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Commentary on Adler

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IGNORANCE IS NO EXCUSE (FOR DEDUCTIVELY INVALID INFERENCE): REPLY TO ADLER'S 'ARGUING FROM IGNORANCE'

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I am intrigued by many of the questions raised by Jonathan Adler's discussion of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. For the sake of generating controversy, I shall confine my remarks to just a few topics about which I may be able to offer an opposing viewpoint. The problems I want to consider have mostly to do with issues Adler does not directly address, but that I think are intrinsically important for the subject of his paper, and that have wider implications for the logical status of the so-called informal or rhetorical fallacies, of which the *ad ignorantiam* is a particularly instructive example.

Adler reconstructs a version of the *ad ignorantiam* which he claims has 'the most plausible...structure.' If this is true, which I am perfectly prepared to believe, I am surprised that Adler does not comment on a conspicuous deductive invalidity in the argument. Adler says that 'the step from 2 to 3 does not succeed' and that the inference 'does not follow'. Step (2) is interpreted in terms of the epistemic possibility of proposition p (a concept I am not sure I fully understand). The proposition in step (3) which according to Adler does not actually follow from step (2) states that there is no reason not to reject p as false, or that p's truth is seriously possible (the meaning of which strikes me as even more vague and unenlightening). Unlike Adler, however, I find the inference from (2) to (3) relatively unproblematic. If (2) says that p is epistemically possible merely in the negative sense of not having been disproven or not being known to be false, then I think I can agree with the conclusion in (3) that there is a reason, however weak and thin, not to reject p as false (my only reservation is that I'm not sure I can go along with Adler's parenthetical paraphrase, by which the above is taken to mean that p's truth is 'seriously' possible). Such a conclusion accords with another theme Adler sounds, that if we want to advance the cause of knowledge, then we should keep an open mind and not prejudge the truth of a proposition when we do not know whether it is true or is false. I think that this commendable attitude is sufficient to support (3) given (2). My difficulty begins earlier with the inference from step (1) to step (2) in Adler's formulation, which as far as I can see is deductively invalid. I shall try to show this by an application of the good old fashioned counterexample method. Assumption (1) states that: 'No one has disproven, or knows to be false, that p'. Of course, realistically our epistemic situation is typically one of more highly iterated ignorance under the circumstances. As a rule, we are seldom in a position honestly to pronounce as something we definitely know (by which I do not mean know with certainty) that no one has disproven p or knows p to be false. At most, we are ordinarily entitled to say that we know of no one who has disproven p or who knows that p is false. Here we have an additional layer of ignorance beyond that which Adler acknowledges to play havoc with the epistemic conditions of our reasoning. Yet even if we know that no one has disproven or knows proposition p to be false, it still does not logically follow as Adler's step (2) maintains that it is (logically, 'epistemically', or 'seriously') possible that p is true.

As a counterexample, we need look no further than Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in a problem developed for somewhat different purposes by Saul A. Kripke in his lectures on *Naming and Necessity*. Consider any (as far as we know!) unproven and undisproven proposition of mathematics. A famous case is Goldbach's conjecture that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes. If Goldbach's

conjecture is true, then as a proposition of mathematics, it is logically necessarily true; while if it is false, then for the same reason it is logically necessarily false. Now no one (as far as we know!) has disproven Goldbach's conjecture, and no one (as far as we know!) has disproven the negation of Goldbach's conjecture. But whether Goldbach's conjecture or its negation is true, it does not follow as Adler's conclusion (2) has it, that either Goldbach's conjecture or its negation is logically, 'epistemically', or 'seriously' possible, by virtue of not having been disproven. If Goldbach's conjecture is true, but its negation as we currently believe is undisproven, the negation of Goldbach's conjecture is not possible in any of the senses Adler mentions despite being undisproven, because in that case it is logically impossible. If, on the other hand, the negation of Goldbach's conjecture is true, but the conjecture itself as we currently believe is undisproven, then Goldbach's conjecture is not possible in any of the senses Adler mentions despite being undisproven, because in that case it is logically impossible.

I could raise similar objections by means of different counterexamples about the truth of step (6) in Adler's reconstruction. This sentence also seems to condense a deductively invalid inference into a conditional proposition, and appears to me to embody a logical howler as damaging to the semantic integrity of the inference it contains as that from step (1) to (2). Since Adler has also detected some epistemic mischief here, I shall not elaborate further. But I think that I am a bit more concerned than Adler seems to be about the blatant equivocation in the transition this paraphrase entails from it being permissible to believe a proposition (on general grounds of open-mindedness, especially where we have no good reason for disbelief), to its being reasonable to believe the proposition. The latter I understand in Roderick M. Chisholm's *Theory of Knowledge* vocabulary to be a term of much higher epistemic appraisal. To say that it is reasonable to believe a proposition for me suggests not only the lack of any specific reason to disbelieve it, but a stronger more positive justification to accept it as true. Yet the elision from a proposition's being permissible to its being reasonable to believe is the very inferential problem at stake in the ad ignorantiam fallacy. In less refined formulations than Adler's, like those found in elementary logic textbooks, it is even more clearly deductively invalid to infer that a proposition p is true or may justifiably be believed from the assumption that it is not known to be false.

My final remark, a parting shot, is that I am not at all sure, or at least not as certain as Adler, that Henry Fonda in *Twelve Angry Men* is guilty of reasoning *ad ignorantiam*. When Fonda says 'supposing we're wrong', I do not regard him as necessarily trying to argue against his fellow jurymen by assuming that we do not know whether the accused is guilty, and inferring that therefore we can or should conclude that the accused is not guilty. That would indeed be a patent fallacy, and perhaps the juryman who retorts, 'Suppose this building should fall down on my head! You can suppose anything', interprets Fonda as Adler does. But I would give a rather different account of his reasoning, according to which the argument is something more like a practical recommendation than a factual pronouncement. Perhaps Fonda reasons as follows. 'If we're wrong in condemning the accused, the defendant's punishment will be irreversible, and we will have no opportunity to correct our mistake and undo the wrong which for all we know we may be about to commit. Therefore, we should reach a decision that we can know with some assurance in advance will not trouble our consciences later when more of the facts relevant to this case come to light. We should consider more seriously voting for acquittal if we are not sure beyond a reasonable doubt of the accused's guilt, even if we thereby risk setting free someone who is in fact guilty.' Fonda may thus be expressing a higher criterion of reasonable doubt than the other members of the jury. And this, in view of the potentially disastrous consequences of a mistaken guilty verdict, I prefer to describe as the mark of a prudent and conscientious, even courageous (albeit obnoxious) juror, rather than the unwitting author of a deductive logical fallacy in the guise of a clumsy argument from ignorance. By such reasoning he is the very sort of person I would want to sit in trial of my case, guilty or innocent, were I (heaven forbid) ever to be accused of a capital offense.