence to normative revisionism. Motivated by intuitions about visual-verbal content non-equivalence, one might be led to infer a general incommensurability of the visual with the verbal, such that something like Johnson's autonomy thesis holds. This, in turn, entails the normative independence of the visual and thereby normative revisionism. In short: the visual and the verbal are content-incommensurable; hence they are normatively incommensurable also.

**6 An incommensurability argument for normative revisionism**

*6.1 A general case for normative revisionism: Visual-verbal incommensurability*

With these considerations in mind, a basic incommensurability argument for normative revisionism might be formulated as:



*Argument for normative revisionism from visual-verbal incommensurability*

- P1 There are uniquely visual content features of visual arguments that are not equivalent to, and cannot be reduced to, any non-visual (verbal) content.
- P2 There is no third thing to which both the uniquely visual and the non-visual (verbal) can be compared or reduced.
- ∴SC1 Thus, visual arguments are content-incommensurable with non-visual (verbal) arguments (cf. Johnson's autonomy thesis).
- P3 The normative properties of arguments are a function of their content.
- P4 At least some of these uniquely visual features are normatively relevant.
- ∴SC2 Therefore, visual arguments are normatively incommensurable with non-visual (particularly verbal) arguments.
- ∴MC Therefore, visual arguments cannot be properly evaluated using existing evaluative ways, but require their own theories, methods, criteria, or standards of evaluation (i.e., normative revisionism).

Clearly, incommensurability is a load-bearing concept in this argument. What is meant by it? The central idea of incommensurability is that of incomparability, or the absence of a common metric or standard against which the incommensurable things (arguments, their components and their properties, in this case) can be described, related, or evaluated. The central claim of the argument from visual-verbal incommensurability, then, is that at least some visual content is categorically unlike any non-visual, specifically verbal, content. (Call these putatively irreducible, incommensurable, or universally nonequivalent features the *uniquely visual features of visual arguments*.) None of the categories, qualities, properties, or relations that apply to non-visual content properly or meaningfully apply to uniquely visual content. As a consequence, it is impossible to say whether some instance of uniquely visual content is more or less similar (or different) to this or that example of non-visual, verbal content. Instead, since only comparable things can be related in ways of similarity and difference, uniquely visual content is *equally* and *categorically* unlike any non-visual, verbal content.

The initial content-incommensurability [SC1] articulates the idea behind Johnson's autonomy thesis—that visual arguments are categorically distinct in kind from non-visual arguments, and results from the non-equivalence and irreducibility of at least some visual content elements to the non-visual (or verbal) [P1]. That is, at least some visual content cannot be represented or given equivalent expression in a non-visual, verbal mode. The step from irreducibility to incommensurability arises from the claim [P2] that there is no third thing to which both the visual and the verbal can be reduced, or by which they can be expressed, or against which they can be uniformly compared. (Here, the following important point should be noted: since reducibility and comparability are transitive relations, were there some third thing to which both initial items could be reduced or compared, then there would be a way of reducing or comparing the initial items to each other, if only via that third thing.) To arrive at the sub-conclusion [SC2] that visual-verbal content-incommensurability results in a normative incommensurability one need only accept two additional claims: [P3] that normative properties are a function of descriptive properties, in this case content qualities, and [P4] that at least some of the uniquely visual features are normatively relevant. (Call the conjunction of content incommensurability

[SC1] and normative incommensurability [SC2] *visual-verbal argumentative incommensurability*.) The main conclusion of normative revisionism [MC] follows directly from [SC2]. Since visual arguments are normatively incommensurable with non-visual, verbal arguments, the ways of appraising verbal arguments don't apply to visual arguments.

Should the incommensurability argument for normative revisionism stand, its implications for argumentation theory are rather momentous. Not only will we require an entirely new normative apparatus to properly appraise visual arguments, but there will be no common, trans-modal basis of comparison or evaluation. Rather, if the incommensurability argument holds, then just as it will be impossible to say whether any visual argument is more or less like one or another verbal argument (since only comparable things can be related in the ways of similarity or difference), likewise it will be impossible to say whether any verbal argument is better, or worse, than any visual argument, and vice versa.

## 6.2 Objections to the incommensurability thesis

Although the argument from visual-verbal incommensurability gains the normative revisionist their desired conclusion, the normative independence of the visual, it does so only at the unaffordable cost of taking on commitments that are both *prima facie* untenable and inconsistent with their other commitments. There are at least three such points: first, and most importantly, the components of visual and verbal arguments must at least be functionally comparable; second, there are obvious cases where some verbal arguments are more unlike (i.e., are worse interpretations of) a given visual argument than some other verbal arguments; and finally, if arguments necessarily have a cognitive dimension or interpretation then there is some third thing to which both the visual and the verbal can be compared or related.

Let's start with the last point. If the visual really is incommensurable with the verbal then there can be no third thing to which each is comparable. Yet, many enthusiastic approaches to visual argument claim that the visual provides cognitive, though not verbal, content. Roughly understood, such views construe arguments as primarily cognitive, rather than either visual or verbal, constructions. For example, all semiotic accounts of meaning (imagistic or otherwise) are committed to a cognitive dimension of signs. Van den Hoven, for example, claims that “[i]t is the mental representation that is the argument” (2015: 161; cf. 2011). Similarly, though not offering a semiotic account, Roque concludes that “[t]hey [arguments] are mental or logical or cognitive operations that can be expressed verbally as well as visually” (2009: 8; cf. 2015). Yet, if it is the case that the argumentative content of images and words are explained cognitively, or have an essentially cognitive component, then it is not the case that words and images are incommensurable. Rather, they are both commensurable with the cognitive.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, if visual and verbal arguments really are incommensurable, then a visual argument should be equally and categorically unlike all verbal arguments. That is, it

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<sup>14</sup> I prefer the view that arguments are linguistic, rather than cognitive, artifacts (Godden 2015b). Such a view needn't commit one to the textuality of language, but it does provide what seems to me to be adequate resources for explaining the meaning, including the argumentative meaning, of images and words alike (see, Groarke 2014).

should not be possible to rightly or justifiably say that some visual argument is *more* like some particular verbal argument than it is like any other verbal argument. Yet, even in cases of highly complex visual arguments (or persuasive images), this claim is plainly false. The image, if it is functioning argumentatively, must convey some meaningful content. For example, the image might be about something (or some things), rather than others. Or, perhaps the image conveys some sentiment (or sentiments), rather than others. Yet, if this is the case, then sentences about those same things, or conveying those same sentiments, will be more like the image than sentences about other things or conveying different sentiments. Whatever the differences between images and collections of words, some verbal interpretations of argumentative images are better than others, and this means that, while they may not be equivalent, they are commensurable.

Lastly, a fundamental point in the debate about the autonomy and normative independence of the visual concerns whether reasons and claims, indeed *the same reason for the same claim*, can be presented both visually and verbally. If images can be arguments, then they must, according to the rational nature of argument, involve reasons and claims. Yet, the incommensurability argument works by denying this very possibility. The claim of visual-verbal incommensurability commits the incommensurist to a general and complete absence of content *comparability*.

Conceptually, it is not tenable to claim that argumentatively relevant visual content is nothing *like* reasons stated verbally. Reasons are things that are *like* what we study when we analyze and evaluate arguments. If the uniquely visual features of visual arguments are nothing like that, then what is the motivation to call them *reasons* in the first place? Indeed what is the sense in calling them *reasons* at all? Reasons, whether visual or verbal, must be capable of supporting claims, typically by making their acceptability more apparent than it was previously. If the uniquely visual does nothing like that, if the uniquely visual features of images cannot act like reasons, what sense can be made of the claim that they are reasons?

If it turns out that images are incapable of containing or expressing reasons then I, for one, am okay with concluding that they cannot be arguments. Similarly, if it turns out that the uniquely visual features of visual arguments are incapable of expressing, or making apparent, anything like reasons then I am okay with concluding that the uniquely visual features of visual arguments are not *argumentatively* relevant.

Yet, it would seem that the normative revisionist does not want to make this claim. Rather, they seem to want to say that uniquely visual features are *like* reasons, they are just not like any verbal reason. At this point, the normative revisionist is committed both to the claim that visual arguments present reasons for claims, but that uniquely visual reasons are not at all like any set of reasons presented verbally. This is a rather precarious pair of commitments to maintain. Minimally, it commits the incommensurist to the position that at least some uniquely visual features of arguments function as reasons, and are thus comparable to verbal reasons in at least that respect. As such, the visual and the verbal are not *completely* incommensurable. Rather, they are *functionally* comparable. After all, reasons, whether verbal or visual, work to support claims—they demonstrate, establish, make evident, manifest or apparent the acceptability of claims.

The normative revisionist cannot have it both ways. Either, the uniquely visual elements of visual arguments really are content-incommensurable verbal reasons, in which case Premise 4 of the argument from visual-verbal incommensurability must be

given up: the uniquely visual is entirely unlike a reason and hence is not argumentatively relevant. Or, the uniquely visual elements of visual arguments really can function as reasons, thereby making them argumentatively relevant but also commensurable with verbal reasons. In this case, Sub-Conclusion 1 must be abandoned: there are no uniquely visual features of visual arguments and visual arguments are not content-incommensurable with non-visual arguments. Either way, there are no features of visual arguments that are both uniquely visual (i.e., incommensurable with the verbal) and argumentatively relevant.

## 7 An ineffability argument for normative revisionism

If the argument from visual-verbal incommensurability is an inviable means of supporting normative revisionism, perhaps there is some weaker position that might suffice instead.

Perhaps, for example, one might articulate the intuition behind the autonomy thesis as claiming that the type-identity of reasons and claims is indexed to mode, and hence that the same reason for the same claim cannot be presented in several different modes. Rather, presenting something in one mode (say, visually) makes whatever is presented somehow different from—i.e., not identical with, but nevertheless comparable to—anything presented in another mode. It follows that no uniquely visual reason (or component thereof) would be the same as any non-visual, verbal reason (or component thereof). Hence, the uniquely visual elements of arguments are constitutively ineffable, and are therefore irreducible to any collection of verbal or textual elements. Such a position seeks to allow that visual and non-visual content can be functionally similar (in offering support or making reasons apparent) and thus not wholly incommensurable, while still maintaining that visual arguments are categorically different from non-visual arguments.

### *7.1 A second general case for normative revisionism: Ineffability of the uniquely visual*

Thinking along these lines might yield a visual-verbal content non-equivalence argument for normative revisionism, which could be formulated as follows:

#### *Argument for normative revisionism from the ineffability of the uniquely visual*

- P1 There are uniquely visual content features of visual arguments that are not equivalent to, and cannot be expressed as, any non-visual (verbal) content.
- ∴ SC1 Thus, uniquely visual features of visual arguments are ineffable.
- ∴ SC2 Thus, visual arguments are content-non-equivalent to non-visual (verbal) arguments (i.e., content non-equivalence).
- ∴ SC3 Thus, visual arguments are irreducible to non-visual (verbal) arguments.
- P2 The normative properties of arguments are a function of their content.
- P3 At least some of these uniquely visual features are normatively relevant.
- P4 The uniquely visual features cannot be properly evaluated using existing evaluative ways.
- ∴ MC Therefore, visual arguments cannot be properly evaluated using existing

evaluative ways, but require their own theories, methods, criteria, or standards of evaluation (i.e., normative revisionism).

While not taking on the full commitment of visual-verbal incommensurability, the ineffability argument seeks to demonstrate a gap between the verbal and the visual that cannot be descriptively or normatively traversed. To borrow Ian Dove’s especially apt phrase, the main idea behind the ineffability argument is that “there’s stuff in the visual that cannot be narrated.” One might imagine that such a position is similarly motivated by those intuitions (discussed in section 5.1) arising from our dissatisfaction with several specific “verbal repackagings” as capturing the full cognitive, argumentative, rhetorical, or experiential import, or evocative force of the visual.

### *7.2 Content non-equivalence: Particular and universal*

Importantly, for the ineffability argument to succeed it must not merely be the case that *this* particular verbal argument fails to adequately express the content of *that* specific visual argument, as though there were some *other* verbal argument with the same content. Rather, what is required for the argument to go through is that there be *no* “verbal repackaging” that expresses the same content as the putatively uniquely visual feature of the argument. Thus, the content non-equivalentist requires not merely the weaker claim of

#### *Particular content non-equivalence*

*this* particular visual argument (or component thereof) is not content-equivalent to *that* specific verbal argument (or component thereof),

but rather to the much stronger claim that

#### *Universal content non-equivalence*

there is *no* verbal argument (or component thereof) that is content-equivalent to *any* visual argument (or uniquely visual component thereof).

Commitment to a universal visual-verbal content non-equivalence of uniquely visual content amounts to the view that such content is *constitutively*—rather than, say, practically—*ineffable*. That is to say, the ineffability of the uniquely visual must be due to some *essentially inarticulable* feature of its content, rather than due to *our inarticulateness* (or our inability to give that content words, or find words for it).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This last point is important, since there is no reason to assume that we are especially reliable introspective reporters on the kinds of cognitive processes (broadly understood) that occur when we process visual information. For example, although we are typically particularly able to recognize and distinguish human faces, as well as facial expressions, our ability to do so is not a good reason for thinking that we have any good insight into, or explanation for, *how* we do so. I may be able to reliably make such distinctions without being able to report (whether reliably or at all) on, for example, which visual features I am processing and tracking in making these distinctions reliably. Yet, it does not follow from my inability to report on this that I am not processing, tracking, and distinguishing particular features which are *articulable* even if not by me.

At the very least, then, having embraced a universal trans-modal (visual-verbal) content non-equivalence of the uniquely visual, the ineffabilist, like the incommensurist, is committed to a universal trans-modal (visual-verbal) evaluative non-equivalence. Since no uniquely visual argument is content equivalent to any verbal argument, visual arguments are irreducible to non-visual, verbal arguments. So long as some of the uniquely visual features of visual arguments are normatively relevant, evaluative non-equivalence results and no visual argument should receive the same evaluation as any non-visual (verbal) argument for the ordinary and non-controversial reason that the arguments are not presenting the same reasons for the same claim.

In order to reach the stronger conclusion of normative revisionism, the claim [P4] that uniquely visual features cannot be properly evaluated using ordinary evaluative ways is also required.

### *7.2 Objections to the ineffability argument*

There are several significant problems with the argument from ineffability. First, the intuitions motivating the argument don't support the ineffability, or the universal content non-equivalence, of the uniquely visual. Second, claims of the ineffability of the visual are contradicted by empirical studies where audiences are allowed to supply their own interpretation of persuasive visual media. Third, a position that maintains both the ineffability and the argumentative relevance of the uniquely visual is paradoxical. Finally, the claim that generates the normative independence of the visual remains unsupported by the ineffability argument, and does not follow from the intuitions motivating it. Let us consider each objection in further detail.

First, recall the intuition motivating the ineffabilist: that *what is expressed* in the image is somehow different from *what is expressed* by the words. Intuitions of this sort about visual-verbal content non-equivalence readily support the particular, but not the general claim. Our situation was this: we compare some persuasive image to some set of sentences that purports to reconstruct, or attempts to convey, the argumentative meaning of the image, and are dissatisfied—we find the words to be somehow wanting. This entitles us to reject the verbal reconstruction as not equivalent to the visual. But, all too often, from this we are inclined to hastily move to the much stronger claims of universal content non-equivalence, ineffability, and autonomy, perhaps after being dissatisfied with a number of attempted verbal reconstructions. Yet, these inferences are non-sequiturs. Establishing the stronger claims does not involve several failed attempts to capture visual content verbally; it requires a positive argument demonstrating that no such articulation of the argumentatively relevant visual content is possible.

Not only has no such argument been made in the literature, but, as a second problem, at least some empirical studies suggest that it is false. For example, a recent, focus group study by Kjeldsen (2015c) finds that ordinary audiences, untrained in theory-laden approaches to both argumentation and visual literacy, readily supply some verbal description of the argumentative contents of persuasive visual advertisements. Importantly, when allowed to formulate and articulate these contents themselves, participants were satisfied that the reasons they articulated accurately express the reasons and claim conveyed (if only to them) by the visual elements in the argument samples. Similar studies have been reported by Morgan (2005), who concludes that “although

consumers are not necessarily drawing the same meaning from visual ads, they engage in meaning-making processes by inferring positive product claims” (162). Importantly, Morgan situates her study in a context of visual literacy scholarship going back to the 1980s indicating that audiences readily treat persuasive visual media as having articulable argumentative content. “The overall conclusion from this research,” Morgan writes, “is that consumers are doing more than emotionally responding to ads; they appear to be extracting basic arguments from them” (146).

Empirical studies, then, suggest that, while we might be disinclined to accept another’s interpretation of the argumentative content of persuasive images, when given the opportunity to specify the content for ourselves, our inclination is to do so, rather than to insist that no such articulation can be given. And, we tend to be satisfied that these self-generated articulations accurately capture the argumentative content of the image.

This leads to a third problem: like the incommensurist, there is a paradoxical tension in the position of the ineffabilist, who is committed both to the claim that some uniquely visual content is argumentatively relevant, and to the view that one can never say what that content is. Even supposing such a position to be coherent, its consequences are theoretically unwieldy. On such a view, it is difficult if not impossible to say how this putatively ineffable content factors into the argument—what role it is playing in the argument—let alone how it contributes to the functioning of a reason or claim. Consequently, it becomes difficult if not impossible to say how this ineffable content should affect the processes of argument appraisal or the result of argument evaluation.

This, in turn, leads to a final problem for the argument from ineffability, which concerns the final inference to normative revisionism. The conclusion that visual arguments require their own theories, methods, criteria, or standards of evaluation only follows from the ineffabilist’s premises if the claim that the uniquely visual cannot be properly evaluated using our existing evaluative ways (i.e., P4) is accepted. Yet, not only does P4 assert the very claim at issue between the revisionist and non-revisionist, but it is not supported within the argument. It does not follow from the intuitions motivating the argument from ineffability, and nor can the ineffabilist offer a reason for it, since, by their own admission, they cannot tell us what the content of the uniquely visual is. As such, how can it be shown that our existing evaluative ways do not apply? Thus, while the argument from incommensurability gains the normative revisionist their desired conclusion, albeit in an entirely problematic way, the argument from ineffability doesn’t succeed without begging the very question at issue.

### *7.3 Intuitions about the autonomy of the visual: The moral of the story*

Despite any intuitions that might incline us towards the autonomy of the visual, it would seem that our dissatisfaction with this or that “verbal paraphrase” (to borrow another especially apt phrase from Dove) does not support either normative revisionism or even evaluative non-equivalence. The incommensurist claim that uniquely visual contents are categorically unlike any non-visual, verbal content means that no uniquely visual feature can function as, or contribute to the function of, a reason or a claim. Hence, they cannot be argumentatively relevant. The ineffabilist claim that uniquely visual contents are constitutively inarticulable means that it is impossible to say how they function argumentatively. Hence, their argumentative relevance can never be determined. Finally,

proving the controversial case of evaluative non-equivalence requires showing that content-equivalent arguments should receive different evaluations when presented in different modes, *ceteris paribus*. And, this requires a way of specifying and relating the argumentatively relevant contents of arguments across visual and verbal modes. Yet, the arguments from incommensurability and ineffability deny that very possibility.

The moral of the story seems to be that visual and verbal arguments cannot be incommensurable or irreducible either descriptively or normatively. Instead, as Groarke once put it:

If we are to make sense of a typology of argument that includes verbal and visual argument, then there must be something that they share in common. They cannot both be kinds of argument unless they are two subspecies of the more basic species we call ‘argument.’ (Groarke 2009: 2)

More specifically, it would seem that we require a way of talking about the contents of visual and non-visual, particularly verbal, arguments such that their contents can be specified and compared. The next section seeks to provide such a way, using the concept of information.

## **8 Content: Informational and argumentative**

As the preceding discussion has revealed, the notion of content features centrally in the theories and controversies about visual argument. On the one hand, to simply stipulate, or insist, that arguments consist of propositions and that pictures are non-propositional is to beg the question against the enthusiast. On the other hand, normative revisionists take a strikingly similar position, claiming that at least some images have a content that is both argumentatively relevant and yet inexpressible in, or perhaps even incommensurable with, *any* set of propositions. Either move simply deadlocks the debate by fiat. To retain our intuitions about the content of visuals while avoiding the problems and mistakes identified in sections 6 and 7 that can arise from these intuitions, I suggest that we need a way of talking about the content of visual images that recognizes their differences from collections of words or sentences, yet accounts for, and explains, their argumentative function.

What seems to be required to navigate this impasse is a concept of content that is neutral between sentential (or verbal) and visual media. I suggest that such a concept can be found in the idea of *information*. This section presents such a notion, and distinguishes between the informational content and the argumentative content of an artifact (like an image or a sentence). I then argue for two points: first, the informational content of an artifact need not be identical to its argumentative content; second, I claim that two artifacts can have the same argumentative content even though they differ in informational content.



### 8.1 Informational content

Let's begin with the *general definition of information* (GDI) according to which *information is meaningful data* (Floridi 2010: 20; cf. Adriaans 2012; Floridi 2003, 2005, 2011). More specifically, something, *i*, is information (understood as semantic content) if and only if it meets three conditions:

- (1) *Data condition*: *i* is data
- (2) *Syntactic condition*: the data are well formed
- (3) *Semantic condition*: the well-formed data are meaningful. (Floridi 2010: 20-21; cf. Floridi 2005: 353)<sup>16</sup>

Data, in turn, is explained *diaphorically*, such that “[a] datum is ultimately reducible to a *lack of uniformity*” (Floridi 2010: 23). These absences of uniformity can occur naturally (e.g., rings in a tree or geological strata) or as the result of some contrivance, whether accidental or intentional (e.g., scuff marks on a floor or groves in a record album). To be well formed, these irregularities must occur nomologically, in regular, law-like ways. In cases of environmental information there can be natural laws describing the regularity of the irregularities constituting the *dedomena* (or “data in the wild”) (23). In cases of contrived data, e.g., the differences between signals and symbols, the irregularities may be governed by rules prescribing the differences (24). Data that are well formed and meaningful give us *semantic content*, which can come in several varieties such as factual (or truth-apt) or instructional (or action-oriented) (34).

This account yields Bateson's (1973: 428) famous conception of the “elementary unit of information” as “a difference which makes a difference.” Perhaps the most salient and attractive feature of this conception of information for our purposes is that it makes no restriction as to the *mode* in which information can be contained, encoded, presented, or conveyed. As Floridi (2010: 25) writes:

The dependence of information on the occurrence of syntactically well-formed data, and of data on the occurrence of differences variously implementable physically, explain why information can so easily be decoupled from its support [i.e., medium of conveyance]. The actual *format, medium, and language* in which the data, and hence information, are encoded is often irrelevant and disregardable. In particular, the same

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<sup>16</sup> Importantly, neither the syntactic nor semantic conditions exclude non-linguistic information. Floridi (2010: 20-21) writes:

‘[W]ell formed’ means that the data are rightly put together, according to the rules (syntax) that govern the chosen system, code, or language being used. Syntax here must be understood broadly, not just linguistically, as what determines the form, construction, composition, or structuring of something. ... ‘Meaningful’ means that the data must comply with the meanings (*semantics*) of the chosen system, code, or language in question. Once again, semantic information is not necessarily linguistic.

Floridi offers an example of illustrations in the instruction manual for a car having a “pictorial syntax” and semantics (Floridi 2010: 21).

data/information may be printed on paper or viewed on a screen, codified in English, or in some other language, expressed in symbols or pictures, be it analogue or digital.

A drawback of this definition, though, is that it restricts factual semantic information to something that is not merely truth-apt but true, such that “false information is not a genuine type of information” (Floridi 2010: 50). This restriction can readily be set aside for our purposes so that we can include misinformation and disinformation within the concept of information by conceiving of it as factual semantic content understood as “information not yet saturated by a correct answer” (40).

## 8.2 *Visual and verbal differences as informational differences*

The idea of information allows us to explain the differences in content between visuals and their verbal reconstructions without resorting to any mysterious, ineffable, verbally incommensurable, visual somethings-we-know-not-what. There is nothing mysterious, ineffable, or verbally incommensurable about the content of visuals; rather, they are (entirely!) comprised of, and convey, information. And, typically, that information is visual, not verbal.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, visual and verbal arguments tend to have different informational content. Typically, even the simplest visual images contain and convey vastly, indeed infinitely, more information than any finite set of sentences (Kitcher and Varzi, 2000). Thus, we can easily account for the ordinary lack of fidelity between some persuasive visual and its infinitely elliptical, enthymematic, informationally impoverished verbal reconstruction. Indeed, any verbal reconstruction that approached the information content of even a basic visual construction would be so cognitively unwieldy as to be entirely argumentatively ineffectual.

Yet, none of that visually expressed information is, in principle, either inarticulable or incommensurable with a verbal expression of that same information. Indeed, all of the information in any visual, no matter how rich, complex or multi-faceted, can, in principle, be parsed-out. Most literally, an algorithm can be supplied to reproduce the image.<sup>18</sup> The difference lies not in the information itself, but rather in how we experience, process, or convey that information.

So, an informational account of the content of visuals explains and validates our intuitions of visual-verbal content non-equivalence. This difference in content, together with differences we experience between the forcefulness of persuasive visuals and their impoverished verbal reconstructions, is explained either in terms of real differences in the content of visual and verbal expressions, or in terms of differences in how we process

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<sup>17</sup> Note: The contention of the paper is that information properly explains the nature and content of visual artifacts (e.g., images), understood as objects of visual experience—not the nature or content of the experiences of visual objects. The paper does not contend that information (or being informed) properly characterizes the rhetorical effect or phenomenological, lived quality of experience of the object-as-experienced.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to conflate the difference between *saying* (which collections of words do when uttered or written) and *showing*, or depicting, (which images do when presented or displayed). Rather, than resting on an identification of two presentational modalities, saying and showing, it relies on an identification of *what is said* with *what is shown*—i.e., of content.

visual and verbal information. Yet, equally importantly, the informational account of content does not justify any incommensurist or ineffabilist conclusions. Both visual and verbal arguments contain and convey information. So, *in principle*, they are commensurable, and the contents of visuals are articulable, even if, *in practice*, a content-equivalent verbal expression of some visual is entirely impractical.

### 8.3 *Argumentative content*

Yet, an informational content non-equivalence between the verbal and the visual needn't be the infinite, unbridgeable chasm that it might at first seem. After all, not all of the informational content of a visual is argumentatively relevant. (Indeed, not all of the information in a verbal argument is argumentatively relevant—e.g., the font in which a textual argument is presented is, typically, argumentatively irrelevant.)

This gives us a notion of argumentative content as distinct from informational content, where:

*Argumentative content:* [is] content that constitutes, or ineliminably contributes to, a reason or claim.

To have argumentative content, an informational, content expression (whatever its modality) must fulfill, or contribute to, the *functional* role of either a claim or a reason (or some essential part thereof).

Argumentative content, on this account, is informational content with probative effect or value. By argumentative content, I mean something more than what Dove (2012) called “evidence,” whereby images (specifically photographs and diagrams) can have an evidential function, e.g., in determining premise acceptability, yet do not actually have an argumentative function by acting as, or expressing, reasons or claims.

Hence, to specify the argumentative content of some informational, content expression (whatever its modality) we must articulate its *functionality* in the space of reason—that is, we must specify what it counts as a reason for, and what counts as a reason for it (Brandom, 2000), or how it contributes to the rational workings of a reason or claim. Unless the inferential operation of the image (or visual element thereof) can be articulated, what sense can be made of the claim that the image (element) acts as, or contributes to, a reason or claim—i.e., that it has argumentative content? This is not to insist that argumentative content be propositional, or truth-apt (cf. Blair 1996: 23). Rather, it is only to insist that, according to the *rational nature of argument*, that it be entitlement-apt—i.e., that the argumentatively relevant contents of arguments function as, or contribute to the function of, reasons or claims (Godden 2105b; cf. Pinto 2009).

### 8.4 *Visual content as informational content: Consequences*

Distinguishing between the informational and argumentative content of images, texts, and other persuasive media allows us to take the following position: things can differ in their informational content while sharing the same argumentative content. Such a position helps to explain and manage the differences between visual and verbal arguments in theoretically fruitful ways.

As already noted, understanding visual content as informational content explains the differences in our experiences of the meaning and forcefulness of images in comparison with words without resorting to the untenable claim that visual contents are mysterious, inarticulable, verbally incommensurable, somethings-we-know-not-what. Moreover, explaining visual content as informational provides a perspective from which the contents of visual and verbal arguments can be compared and potentially equated.

First, recognizing that there are typically vast informational differences between a visual argument and any verbal argument compels us to consider the argumentative relevance of the informational differences between images and (collections of) words. In some cases, while there may be vast informational differences, argumentatively there may be none. That is to say, depending on the argument being conveyed, much of the informational content of the image may be argumentatively irrelevant, in the sense that it neither constitutes, nor conveys, nor contributes to, a reason or a claim.

Second, should we feel that there is some content in the image that is argumentatively relevant, understanding it as ordinary and informational rather than mysterious and ineffable prompts us to articulate what that content is, or at least say what argumentative role it is playing and what effect it has upon us. It is only by consciously identifying and attending to these persuasive effects and means that we will be able to reflectively and critically subject them to rational evaluation.

Further, it is only by articulating, or at least identifying, the content of the image that is not captured in the “verbal paraphrase” that we will be able to (i) explain the argumentative role, and hence the argumentative relevance, of the putatively uniquely visual content, and (ii) thereby justify any claim that the visual and the verbal are not equivalent in this instance, because they do not convey the same argumentative content.

Finally, by offering a perspective from which we can say that arguments of differing modalities can have the same argumentative content, the informational account of visual content provides a sound way to test the thesis of trans-modal evaluative equivalence. We can now look for images and arguments that have the same argumentative content, and then consider whether they should receive the same rational evaluation—that is, whether the modality of the argumentative content affects its normative appraisal.

## 9 Conclusion

If what I have said to this point is on the mark, then there are important consequences for theories of visual argumentation, concerning both the analytical, interpretive aspects of visual arguments as well as their appraisal and evaluation.

### *9.1 Consequences for the analysis of visual argument analysis*

Two important consequences follow concerning the analysis of visual arguments. First, just as it does not follow from the mere fact that *some* specific visual argument is not content equivalent to *some* particular verbal argument that *no* verbal argument is content equivalent to *any* visual argument, similarly, it does not follow from the mere fact that some verbal argument is *informationally* content non-equivalent to some visual, that they are *argumentatively* content non-equivalent. So long as they express the same

argumentative content, they may rightly be considered content-equivalent in all aspects bearing upon (i.e., relevant to) the rational appraisal of argument.

Second, there is good reason to think that the argumentative content of any visual can be verbally expressed. This might happen in one of two ways: at the level of the object language, or in the meta-language. In the object language, there may well be sentences, or manageable collections of sentences, that equivalently express all of the argumentatively relevant information in some image. And, even in cases where we remain resistant to such a ‘translation’ of the visual into the verbal, the meta-linguistic rules governing the argumentative functioning of the visual can be articulated in natural language.

Even if the object language is an imagistic one of pictures, the meta-linguistic rules governing the inferential use of images as entitlement-establishing, entitlement-preserving, and entitlement-defeating are expressible in natural languages. Indeed these meta-linguistic rules often constitute the warranting principles that arguers must invoke when justifying their argumentative moves if challenged. As such, if the inferential use of images cannot be specified or codified in a more-or-less rigorous manner adequate to the communicative and rational needs of arguers, significant doubt is cast on whether the images really are functioning argumentatively. (Godden 2015b: 236-237)

Thus, not only is visual-verbal incommensurability false, so is a universal visual-verbal content non-equivalence. Any visual whose argumentative content is governed by a set of meta-linguistic rules specifying its argumentative functionality, or proper use in argument, will be argumentatively equivalent to any verbal expression whose proper use is governed by those same rules. (It should be noted that this is a consequence of the view (cf. Groarke, 2014) that the visual and the verbal gain their meaning in the same way—namely, according to their use.) And, even if there is no verbal expression currently in use that operates according to the same meta-linguistic rules, one could readily be coined and specified to have the same argumentative functional role as the image.

Despite the falsity of visual-verbal incommensurability, our intuitions that images often convey something different than their verbal repackaging can be validated and explained by differences in their informational content—the very thing that makes the visual and the verbal commensurable. Similarly, by distinguishing informational from argumentative content, the falsity of a universal visual-verbal content non-equivalence has also been demonstrated.

## 9.2 Consequences for the appraisal of visual arguments

Two important consequences also follow for the appraisal of visual arguments. First, despite any intuitions we might have towards Johnson’s *autonomy thesis*, normative revisionism is mistaken. At the very least, no compelling reason—indeed no good reason whatsoever—has been offered that the visual require any special evaluative ways. Quite the contrary. Recent work (Blair 2015; Dove 2016; Godden 2013, 2016) suggests that our existing theories, methods, criteria, and standards of argument appraisal apply just as well to visual arguments as they do to non-visual, verbal ones. And this should come as no surprise. These evaluative ways were designed to appraise the probative force of reasons,

not words. Thus, just as incommensurability is an unwarranted and untenable position about the content and analysis of visual arguments, normative revisionism is an unwarranted and untenable position about visual argument appraisal.

Second, although normative revisionism is false, our intuitions that the visual may be acting upon us differently than the verbal, and hence should receive a different appraisal may have some merit. And, perhaps the modality in which argumentative content is presented can make a difference to its probative merits, or our ability to take cognizance of those probative merits. That is, there may be something to the idea of a visual-verbal evaluative non-equivalence.

Suppose that the same argumentatively relevant informational content is presented visually and verbally. That is, let us stipulate that there is a visual-verbal equivalence of argumentative content in certain cases. Perhaps, in some of those cases we might more easily apprehend, detect, understand, grasp, parse, or appreciate either the informational content itself or its probative qualities because of its manner of presentation.

A wide variety of examples merit consideration for a full investigation of this hypothesis. Here, I will briefly consider only a small few. Blair (2015) considered four samples, and seemed to argue not only for normative non-revisionism but also for an evaluative equivalence between the visual examples and their verbal surrogates. Godden (2013) considered two examples. In one, he argued that a syllogism stated verbally ought to receive the same rational appraisal as a content-equivalent syllogism expressed visually, say in Venn diagrams. Yet, perhaps he was mistaken. As Dove (2016) observes, students of logic often apprehend the validity or invalidity of a-typical syllogisms expressed visually well before they recognize the same probative qualities in the verbal expressions of those same syllogisms. Similarly, Guarini (2011) (responding to Dove 2011), considered an example that contrasts visual and verbal analogies comparing skeletal bird feet. (In an attempt to ascertain the species of bird from one of the samples, the question was: which of the remaining samples is the skeletal structure of the target sample more similar to?) Let's assume that the argumentative contents of those visual and verbal analogical arguments are equivalent. As Guarini notes:

Extended sentential descriptions of the feet of that many different types of creatures may not render perspicuous the [possibly quite subtle and complex] similarity relation that holds between them. The images, though, do render the similarity in a perspicuous fashion. (Guarini 2011: 4)

Our cognitive resources dedicated to the processing of visual information are vast, allowing us to process much more visual information, and far more quickly, than we can process verbal information. (Hence, it's no wonder that we often feel as though there's a lot more going on in a persuasive visual than in any verbal rendering of it. Often, there is! And, we can detect, process, and act on that information far more efficiently and effectively, often without ever articulating it to ourselves, than we can information delivered verbally.) Thus, comparing the feet visually, we recognize and gesture at, without explicitly articulating, the salient qualities (similarities and differences) constituting the evidential basis of the analogy. Because of this, not only do we tend to experience the visual as more informative than the verbal, but we also often experience the visual as being more persuasive than the verbal. And, perhaps, in some cases, we

ought to. Perhaps we ought to find the visual to be more, or at least differently, persuasive than its repackaged verbal translation, even if that translation is informationally equivalent in all the argumentatively relevant aspects.

If this is the case, then there is a space for a certain measure of normative difference of the visual, even if normative revisionism is false. As already noted, normative non-revisionism is consistent with trans-modal evaluative non-equivalence, and perhaps that is the proper way of accounting for the normative differences that we intuitively apprehend between visual and verbal arguments.

## **Appendix A: A proof that there are visual arguments**

### *A.1 Proof*

- P1 Categorical syllogisms are arguments.
- P2 Categorical syllogisms can be expressed by Venn diagrams.
- P3 Venn diagrams are visual images.
- ∴ C Some visual images express arguments.

### *A.2 Reply to an anticipated objection*

To those inclined to respond that images can only *express*, rather than *be* arguments, consider the analogous argument:

- P1 Categorical syllogisms are arguments.
- P2 Categorical syllogisms can be expressed by sets of sentences.
- ∴ C Some sets of sentences express arguments.

Consequently, in whatever sense sentences can be syllogistic arguments, so too can images.

### *A.3 Discussion*

There is considerable debate about whether mathematical diagrams constitute proofs (i.e., arguments of a kind) or whether they are merely ancillary to proofs which, properly conceived, are ordered sequences of sentences or formulae where the initial items on the list are given as axioms or premises, the remainder of which are theorems derived by rules of inference from items higher up on the list, and where the last item in the sequence is the conclusion (Barwise and Etchemendy 1996; Brown 1997, 2008; Dove 2002). The work of Shin (1996) and Hammer and Danner (1996) demonstrates that Venn diagrams can be operationalized as a logical system, understood as “a mathematical model [either semantic or proof theoretic] of some pretheoretic notion of consequence and an existing (or possible) inferential practice that honors it” (Barwise and Hammer 1996: 51). That is, the basic diagrammatic elements of Venn diagrams can be provided with a syntax, semantics, and system of derivation rules such that Venn diagrams can be rigorously and unambiguously interpreted as expressively equivalent to sequences of lines in a syllogistic proof. If successful, this conclusively demonstrates that Venn

diagrams are arguments if syllogisms are. Mumma (2010) provides a similarly rigorous interpretation of the diagrams in Euclid's *Elements*, in an effort to establish that they too function demonstratively, rather than merely instrumentally as heuristic or illustrative devices. See also Dove (2013a: 8-9) for a visual, diagrammatic refutation of the transitivity of the quantifier "most," and (9-14) for a diagrammatic map that provides a Heawood counter-model to Kempe's four-color theorem about the minimum number of different colors required to shade any planar map such that no bordering regions will have the same color.

The point here, I take it, is not that such a rigorous interpretive system is a requirement for something's being an argument. Rather, the point is that whatever standards of meaningfulness we require in order that something rightly be interpreted as an argument, those conditions can be met by images when they are supplied with an appropriate context of use. More generally then, as Groarke (2014) argues, meaning is a function of use, and images, when used in the right sorts of ways, can take on meaning such that they can function argumentatively (cf. Lake and Pickering 1998; Barceló-Aspeitia 2012; Tseronis 2013). And most importantly, the meaningfulness and argumentative function of images is to be explained in exactly the same way as the meaningfulness and argumentative function of words. When embedded in an appropriate system and practice of use, images become linguistic elements just as phonemes and graphemes do.

### **Appendix B: On the nature of argument modality**

Section 3.2.2 characterizes the modality of an argument as its presentational manner, such that modes are distinguished not on the basis of content but according to the manner in which some content is presented. Blair (2015: 218; emphasis added) adopts a similar idea whereby the modal categorization of an argument designates "the *manner* in which the argument is expressed or communicated." By contrast, Groarke (2015: 140, 143; emphasis added) proposes an account that "define[s] modes in terms of the *ingredients* (the '*material*', the '*stuff*') an arguer uses and arranges when they engage in an act of arguing," such that "[t]o see if an act of arguing is an instance of a particular mode it is enough to check whether it is built from ingredients that define the mode."

Given its centrality in theories of multi-modal argumentation, there is a pressing need to articulate a workable and agreeable concept of an argumentative mode. Of the two views just considered, despite their difference in focus on adverbial qualities of argumentative acts (*presentational manners*) versus noun-categories of argument components (*material ingredients*), the views are similar in that each directs us to consider *by what means* the arguer is arguing when determining the mode of argument. I recommend an account that permits the distinction of *function*, *content*, and *mode*. Functionally speaking, arguments are all built from the same stuff. Arguments are composed not of images, nor even of words, but of claims and reasons (Godden 2015b: 237). As Blair (2015: 232) writes: "Arguments are not themselves verbal or visual." Whatever reasons are built out of, it is a condition of their being a reason that they be able to function as such. Thus, the modality of a reason cannot interfere with its functionality as a reason; similarly with claims. Further, in order to retain the possibility



that the *same* argumentative content (whether claim or reason) might occur in a variety of different modes, I suggest that there is an advantage in identifying reasons and claims by their content. Rather than a noun-category, the modality of a claim or reason could then be either an adjectival property of the artifact (i.e., its manner of presentation), or an adverbial property the presentational act. This would allow claims and reasons to be identified by their content and categorized by their mode in a way consistent with Groarke's (2015: 135ff.) *key component tables*.

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