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Commentary on Catherine Hundleby's "Fallacy Forward: Situating fallacy theory"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Catherine Hundleby presents a formidable challenge to anyone desiring a theory, or at least a general account, of informal fallacies. The challenge takes the form of suggesting that there may be certain moribund informal fallacies that have gone out of fashion and need to be replaced by newer informal fallacies with more contemporary appeal and relevance. The problem of individuating informal fallacies, which so often seem to overlap in attempted applications to cases, is an old one. What is new in Hundleby's paper is a direct challenge to the standard canon: why shouldn't new fallacies be added and old ones deleted? Moreover, Hundleby places the burden of proof squarely in the court of anyone wishing to maintain the *status quo* by arguing for candidates for both the obsolete and the flourishing.

2. DEFINITION OF "FALLACY"

Hundleby defines informal fallacies "as common forms of argumentative reasoning that appear correct but are not, which emphasizes both their frequency and deceptive nature." (p. 3) One is reminded of Ralph Johnson's suggestion that

[...] we be led by perceived frequency. That is, we should admit a (new) fallacy to the inventory just when it can be 'shown' that this fallacy occurs with sufficient frequency to make it worth our while to have a label handy. (Johnson 1995, p. 118)

In addition, Hundleby discusses what she calls the "situational dependence" of fallacies, which she describes as the recognition that "some strategies of argumentation may be valid in particular situations but not in others." (p. 5) While Hundleby explicitly mentions only Aristotle and Locke in this regard, she calls them "only the most famous of philosophers" who have recognized the situational dependence of fallacies. I suggest Douglas Walton as another to add to the list, given his strong commitment in many of his writings to the idea that what appears to be a fallacy in some contexts does not so appear in other contexts. As Hundleby remarks, fallacies are often "perversions of argument

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schemes that are quite worthy in specific cases.” (p. 7) Thus, supplementing her basic definition of fallacy as “reasoning that appears correct but is not” are two further criteria: (i) the frequency condition, and (ii) the situational condition.

3. INTRODUCING TWO NEW FALLACIES

Hundleby proposes that two new informal fallacies be added to the standard canon: the *androcentric* fallacy and the *biological reductionism* fallacy. How does her proposal fare in light of her self-imposed two criteria? The androcentric fallacy is defined as “the mistaken assumption that what is male or masculine is most important.” (p. 6) In defence of the proposed fallacy’s fulfillment of the frequency condition, Hundleby discusses the following cases: using masculine pronouns as gender neutral, the commonness of androcentric language, especially in patriarchal societies, Lawrence Kohlberg’s developmental psychology, and E. A. Lloyd’s study of biological research into the female orgasm, in which all 21 recognized theories regularly employ androcentric assumptions. The biological reductionism fallacy is defined as the mistaken assumption that “a characteristic of an organism has a distinctly biological origin (noting that ‘biological origin’ can mean many different things).” (p. 10) To support the fulfillment of the frequency condition for this fallacy, Hundleby presents the following examples: Stephen Jay Gould’s attack on genetic accounts of intelligence, Plato’s use of the Myth of Er, sociobiological accounts, evolutionary psychology, and, again, Lloyd’s study of research on the female orgasm. Do these cases meet Johnson’s test? That is, has Hundleby ‘shown’ that these fallacies occur with sufficient frequency to make it worth our while to have a label handy? I think so, with some reservations to be explored later. First, Hundleby should be seen as giving us only a representative list of examples, and further searches could surely reveal more cases. To add just a couple: a more detailed exploration of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology can be found in David J. Buller’s recent article “Four Fallacies of Pop Evolutionary Psychology” in *Scientific American*, and let us not forget Philip Kitcher’s critique of sociobiology in *Vaulting Ambition*. Second, Hundleby points out several times that these fallacies occur within the domain of science, or at least, widely acclaimed pop science, which give lip service to the claim of promoting knowledge and truth and are supposedly not in the business of employing mere persuasive tactics. Thus, fallacies in these domains are more serious and toxic, and more readily justify having a fallacy label handy.

Has Hundleby successfully met the second criterion, the situational condition, with her two proposed fallacies? She mentions that the androcentric fallacy is not fallacious “when the topic is only men,” such as in “medical research about men, and in romantic considerations about men, or in any other argument where the subject of inquiry is exclusively male.” (p. 7) Likewise, biological reductionism is often appropriate and can provide “categorically good” explanatory accounts of an organism’s characteristics. (p. 11) Thus, Hundleby seems correct, and both fallacies may be seen as parasitic upon what are cogent schemes of reasoning in certain contexts. Overall, Hundleby gives us a very good *prima facie* case in favour of including her two new fallacies.

4. OUT WITH THE OLD, OR JUST NEW BOTTLES?—THE ASSIMILATION PROBLEM

Proposed by Hundleby for elimination or at least having the status of little contemporary relevance are:

1. Aristotle's fallacy of *accent* "in which a meaning shifts because of word order [...] a feature much less common in contemporary languages [...]" (p. 4)
2. Aristotle's fallacy of *accident*, "in which accidental or contingent features are taken to imply general, necessary, or essential features. It has been very difficult to make sense of this fallacy in a culture that denies such essentialist thinking, *pace* Hilary Putnam." (p. 13)

However, a number of fallacy theorists introduce newer versions of *accent* and *accident* to make them more fit for contemporary applications. For example, Alex Michalos reinterpreted *accent* to be a fallacy of misplaced emphasis or stress in a sentence, improperly changing its meaning; also, the fallacy of *accident* is introduced as the improper application of a generalization to a single instance (Michalos 1969, pp. 364, 366). I'm inclined to accept Hundleby's narrow suggestion that we eliminate or continue to ignore the strictly Aristotelian versions of these fallacies, but I believe the flexibility of reinterpretation of traditional fallacies, illustrated by Michalos, raises an "assimilation" problem for Hundleby—why can't the androcentric and biological reduction fallacies be regarded as variants of already recognized fallacies in the standard canon? This seems to be a question that worries Hundleby, since she argues against such assimilation: for the androcentric fallacy, she argues that it is not just an appeal to emotion or hasty generalization (p. 8), nor should it be seen as Kahane's fallacy of provincialism. (pp. 13f.) Moreover, the fallacy of biological reductionism, Hundleby argues, cannot be the fallacy of accident (though it may "resonate" with that archaic fallacy), since that fallacy makes no sense in contemporary culture. (p. 13) Nevertheless, it seems like many individual cases of androcentric thinking are not just variants but *instances* of good old standard fallacies, such as hasty generalization, provincialism, authority, *ad hominem* circumstantial and abusive, slippery slope, etc. For example, a speech by a Taliban mullah on not educating women might appeal to the Koran (authority), appeal to prevalent Islamic male norms (circumstantial *ad hominem*), argue the dire long-term consequences of educating women (slippery slope) and pose the false dilemma of educating women or preserving fundamental Islamic values. Surely these are instances of Hundleby's androcentric fallacy as defined; however, they are also instances of standard informal fallacies. What does Hundleby's revision of the standard canon imply? Are these no longer the androcentric fallacy as she has defined it—mere variants or instances of already well-recognized fallacies? Or are they still the androcentric fallacy, but overlapping these others? Or will the androcentric fallacy be reserved just for non-overlapping cases? Similar points can be made for the biological reductionism fallacy.

5. THE NATURE OF CRITICISMS WITHIN SCIENCE

A second concern arises because Hundleby's examples are almost exclusively in the domain of science, including pop science. Certainly what appears to be science but is best called *pseudoscience* has often been used to promote a hidden ideological agenda. However, it would not be appropriate to include most pop sociobiology or pop evolutionary psychology or other pop sciences in the category of pseudoscience. Pop sciences may be misguided and mistaken, and the mistakes need to be exposed by critics such as Gould, Kitcher, Longino, Lloyd, and Buller. Nonetheless, they lack the characteristic of deception and a hidden agenda so often associated with pseudoscience. Recall that a deceptive nature is accepted by Hundleby as a basic definition of fallacy. So, does Hundleby wish to preserve a distinction between pop science and pseudoscience and what are the implications for her definition of fallacies as having a "deceptive nature?" If pop science and science are not by nature "deceptive," then it goes against her own definition for Hundleby to include cases from them as examples of "fallacies."

Finally, criticizing any scientific hypothesis, pseudo, pop, or otherwise, will involve careful scrutiny of any underlying assumptions to expose faulty assumptions and incoherent logic, and will further involve presenting alternative hypotheses that explain the phenomenon just as well. It seems to me that this is the spirit of criticism employed by Lloyd, Gilligan, Gould, Buller, and Kitcher. If the traditional machinery of science is well-tuned to expose the kind of erroneous assumptions found in science, then what advantage is gained by having labels handy for just the small subset represented by the androcentric and biological reductionism fallacies? Buller does use the term "fallacy" to describe the questionable assumptions he identifies in pop evolutionary psychology; however, I take him to be using the term loosely, and not in the technical sense now under discussion. I believe Hundleby needs to say more about the value of including her two new fallacies within a revised standard canon of informal fallacies beyond what can be achieved in teaching students about the pitfalls of faulty scientific reasoning in general. None of these remarks are meant to call into question the importance of Hundleby's examples in educating students or the public about these crucial issues. Nevertheless, it seems to work well in critical thinking courses to have one section of the course devoted to the identification of informal fallacies of the standard sort and another section of the course given over to understanding the nature of scientific reasoning, including statistical and causal reasoning, with some emphasis on how these can go wrong. I'd like to hear more from Hundleby as to why we should attempt to blend what are usually separate areas of critical thinking approaches in the way she suggests. What is at issue is whether we need to enlarge the standard canon of informal fallacies, or instead to treat her two new fallacies (and even use the term "fallacy" in their titles) as examples of egregious errors in scientific reasoning. Are there pedagogical or other advantages to the former over the latter?

[Link to paper](#)

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