May 14th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Huss

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Commentary on: B. Huss' "Being Careful with Paralogisms: Pedagogical Concerns about
                Informal Fallacies"

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Professor Brian Huss identifies a central concern in the teaching of informal fallacies: the fact that nonfallacious arguments may often be incorrectly classified as fallacies, and that some students too readily "overlearn" a list of fallacies, going on to make that mistake with abandon. A clear case of too little knowledge being dangerous. Ralph Johnson (1995, 110) was among the first to discuss this problem extensively in his article "The Blaze of Her Splendors" in which he states, "In similar fashion it becomes intelligible why critics of fallacy theory often wish to point out that what is fallacious in one context is not so in another." Others have remarked on this point. For example, in discussing argumentum ad hominem, Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1995, 227) say, "It may seem as if the same discussion move is in one case permitted and not in another, so that it is in some cases a fallacy and in other cases not. What the two moves have in common is that something negative is said about a person, but on a closer inspection they prove to be very different." Douglas Walton frequently takes note of this difficulty in his numerous evaluations of fallacy types, often giving two or more examples of an alleged fallacy, some clearly fallacious and some not. I support this observed distinction as a significant feature of informal fallacies theory and pedagogy and will refer to it here as the "demarcation problem" of informal fallacies.

Professor Huss's solution to the demarcation problem is that "teachers of informal fallacies should be careful to provide examples of arguments which might appear to commit a fallacy but really don't" (Huss, 1). I believe this is sound advice; however, it isn't clear that this will suffice to overcome the problem Huss notes. Lacking a deeper analysis of fallacy examples, teachers of fallacies will not always be in a good position to justify the classification of examples into the fallacious vs. nonfallacious categories. Thus, it might sometimes appear the instructor is offering unjustified opinions, and that carries its own hazards in a classroom. I believe help is at hand, and in what follows I will offer my cogent reasoning model of informal fallacies as one way to provide guidance to students about the demarcation problem.

1. Brief description of the Cogent Reasoning Model of Informal Fallacies (CRM)

In a forthcoming article (Boone, 2002) I give the following definition of the cogent reasoning model of informal fallacies:

> CRM identifies three features of informal fallacies. First, committing an informal fallacy involves what I term implicit cogent reasoning; that is, there is either deductively valid or inductively strong reasoning used by the person(s) guilty of committing a fallacy, and much of that reasoning is almost always implicit. Second, one or more false premises are responsible for the fallaciousness. And third, an element of "culpable ignorance or deception" is connected with

the falsity of the premise(s). In brief, CRM asserts a major role for implicit premises or conclusions used to reason cogently in informal fallacies, with the falsity of at least one of the premises producing the fallaciousness. However, the falsity of the premise(s) must not be falsity simpliciter but culpably ignorant and/or deceptive falsity, or else there is no way to distinguish nonfallacious valid but unsound arguments from fallacious ones.

The main assumption of CRM is that a fallacy perpetrator and/or an audience share general and common patterns of "good" reasoning when an informal fallacy is committed. The premises and conclusions of these patterns involve both implicit and explicit beliefs or intentions. The implicit beliefs or intentions are at least "unexpressed" and often lie below the level of overt awareness. When an informal fallacy is committed, one or more of the premises is false and the falsity is associated with deception or culpable ignorance. When all the premises are true, there is no fallacy. Marking the distinction this way has ready application to the demarcation problem Professor Huss sets for us. Elsewhere I have likened the CRM account to the pragmatic reasoning schemas identified by Richard Nisbett, and I believe other recent research in the psychology of reasoning (e.g., Gerd Gigerenzer) supports the view that human reasoning is not as bad or incompetent as earlier research suggested. In particular, good reasoning practices develop early in life for pragmatic and social applications. We learn later to misapply some of these for purposes of manipulation or deception—these are the informal fallacies. Informal fallacies work well precisely because they use familiar and common cogent reasoning processes. That is, the familiarity of the good reasoning is itself a factor in our failure to catch the falsity of one or more of the premises. Thus, I argue that we need to do more to address Huss's concern than provide examples. In particular, we should attempt to sharpen our students' abilities to find both the underlying patterns of reasoning and the truth or falsity of the premises involved to make progress in solving the demarcation problem.

2. Let's apply the CRM approach to Professor Huss's first fallacy type, the ad populum fallacy. Huss gives a very simple definition of the fallacy:

"Everyone (or nearly everyone) thinks p is true.

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P is true." (Huss, 1)

In my original treatment of this fallacy (1999, 12), I propose it as a variant of the fallacy of authority, having the following implicit cogent reasoning pattern:

(Most/ Many/ The majority of/ A significant number of/ A few) cases of popular opinion in the present circumstances reflect common knowledge about correct beliefs and proper actions.

Common knowledge beliefs are probably true and common knowledge recommends actions which are probably proper.

This is a case in which popular opinion says believe or do A, and the proper circumstances are present.

Hence, A is probably true or proper.

Huss's first example (the fallacious one) is:

"Throughout history and in almost every culture, most people have believed that God exists.
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God exists" (Huss, 2).

       I agree with Huss that this is a fallacy. However, his explanation of why it is a fallacy is very brief, remarking only that "it is clear." Following a discussion by Freeman, I have proposed the CRM analysis above rooted in the concept of "common knowledge." It can be argued that belief in the existence of God is disputed by significant numbers of people, and thus, such beliefs, even if popular opinion, do not "reflect common knowledge." So, the first premise is false in the CRM analysis above. I am also concerned that Huss omits the inductive nature of the implicit reasoning in this fallacy and think his conclusion might be better expressed as "Probably, God exists." Further, the appeal to popularity can vary widely in terms of the numbers or ratio appealed to, so it seems best to include a range from "most" to even "a few." Finally, using such abbreviated and simplified textbook examples makes it difficult to assess a case in terms of the third factor, culpable ignorance or deception. I surmise that most ordinary uses of the above example under a fuller description would indeed reveal a manipulative element. I recommend discussing this aspect of informal fallacies with students to give them a richer understanding of the subject. However, this is a less important factor in discussing the particular demarcation problem Huss addresses, so I will omit further consideration of it below.

Huss's second example (the nonfallacious one) is:

"Everyone (or nearly everyone) thinks this piece of paper (which depicts a past leader and which is issued by the government) is worth $5.
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This piece of paper is indeed worth $5" (Huss, 2).

       Huss makes what I take to be the correct initial move in his comments on this example, indicating that there is a "suppressed premise." Unfortunately, he doesn't take back his statement that the "argument is not formally valid" even with this suppressed premise added. In fact, he argues instead that the argument is "semantically valid (and hence informally strong)," based on the concepts of money and value. Even if that is true in some sense in this case, it seems hard to generalize this case to what Huss wants in the long run, namely, instances of nonfallacious arguments primarily based on popular opinion. Consider the following case: a student in her first day at a new school hears the teacher say, "It's lunch time! Everyone line up!" The other students in the class rise from their desks and form a line down the left wall of the classroom leading to the door. The new student follows suit and gets in line. The new student seems to be inferring common knowledge on the part of the other students of what to do in these circumstances, and is believing and behaving appropriately and nonfallaciously—reasoning to the conclusion that, probably, getting in the line forming along the left wall is the right thing to do. Note that there doesn't seem to be anything semantic about this case. I would again plead for the insertion of "probably" in the conclusion of Huss's example, if for no other reason than the existence of counterfeit bills. The main point is, in the new student case (and probably in Huss's $5 bill case) all the premises in the above CRM analysis are true in the given circumstances and that explains why no fallacy is committed: truth combined with cogent reasoning yields soundness, not fallaciousness.

3. I wish to withhold comment on Huss's Naturalistic Fallacy (though I find it quite interesting) and move next to raise similar questions about Huss's treatment of the authority fallacy. His two examples are:

"(A) Einstein was a genius and much of what he said suggested that he believed in God.

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God probably exists.

(B) Many physicists have reported that their experiments suggest that Einstein's General Theory of Relativity can be used repeatedly and consistently to make very accurate predictions.

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Einstein's General Theory of Relativity is probably correct" (Huss,4).

I endorse Huss's recognition of this fallacy as inductive in nature. However, an immediate concern is that Example B seems more like the previous ad populum appeal to "many physicists." (That's not a grievous error with me since I see ad populum as an authority variation anyway.) But perhaps a more parallel example would be something like:

(B') Einstein was a genius and believed in gravitational lensing.

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Gravitational lensing probably exists.

For these kinds of appeals I speculatively propose (1999, 10) the following CRM analysis:

> "Most people who are legitimate authoritative experts about a subject have true opinions about many uncontroversial questions in that subject.
> This person is a legitimate authoritative expert about this uncontroversial question.
> Therefore, this person's opinion about this question in this subject is probably true."

Commonly noted factors in evaluating appeals to expert opinion are:

a.   The legitimacy of the credentials or qualifications of the expert.
b.   The relevance of the expert's credentials for the subject or issue in question.
c.   The existence of consensus or lack of controversy among legitimate experts about the subject or issue in question.

The CRM analysis addresses these three factors. The notable difference between Huss's Example A and my substitute Example B' is that the former fallacious case has at least one false premise, whereas the latter nonfallacious case has all true premises, at least in the recent community of physicists. Again, I suggest that recognition of this difference gains Huss's main objective in a deeper way: to help the student "appreciate the difference between the two appeals to expert opinion" (Huss, 5).

4. Huss has the right intuition about ad hominem fallacies: indeed, one needs to give some weight to such things as ulterior motives in assessing the credibility of someone's opinions or premises. Of course, there are other factors beyond just ulterior motives. Here's the CRM analysis I have proposed (1999, 13):

> Discrediting Opinions: Most people who are despicable in ways affecting their integrity and reliability on certain issues do not have trustworthy opinions about these issues. This person is despicable in ways affecting his/her integrity and reliability about the issue at hand. Therefore, this person's opinion in this particular case probably should not be trusted.

> Disapproving of Actions: The behavior of most people who are despicable in certain ways should not be imitated. This person is despicable in certain ways. Therefore, this person's behavior probably should not be imitated.

These analyses focus on the personal characteristics that affect a person's integrity or reliability, including their credibility or trustworthiness, points Huss appropriately makes. There is also an extension to cases of good or poor models of behavior. Of course, judgments on personal characteristics may be very context bound. For example, someone may have a propensity to lie about alcohol consumption but be otherwise quite trustworthy. The difficulty this context-dependence raises is that the range of personal characteristics affecting credibility is large. Even the category of "having an ulterior motive" comprises a large set of factors. I endorse Huss's program to look at numerous examples of both fallacious and nonfallacious cases, hopefully diverse in nature. However, we need also to help the students develop a general sense of which personal characteristics are relevant to credibility and which are not. Here again, the CRM schema serves to focus attention on this salient feature in evaluating such appeals.

5. *Tu Quoque*

The nonfallacious example Huss develops for this fallacy is: a relativist criticizes an objectivist, "saying that objectivism with respect to truth must be false because truth is relative to what individuals believe." The objectivist rejoinder is: "the relativist's proclamation amounts to the claim that it is true that nothing is true. Therefore, the relativist's objection seems to be subject to itself" (Huss, 5). Huss claims this is not a *tu quoque* fallacy because it seems "legitimate for the objectivist to dismiss a naïve relativist's criticism on these grounds alone" (Huss, 5-6).

I don't believe Huss has captured the sense of standard *tu quoque* fallacies in this example. Understandably, what he is searching for is a nonfallacious example that seems superficially to be similar to fallacious cases, but I don't think he needs to rely on anything as strong as objecting to a self-refuting view to establish nonfallaciousness. Instead, his main point is better carried by a nonfallacious example that shares the general *tu quoque* reasoning pattern, but has true premises. Such as:

A: "You're running a high fever with a bad cough and wheezing, so I don't think you should go to the concert—you might infect others with whatever you have."

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B: "Well, you've got the same symptoms I have. So, why are you talking about going to your meeting?"

Clearly, any legitimate sauce-for-the-goose-is-sauce-for-the-gander examples will serve to show that what superficially looks like the *tu quoque* fallacy is actually not.
     Tu quoque is one of many fallacies for which I have not previously developed a CRM analysis. Tentatively, I propose that the underlying concern is fairness in the enforcement of standards or rules and avoidance of hypocrisy. Something like this may be going on:

> If one endorses a rule or standard for behavior or judgment of others, then one must be willing to live up to that rule or standard for oneself. A is not willing to live up to this particular rule or standard for herself or himself. Therefore, A should not endorse that rule or standard for others.

To apply this to one fallacious example for the sake of contrast, consider the case of the teenage son rejecting his mother's criticism of his smoking on the grounds that she also smokes. Arguably, the son is committing a fallacy, which can be explained by the fact that, in this case, the first premise in my proposed analysis is false – even smokers can try to persuade others of the evils of smoking.

6. Question Begging

Following Douglas Walton's concept of "evidential priority," (1995, 234) the cogent reasoning analysis is:

A

Premise A has evidential priority with respect to Conclusion B.

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So, B.

For Walton, "evidential priority" means "that the premises are being used as evidence to support the conclusion in such a way that each premise must be capable of being established without having to depend on the prior establishment of the conclusion, in the supporting line of argumentation backing up the premise." I believe that this concept avoids Huss's second form of "context-relative" question begging "against a particular position" (Huss, 6). One needs to offer premises "capable" of being supported independently of the conclusion, but one need not anticipate what one's opponent will or will not reject out of hand. To suggest that offering premises that *may* be rejected by an opponent is a fallacy would make, as Huss states, most argumentation and philosophical debate "problematic." If so, that is perhaps a very good reason to exclude this, and certainly not teach it, as a form of fallacy. Thus, we seem to be left with circular reasoning as the main form of the fallacy of begging the question.
     If Huss wishes to generate nonfallacious examples similar to fallacies, the contrast class with question-begging fallacies would be non-circular arguments that preserve Walton's sense of

evidential priority. To achieve Huss's main objective in teaching fallacies to students, it would seem advisable to construct noncircular arguments that structurally parallel a given circular fallacy.

7. Slippery Slope

Informal logicians, including Huss, frequently observe that slippery slope fallacies seem to employ deductively valid reasoning. However, the CRM analysis puts a slight twist on this common observation by incorporating a feature often found in actual cases: usually the chain leads to a very undesirable or catastrophic consequence. It should still be possible to regard such formulations as deductively valid in deontic or preference logics.

Here is the proposed CRM pattern (Boone, 1999, 7):

> "If A, then B
> If B, then C
> If C, then D
> If D, then E
> [We should not want E to be true]   (implicit premise)
> So, [We should not want A to be true,
> or we should not let A be true.]   (implicit conclusion)"

I disagree with Huss's classification of the "fallacy of the heap" example as nonfallacious. His first premise seems arguably false: "If one grain of sand does not constitute a pile of sand, then neither do 50 zillion grains of sand." The "unstated premise" or "principle" Huss gives that seems to compel him to this judgment is: "If n pieces of sand does not constitute a pile of sand, then neither does $n + 1$ pieces of sand." Huss calls this principle "reasonable on its face," and I tentatively agree, though the reasonableness is illusory. The vagueness of "pile of sand" is matched by the vagueness of "a piece of sand." Thus, we could in truth have a situation in which infinitesimally tiny and ever tinier pieces of sand added one at a time never quite make it to a pile of sand—shades of Zeno. Or, we can take a more reasonable route and adopt some degree of specificity in each antecedent and consequent. For example, in the pile of sand case, the premises should be quantitatively specific (after all, "pile" is a vaguely *quantitative* concept). The first premise may be "If I add one grain of sand to the one grain of sand I have already, each weighing .00001 kg, then I have .00002 kg of sand, but not a pile of sand." Much later in the chain, we come to premises like "If I add one grain of sand to the 50 zillion grains of sand I have already, each weighing .00001 kg, then I have (arbitrarily assuming the value 10^{12} for a "zillion") 10,000,000.00001 kg of sand, but not a pile of sand." This certainly seems like a false premise, and indeed, false premises have been arrived at long before in the chain, though with some imprecision given the vagueness of "pile of sand." So, the dilemma facing fallacies of the heap seems to lie in either purchasing soundness by avoiding sufficient quantitative specificity, combining vagueness with vagueness, to side-step a common sense conclusion, or permitting reasonable specificity and falling into unsoundness somewhere down the line.

In any case, what would best fit Huss's quest for a nonfallacious "slippery slope" case is not a sophistic (and itself "slippery") fallacy of the heap, but a robust, concrete example. As

CRM suggests, we just need to find cases with plausibly true premises. How about this mundane example? "If you send in this magazine subscription to this subscription service, you will receive six months of free issues. If you get six months of free issues, then you are committed to 2 years of issues at their regular price, which in the fine print is much more than you would pay if you subscribe directly with each publisher. You don't want to pay that much more. So, you don't want to send in this magazine subscription—this is no bargain!" Similar examples with true premises and in which no fallacy is committed are common and seem to satisfy Huss's search for complements to the fallacious cases.

8. Conclusion

Huss has asked us to pay attention to a very valuable distinction in teaching about informal fallacies: genuine informal fallacies as opposed to nonfallacious arguments similar in superficial respects. I suggest it is more helpful in teaching this distinction not only to present students with examples of both kinds, but to analyze and ground such examples to the extent possible. CRM permits such grounding. Using CRM, one may identify general, cogent, and largely implicit reasoning patterns. The truth or falsity of the premises primarily determines whether the argument is, respectively, nonfallacious or fallacious. I recommend this approach to Professor Huss to use with his students to prevent their "overlearning" of the fallacies. CRM not only makes overt use of the fallacious—nonfallacious distinction, but also provides a way more easily to focus students on the important questions and comparisons when faced with concrete examples.

There is much about CRM not touched upon in this commentary: (1) There is another aspect of the demarcation problem, namely distinguishing nonfallacious cases with false premises from fallacious cases, and that is really the main point of the third condition, requiring that the false premises be due to culpable ignorance or deception. Absent malicious intent or gullibility, one may lapse into unsound but nonfallacious reasoning with false premises. I have yet to explore this feature of CRM, and it remains a promissory note at this time. (2) CRM is not a reduction of informal fallacies to principle of charity cases or enthymematic reconstructions. Rather, it is an empirical claim about the cognitive reality of reasoning patterns used in committing informal fallacies. In fact, I have some preliminary empirical evidence that some of the proposed CRM analyses are "real." Thus, the CRM analyses proposed above are not "rational reconstructions" of "enthymematic" reasoning or "suppressed premises," but speculative hypotheses about hidden or implicit reasoning common in commissions of fallacies. However, these are matters for another time and place.

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