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Commentary on Gilardoni

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Commentary on Andrea Gilardoni's "Using the 'Protocols': Fallacies and rhetorical strategies"

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is no question that Professor Gilardoni's study of the anti-Semitic *Protocols* is all too relevant to our times and that, as he points out, the Jewish conspiracy myth is an effective instrument of propaganda not only among Islamic extremists but also among non-Muslim Westerners. In addition to the examples that Professor Gilardoni mentioned, two recent instances of violence in my own country—one in which a young man shot three police officers to death and another in which another young man shot and killed a student at an elite university—illustrate this point. In the first case, although the victims were not Jewish, the shooter posted regularly to a Neo-Nazi website and, in the second case, the shooter left behind a journal specifying that he had targeted his victim precisely because she was Jewish. A few months ago the FBI warned that extreme right-wing, armed groups of a Neo-Nazi flavour are a growing threat to security in the U.S. and, while these groups clearly target Jewish Americans, they also often target African Americans, immigrants, and Muslims as well. So, above all, I appreciate the humanistic value of this project in its aim to identify and analyze the argumentative moves of what essentially amounts to a dangerous and persuasive form of hate speech.

In offering my reflections on this fascinating paper, I would first like to briefly summarize what I have taken to be Professor Gilardoni's central arguments, and then I will raise questions with respect to two broader issues that seem relevant to this study, namely the question of distinguishing propaganda from "legitimate" argumentation and that of how one can use the idea of fallacious techniques as a criterion for doing so.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY ARGUMENTS

What I see to be the key points of Professor Gilardoni's paper are as follows: (1) the *Protocols* are characterized by an argumentative strategy designed to make critical discussion impossible: for example, if we try to show a believer in the Jewish conspiracy that his claims are baseless, he would counter that, if no evidence of the conspiracy can be found, this is itself evidence of a cover-up, and hence, from the conspiracy arguer's standpoint, paradoxically, an absence of proof is always equal to proof; (2) in effecting

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this rhetorical strategy, the *Protocols* use numerous argument schemes that are unsound or fallacious, such as shifting the burden of proof, false dilemma, *petitio principii*, *argumentum ad baculum*, *argumentum ad verecundiam*, affirming the consequent, straw man arguments, and techniques of pathos; (3) by considering the *Protocols* in light of Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's ten rules for critical discussion, we can uncover a manipulative rhetorical strategy at work; yet, while from a pragma-dialectical perspective the arguments of the *Protocols* are clear violations of the ten rules, and by implication a "failed" argumentative discourse, from a *rhetorical* perspective—i.e., one that takes into account an audience that already agrees with the underlying themes of the Jewish conspiracy—what seem to be violations of the "rules" are really effective techniques of propagandistic argument for strengthening the audience's belief in the conspiracy. Hence, the authors are practicing a deliberate (and in fact effective) inversion of the pragma-dialectical code of conduct; they make successful use of a "forbidden rhetoric" (p. 4).

3. ANALYSIS

I find Professor Gilardoni's detailed analysis of the argumentative techniques in this text to be quite compelling; it certainly does seem that the authors have deliberately and effectively engaged in a rhetoric that mirrors the ten rules of "proper" argumentative conduct. And it is hard to see such techniques to be anything other than "manipulative" in their attempt to prevent any possibility for rational discussion.

Yet, given that the conclusion of this paper is that "the ten pragma dialectical rules can be used as a criterion to distinguish […] manipulative techniques" (p. 6), I want to raise two further questions for discussion: (1) can we expand the paper's conclusion to texts other than the *Protocols*, and if so, can we distinguish in any definitive way "manipulative" from other "legitimate" forms of argument? and (2) are fallacies (i.e., the "violations" of the ten argumentative norms) a useful criterion for making such a distinction?

On the first point, I am struck by the extent to which, in the political realm, referring to an opponent's argument as a "conspiracy theory" can often itself be an effective argumentative move for discrediting and completely dismissing ideas with which one disagrees. For example, a few years ago, certain conservative American politicians ridiculed Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a "conspiracy theory" against the Bush administration, while liberals in turn mocked conservative commentators, such as Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly, who were claiming that proponents of multiculturalism in public education had an anti-Christian agenda. It would seem then that cultural or ideological values would have an important role to play with respect to which discourse we view as "manipulative," regardless of whether we detect violations of the ten rules. One also recalls Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's distinction in the *New Rhetoric* between the propagandist and the educator: while the educator already enjoys the prestige of having been commissioned to promote certain values that his audience already shares, the propagandist can assume no such "goodwill" from his audience (p. 52) and thus this lack of good will from the audience—not any particular fallacies in the argumentation—is what makes us view some discourse as "propaganda" and other discourse as "educational."

On the second question—that of the fallacies as a criterion for identifying "manipulative" discourse—a recent article from the *New York Times* illustrates the difficulty of applying this method to political discourse. The article charged that Barack Obama, who had pledged to change the divisive tone of Washington, had in fact been regularly employing the straw man fallacy in his speeches, and was therefore continuing the manipulative use of argumentation that the Bush administration made so infamous. The author pointed to Obama's frequent use of the phrase, "there are those who say," followed by an explicit or implicit argument that exaggerated what a member of the opposition had actually been saying. For example, in alluding to the Republican opposition to his proposed budget to address the economic crisis, Obama said that "There are those who say these plans are too ambitious, that we should be trying to do less, not more." Then he knocked down this counter-argument by asserting that "I say our challenges are too large to ignore," thus implying that his Republican opponents were arguing that we should ignore the economic crisis altogether. According to the author, this move was essentially the same as the one Bush made in 2006, when in reference to fighting terrorists, he lamented that there were not more members of Congress who "understand that you can't negotiate with these folks." But, while these moves are formally similar, labelling both of them as "manipulative" is not as straightforward as it might seem. For, to one who already agrees with the premise that the Republican Party has essentially become the "Party of NO," and is ready to undermine Obama at every turn without any good will for working towards a compromise, Obama's charge that his opposition does not want him to address the crisis seems to ring true, while Bush's claim that Democrats want to negotiate with Al Qaeda does not. Thus, could the notion of "manipulative" argumentation be to a large extent in the (ideological) eye of the beholder?

4. CONCLUSION

The questions above concern the potential implications of the paper's analysis rather than the analysis itself; it should be apparent that they do not in any way diminish the "rhetoric of suspicion" that Professor Gilardoni has so adroitly revealed to be at work in the *Protocols*. And perhaps the most important question to which the last sentence of the paper alludes—that of how we can effectively counter arguments that would deny the very process of rational dialogue— is one to which I hope Professor Gilardoni will soon return.

Link to reply   Link to paper

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