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Commentary on Patrick Bondy's "When Reasons Don't Work"

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In his paper "When Reasons Don't Work," Patrick Bondy raises a question fundamental to the rational integrity of any genuine argument community. How shall those that count themselves and are counted as among the members of such a community guarantee that all those that, through their manifest goals and practices, commit themselves to membership will be included, given the many irrational impediments that exist to granting them this status: impediments based on the "kind" of person aspiring to membership, the social identity that he or she has been assigned?

In the argument communities that have evolved as an essential component of so-called Western cultures, the record of dealing with these sorts of impediments has, of course, as we all know, not always been a very good one. One hundred years ago, for example, these communities were largely dominated by men. Many men—and women—believed about women that they were vain, foolish creatures whose reasoning was inevitably characterized by huge logical leaps and a reliance on what was called "women's intuition." Men, in their professional roles as doctors, educators, lawyers, and magistrates, were often encouraged to take what women said about how they felt and what they thought with a gigantic grain of salt. Both legally and morally, women existed in a state of perpetual tutelage.

Similarly, fifty years ago, in some areas of the United States, people of African descent were routinely denounced as being incapable of sustained rational thought. The arguments of their public figures, when not dismissed as the mere parroting of the words of white Communist puppeteers, were often viewed as the very quintessence of passionate demagoguery, motivated by nothing more than cunning, the will to power, and a (perhaps justified) desire for revenge. Indeed, in the popular image of the time (somewhat modified from the extremes of earlier days), the medium of argumentation itself—language—was something in the use of which African-Americans were held by their oppressors to be brutishly or comically inept.

And today there still exist such strategies of argumentative disenfranchisement. As I detailed in a recent paper (Fields 2007), the Christian Right group Focus on the Family, for example, routinely encourages its addressees to deny full membership in the argumentative community to gays and lesbians, claiming that such individuals are so unreliable, so self-deceiving, and so eager to be accepted as normal that they will say or do just about anything to win an argument. Its advice to parents, pastors, and school

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counselors, among others, is that what lesbians and gays have to say about their rights or experiences can be and should be safely ignored.

I agree with Patrick Bondy that there is something about this sort of systematic disenfranchisement that goes way beyond the committing of some kind of fallacy. “Ad hominem” or “poisoning the well,” for instance, seems too limited, too episodic to describe what is going on here: nothing less than the working out in individual cases of a complex, widely ramifying *Weltanschauung* of oppression. Moreover, what one seems to have in the case of fallacies like “ad hominem” and “poisoning the well” is at least a genuine engagement with another in some sort of dialectical interaction, though that interaction may by virtue of the use of these fallacies be somewhat debased or misdirected.

In addition, I agree with him that we should not let the threat posed by such systematic exclusions blind us to the fact that some “social stereotypes,” as he calls them, are useful and factually well-supported: that they are, indeed, necessary to our ability to navigate through the world as efficient and responsible belief-forming agents. For example, as I argued in my 2007 paper, based on the evidence provided by the US Federal Trade Commission, it is probably a good idea not to pay too much attention to the claims of those who manufacture and purvey so-called “diet pills” when they are speaking or writing in their professional capacities, even though this may mean disregarding, at least initially, the claims of some “honest” diet pill manufacturers or purveyors (if any).

I feel less sanguine, however, about the way in which Bondy attempts to navigate between these two important points. To be sure, I am not necessarily opposed to the solution that he offers: that one disregard one’s emotional reactions to an argument offered by an individual who belongs to a group the members of which one prejudicially under- or over-values. (One imagines that this is a position that one ought to adopt towards any argument that one receives, but for the exigencies of time and multiple obligations.) But I am worried about the sorts of circumstances in which such a solution might be called for. Who gets to decide if one’s attitudes towards another social group are the result of prejudice or a justified hesitancy to believe? Isn’t there a difference between the sort of widespread and systematic disenfranchisement from the realm of the rational that is typical of racism and sexism, for example, and mere political partisanship or religious sectarianism? What sorts of consequences will adopting a solution like Bondy’s have on the integrity of the argumentative community he is trying to potentially enlarge and maintain: specifically, on the desirability of presenting oneself as a member of a purportedly despised group in the giving of one’s arguments?

I ask these questions because I am genuinely unclear about what Bondy means by the idea of an “identity prejudice.” He gives as an example the prejudices that he says exist towards scientists that believe in intelligent design. But I have to say that, in my reading of the literature surrounding this topic, I really haven’t encountered a widespread and systematic prejudice against such scientists as such. What I have seen have been arguments against the arguments that such individuals have offered and reasons to doubt that the organizations that fund the research of such individuals are without ulterior motives. And this has led me to believe that, all things being equal, I should be at least initially sceptical about the arguments that such individuals advance, such as the argument (going back to Paley) from inexplicable complexity in nature.

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Now, maybe what this means is that I am too prejudiced to see that my wariness of the work of any randomly chosen intelligent design scientist is a result of my prejudice. I don't think so. But then, who gets to judge? Bondy counsels us to talk to those we may be prejudiced against to see if we are. But then this won't help in this case. For I am not an expert in the fields that intelligent design-oriented scientists are interested in and thus must rely upon others that are. And those individuals overwhelmingly reject the arguments of the intelligent design scientists (though, as scientists, they do not of course reject the possibility of supernaturalism, just the idea that there is direct scientific evidence for it). Are *they* then prejudiced against their intelligent design peers? Many intelligent design scientists say that they are. But then, of course, that's what you would expect them to say, if they thought that their arguments could get a better hearing with people like me; if they could, in others words, get an argumentative advantage from successfully convincing non-experts that others in their field aren't listening to them because those individuals have an irrational animus against them.

Without some sort of practical guidelines for what gets to count as a prejudice, this is the danger that Bondy's account faces. It gives every individual an incentive to say "Your bad feeling about my argument arises from the fact that prejudice against Christians (or Southerners or Northerners or attractive people or unattractive people or old people or young people or white people or whatever) is rife in our society and many people are blind to it." In fact, in the United States, at any rate, many would claim that this has been the course of political dialogue and debate for the last forty years and that the tendency to argue in this way is only intensifying. It makes sense as a strategy because there is a sense certainly in which one can be blind to one's own prejudices. The argument that self-deception may hinder an honest inventory of one's bigotries is especially powerful. And for at least some of the claims that one must respond to, as I have noted, the question of third-party prejudice may also be a major issue.

Now, Bondy may say that this is not his concern. What gets to count as a prejudice is a factual matter, dependent on specific circumstances. But I don't think that this is enough. If this account is to function as a genuine practical guide, it does seem that we will need more guidance than he has provided in when to apply it or we may well have as a result an arms race of purported victimhood that will massively distract from the genuine, deep, historic, and devastating disenfranchisement that this proposal was, I imagine, intended to address.

[Link to paper](#)

REFERENCE

Fields, John E. (2007). Acceptable addressee constraints on the authority of interested or compromised testifiers. In: H. V. Hansen et al. (Eds.), *Dissensus & The Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM, Windsor, ON: OSSA.