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How Political Cults Warp Argumentation: Who's Lying?

Beth Browning Jacobs

University of Illinois at Chicago

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Title: How Political Cults Warp Argumentation: Who's Lying?

Author: Beth Browning Jacobs

Response to this paper by: Stanley B. Cunningham

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One commonly held belief about argumentation is that it is value-neutral; that proper use of the rhetorical tropes and styles passed down to us from Quintillian, Cicero, and Aristotle ensure good rhetorical practice at all times and in all situations. Likewise, if we listen to philosophers, we may come away with the impression that knowledge of modus ponens, modus tollens, of the syllogism and the enthymeme, will protect us from being led astray.

Another commonly held belief is that people who join cults, or who buy into and support any of the beliefs perpetrated by cults, are weirdos and are fundamentally different in some respect from ordinary people. Cults, it is widely held, “do something” to the brains of the people in their power which renders those people incapable of understanding an argument. The latter claim is, in fact, half true – cults do “do something” to the people in their power. People, however, do not start out that way – they begin their relationship with cults by believing claims in the same way that they would believe any sort of claims. That is the stage of the process we will examine here.

This paper demonstrates why neither of the two above-mentioned commonly held beliefs are true. It illustrates what happens when some favorite and well-known argument forms are twisted slightly in service of falsehood. In so doing, it calls into question the notions of truth, falsehood, and argumentation, and asks us to examine exactly what virtues they contain. These are, as we all know, formal notions; by themselves they can prove nothing. In looking at the way argumentation is used within a political cult, I develop a lens which I will then look through to examine samples of current mainstream political discourse. The goal is to come up with an answer to the question “Who's lying?” or “When is something a lie?”

In the early seventies, I was inducted against my will into the political cult run by Lyndon LaRouche and known by various names – US Labor Party, National Caucus of Labor Committees, Executive Intelligence Review Organization, and many, many, more. After my escape, I testified against LaRouche before the US Senate in his tax evasion trial. He was in prison for a number of years, but is now out and is once again mounting his perennial campaign for the presidency of the United States. The examples of cult rhetoric and argumentation I will analyze this morning will be taken from his current speeches. Political cults like that of LaRouche are in fact somewhat rare; far more common are religious cults. Therefore, when it has been necessary to draw upon other cults for comparison purposes, these have been cults of religion rather than of politics.

Much cult language looks, on its surface and in its introductory premises, eerily like the language of ordinary argumentation. This is a point of critical importance. No one ever walked up to a potential member in the street and said “Hi, I represent a cult, wanna join?” In order to be effective, cult argumentation must bear superficial resemblance to absolutely ordinary everyday talk in the same genre. It is this that makes the slippery slope between mainstream politics and cult politics so clear and so dangerous – there is so little difference.

Cult language and argumentation, however, makes sudden and dramatic departures at points at which an ordinary argument should be very different. This pattern is consistent: start out with a standard argument pattern, take in your audience, then quickly break into something wildly irrational. By demonstrating a number of such cases, I hope to show that it should be easy for us to defend ourselves against the lure of cults *if we are paying attention*, since the symptoms can be readily diagnosed.

What, exactly, defines a group as a cult? The dictionary definition is “a minority belief group regarded as spurious or unorthodox.” By that definition, many things would be cults. The definition then goes on to elaborate the part that I want to emphasize, saying that members of cults are characterized by a “great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing.” How, then, is that great or excessive devotion is produced? We have seen it in many forms in our lifetime – the suicide of the followers of Jim Jones, the disaster in Waco, and many more. What rhetorical and persuasive techniques did the leaders use to lure people into doing these and other unspeakable acts?

In their excellent book surveying a number of cults, *All God's Children: The Cult Experience – Salvation or Slavery?*, Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parker list the following as identifying characteristics of a cult (28-29), all of which I can verify from personal experience. (You have these on your handout as well.)

1. A cult has a living leader. Cult doctrine is based on his revelations which either supplant or supplement traditional... doctrine...
2. The cult leader is the sole judge of the quality of a member's faith and he enjoys absolute authority over the members. He often lives in kingly splendor while his subjects live in poverty.
3. A cult promises a system in which a convert may work to save the world and humanity, but actually sponsors no community-improvement programs.
4. The daily work of nearly all cult members is demeaning and utilizes little of their potential in terms of intelligence, training, or, education.
5. ...[C]ults are exclusive social systems... Members are taught to believe that they are 'superior' to those outside of the group.
6. To be a member... a person must... cut himself off from job, education, friends, and family.
7. Methods of ego-destruction and thought control are part of a... cult's recruiting and indoctrination practices.

These traits do not make themselves evident to new recruits. Introductory talks which recruit people into cults are usually bland and harmless in nature. The group does not identify itself by name. The trick is to get people to come once and not offend them so that they will return a second time; then, at that second meeting, the direct indoctrination process can begin. So the talk at the first meeting usually has little content at all. Stoner and Parker point out that in that first talk “is an attempt to paint a picture of a better world, using clichés and platitudes. Though there will be little in the lecture he can disagree with, it will hardly inspire the hope intended in the young recruit's heart.” (33)

Marc Galanter describes a young man's induction into the Moonies in a similar way in his book on *Cults*. He was invited to attend a workshop by a college friend which "dealt with a variety of general issues related to the welfare of the poor in America and abroad." Note the generality and the unrelatedness of the argument to anything to do with Reverend Moon. The same young woman called back and invited him to a weekend long workshop the following weekend; when he declined, she offered to pick him up, so he went. Quoting Galanter again, "(as the weekend progressed), Jerry became increasingly attracted to the group's ideals of universal brotherhood and a Divine Principle... Jerry acknowledged that if he had known (that this was the Unification Church) at the outset, he would not have chosen to participate." The LaRouche political group works in exactly the same way. They initially presented themselves to my husband and myself as just another people's party; LaRouche, the entire elitist apparatus associated with him and his several affiliated organizations, and the required commitment of our whole lives were not mentioned.

Strategy I: Just Plain Fallacious Logic

In the values used to draw in Jerry, we can see the resemblance to some common political rhetoric. Jerry was concerned about the poor – who isn't? Similarly, who can say "Family values are bad?" "Violence is good?" The statements are not wrong – they are vacuous; they are intended as introductory rhetoric to draw in the convert. The next step asks you to listen to more detailed information. This seems completely reasonable. If you have agreed that violence is bad, and you have agreed to the proposition, also hard to disagree with, that you are a bright, energetic person who wants to change the world, then the next premise, that you want to be shown the specific steps of how to do it, seems to follow quite logically.

It does not, of course. You could be bright and energetic and want to change the world and hate violence and have no truck with this particular method of getting rid of the violence. This is one of the places where false argument gets employed regularly. The argument used by cult leaders goes like this.

P1	You said you wanted to change X.	W is an X.
P2	Doing Y is a method of changing X	Y is an X.
Conclusion	Therefore, you want to do Y.	Therefore, W is a Y.

We can all recognize this fallacy: put in more general terms it has the form of the one beside it. It is trying to pretend to be a categorical syllogism; however, in that argument form, the major term has to be the predicate of the conclusion and the minor term has to be the subject of the conclusion. The major term here is "X": in the logic of syllogisms, the *reason* why the major term is the predicate of the conclusion is that it is the subject of what we are talking about, and therefore what ties everything together.

In this light, it is interesting to notice what happens in this piece of cult discourse. The major term disappears altogether! To put it another way, the victim who is being drawn in by the cult started out thinking that he or she wanted to change something (X). That was the motivation. An argument is employed that looks as though it has to do with changing X, but in fact, in the conclusion of that argument, X has vanished, and the victim ends up with only the conclusion that he or she wants to do Y. In classical argumentative language, we can see how ridiculous this is by substituting different terms.

- P1 A tiger is an animal.
P2 A worm is an animal.
Conclusion Therefore, a worm is a tiger.

Simply put, the cult leaders have changed the subject. They employ this technique frequently. Here is an example from a speech made by LaRouche on January 13, 2001 as part of his (never-ending) campaign for the Presidency in 2004:

- P1 One thing all Americans want is to reinstall regulation of the power industry to make sure we get power again.
P2 Past history, at which I am the expert, is where we find examples of such regulation.
Conclusion Therefore, you must elect me President.

The ease with which one can be drawn into this argument can be seen just by looking at premise one. At this point in time, it is probable that a great majority of people do in fact agree with premise one. When they hear it, therefore, they become set into a psychological state of being prepared to accept what follows. Then premise two starts up with a call to the past, something else many people find appealing. This does not sound at all like what most people expect to hear from a cult – they expect it to sound weird, wild, different, strange. Instead, it sounds quite ordinary.

...at which I am the expert... may be a little strong and unusual, but we live in a society of experts, so most people will just let it pass. Notice that LaRouche here makes illicit use of the rhetorical device of conjunctio. Conjunctio is supposed to join similar ideas, but in that second premise, which he delivers very fast, the use of this rhetorical device is neither apparent nor legitimate. There are actually two premises here: the obvious one about past history, and a conjoined one, *I am an expert on past history*. Most people will not analyze it as a separate premise and will therefore let it pass. When they let it pass, and don't examine the argument carefully, they will hear the conclusion as just another ordinary campaign statement and never notice that they have heard an illogical argument.

At this point in the argument, someone will – and should – object “but all politicians do that!” Yes, indeed, they do. Part of my argument will be that frighteningly little difference sometimes exists between the language of the cult and the language of the mainstream campaign. I will return to this point later in the paper. Before coming to that, I want to continue now with the development of more argumentative tactics used by cults.

Strategy II: Sneaky Second Premise

The second argument type is the sneaky second premise. Very often, cult leaders employ a first premise so plainly and obviously true that no one would question it. When that's true, watch out for the second premise. Note that this example concerns the just-slightly-off second premise, which differs from the wildly absurd second premise. Here is an example from LaRouche, from another speech taken from his 2004 Campaign website, this one on the subject of the deterioration of the British monarchy.

P1 “The issues set forth in... the 1776 U.S. Declaration of Independence...express the unbridgeable gulf separating the principle of a modern...republic from an oligarchy of such forms as the British monarchy.”

P2 “The patriot’s view gave political expression to the Christian view of the Mosaic principle, that man and woman are made equally in the image of the Creator of the universe, and empowered, and also obliged, to rule over all lower forms of life in that universe, for their own benefit.”

P3 “Today a degraded, anti-Christian, anti-Mosaic view respecting the nature of the human species is expressed...from such sources as the World Wildlife Fund (and) the monarchy.”

Conclusion “[T]he very highest court, that of history, is moving to remove from power that which the monarchy represents, *in one way or another*.”

I shall not comment here on the validity of this argument; I want only to examine the first two premises. The first premise is an obvious truth of American history. The listener barely even pauses to reflect. It is the sneaky second premise which is worrisome. On thinking about it, one realizes that there is, in the Founding documents of this country, of which I am a student, no mention of the principles of Moses, no mention of men and women being equally empowered, and no mention of their ruling over other life forms. This “patriot’s view” has been made to sound as though it were another expression of the views of the patriots in premise one – that is, the Founding Fathers. It is, in fact, intended to sound as though P2 were a restatement of P1. Therein lies the sneakiness. The two premises together are made to sound like an encomium to Christian Patriotism, which puts the listener in the position of feeling that if he disagrees, he is in the position of rejecting that very Christian Patriotism. The cult leader has spoken with that very goal in mind. The net effect is that premise two, if accepted, adds its weight to premise one, and the two together sweep the listener on to toward the conclusion before he knows what has happened to him. Premise 3 then states the opposing position in such terms that one could not possibly agree with them – unless one were willing to take on the labels *degraded* and *anti-Christian* – and thus most listeners will be led to accept the third premise as well.

Strategy III: Very Fast Switch To Outrageous Minor Premise

Strategy three resembles strategy two, except that the second premise is wildly, outrageously outside the hearer’s expectations of what might constitute a true premise. This one depends for its success entirely upon method of rhetorical delivery and not at all upon content or logic. My observations have convinced me that the method works as follows. First, the speaker states one or two premises with which the listeners are almost certain to agree. The speaker uses a calm, relatively slow tone to deliver these premises. Then the orator delivers the outrageous premise and the conclusion in a rapid, higher-pitched voice, so quickly that the audience literally “doesn’t know what hit é m”. The effect resembles being sucker-punched. The following example comes from LaRouche’s speech “And Now the Incoming President”:

P1 President William McKinley was a patriot.

P2 Emma Goldman ran the Henry Street Settlement house at the time McKinley was president.

P3 Emma Goldman hired a terrorist to assassinate McKinley because she was a traitor and wanted Teddy Roosevelt, who was also a traitor, to be president.

Conclusion Therefore, we got a president, Teddy Roosevelt, who was a traitor.

Strategy IV: The Ad Hominem Argument

The next rhetorical strategy, and one much favored by cult leaders, is the *ad hominem* argument. I shall not explore this in depth, since we are all familiar both with the form of an *ad hominem* argument and with the reasons why it is fallacious. All that is necessary to point out here is that since a cult leader operates on the basis that he is the sole savior of the world and that his followers are far superior to other mortals, the choice of *ad hominem* as an argument strategy to use against anyone outside the cult comes naturally. The following example is taken from an address given by LaRouche on February 17, 2001, titled "Is the United States under Bush doomed?" Remember that on the handout listing the argumentative strategies, I noted that a sound argument often precedes an *ad hominem* attack, and that is the case here; I suspect that it makes the attack sound less offensive.

(Referring to an ongoing discussion) "The discussion was an exploration of the feasibility of reaching an agreement between the two powers (Russian and the United States), and other nations, for what became called, briefly, by President Reagan, "Strategic Defense Initiative." This was not strictly a military program, although it has military aspects. We were then, at that time, as some of you recall, we were living under the threat of nuclear annihilation, a policy which had been introduced in 1945, with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki...*at the insistence of Bertrand Russell, who is probably the most evil man who lived during the 20th Century in any part of the world.*" Now, the bombing may or may not have been right, and Bertrand Russell may or may not have been a nice person (though calling him the most evil man of the century does seem a bit of an exaggeration to me). Whether he was or wasn't, however, is beside the point. The point is that the conclusion of the overall larger argument *depends* on his being so: Russell's character is a premise on which the argument rests. Certainly Reagan's SDI was not entirely military (some, in fact, would argue that it was entirely economic); equally surely, many people felt, rightly or wrongly, that they had been living under the threat of nuclear annihilation. He sets up the sound and reasonable part, then he zaps us with the wild ad hominem about Russell. And the purpose? Those of us who think of Bertrand Russell as a sometimes rather annoying philosopher might say, well, why in the world would he want to do *that*? LaRouche, of course, has an answer.

Russell, says LaRouche, did not believe in national sovereignty, so he wanted to make sure we (the US) lost ours. So he was part of a conspiracy "to induce Einstein to write a letter to Franklin Roosevelt, to set into motion what became known as the Manhattan Project. Now, the intent of Russell, was... to create a weapon so terrible, in the hands of a world government, a joint world government of the British and the United States... to impose world government, by nuclear terror, upon the world." Needless to say, it didn't quite work out that way, but aside from that it should be noted that conspiracy theories such as this one are a common feature of cult thinking. What we believe is happening is never really what is happening: there are always some bad guys behind the scenes pulling the puppet strings. (In this case, LaRouche says that H G Wells, Szilard, and Wigner were Russell's co-conspirators.)

In my reading on cults, I have found this cultic hostility toward the rest of the world portrayed as typical. Stoner and Parke say "[T]his couple seems to carry some of the more notable Krishna traits, the anger and hostility to the world, to an extreme." (190) This also forms

an example of another favorite rhetorical trick used by cults, that of hyperbole. No event in the world gets reported in moderation: everything tends toward the worst that ever happened, or, if referring to the cult itself, the best place that ever existed. It is this rhetorical trope which allows LaRouche to say, seriously, "Since I am the best economist in the world..."

Strategy V: Fear Of Impending Doom

Another favorite appeal made frequently by cult leaders is to the fear of impending doom. This is the one on which I want to spend the most time, for this is the stuff of which cults are actually made. It is universally the case that what marks membership in the cult: the US/THEM distinction – is that WE have the gift of seeing the impending catastrophe, and THEY do not. Either the world is about to end, nuclear war is about to begin, the economy is about to collapse, gas prices are about to reach \$2 per gallon (a favorite while I was in the LaRouche organization), the energy supply is about to run out, or any of a number of other dismal themes. This generally requires the condition that some evidence has to actually exist for the thing feared (although I have seen exceptions). It is very difficult to preach terror of economic disaster in the midst of a booming economy, for example. Disasters, of course, need not be real; they can be invented or exaggerated from existing circumstances, or invented from nothing at all. Intuitively, one would think the first kind (those using existing circumstances) would make the easier sort of invention to believe, but in fact exactly the opposite is often true. Let's look at some examples.

First will be an example of the "exaggerated from reality" type. This is taken from a recent speech by LaRouche entitled *And Now the Incoming President*. LaRouche is here playing on the idea of the recent market downturn. "because there's a depression, we could agree to convene a new international monetary conference, to establish again, the kind of fixed exchange-rate system that got us out of the Depression in the postwar period.... We're going to have to bring nations together around the idea, of saving this planet from the worst depression in recent history, in recent centuries." I shall call this Argument A.

For an example of the "invented from nothing at all" category, I quote LaRouche from his talk entitled *Prince Philip: Man or Beast?* LaRouche claims in this talk that he is "a professed and practicing human being" and that some members of the monarchy are "adversaries who claim to represent a different species, Princes Philip and Bernard." He goes on to say that "On the one side, there is the human species, as defended by me; and, on the opposing side, there is the WWF, which acts in service of its often expressed conviction, that mankind is just another form of beast, fit only to be ruled by beastly predators...." And, continuing on a later page, "Reduced to essentials, Queen Elizabeth II today has a certain ominously ironical resemblance to the Babylonian figure popularly known as Belshazzar. In performing that role, like... the Delphi cult of Pythian Apollo... the Queen is, essentially, like... Benito Mussolini, a *Romantic* figure." I shall refer to this as Argument B.

A second example of something invented comes from a LaRouche speech entitled *Scalia and the Intent of Law*. He says "A crucial, systemic, and deadly element of constitutional fraud, permeates and subsumes the most notable rulings bearing upon criminal justice, political, and economic issues, among those uttered by the U.S. Supreme Court's Associate Justice Antonin Scalia.... Scalia's avowed doctrine of 'textualism,' if continued in practice under presently onrushing conditions of deep financial crisis, leads, quickly... to a self-doomed fascist dictatorship." I shall call this Argument C.

I would suggest that far more people will be taken in by Argument A than by Argument B. People see the economic downturn; it appears in their daily headlines or on their evening news, so they believe it to be real. That it might spiral into a depression would not surprise them. Also, if they are older people, they know that we had a bad Depression in the past and employed some successful strategies to end it; although they may not know exactly what those strategies were, many people are trusting of experts in such matters, and this man sounds as though he has an idea of what should be done about it. Argument B, however, will sound completely strange to listeners. They cannot bring together in their heads the ideas of Prince Philip, bestiality, the WWF, Belshazzar, Apollo, the Queen, Mussolini, and Romanticism. This is just too much, and the argument (employing a term loosely) will be rejected. If any hearer does believe this collection of statements, it will probably be found that the actual content of what is believed by that hearer is “I hate the Queen” or “I hate monarchy”.

LaRouche has been employing for years the slogan that the Queen of England is the mastermind behind all the world's drug running. This was going on when I was in the organization and was able to test the belief content of people who assented to this proposition. I never located a single person who actually believed that the Queen dealt in drugs. What I did locate were a large number of individuals who still held the British monarchy to be the enemies of everything American – who were, mentally, still fighting the revolution – or who were offended by the existence of monarchies because they were egalitarians. For those persons, the content of LaRouche's claim, which they were willing to donate money to support, was irrelevant to their own personal reasons for hatred of its object. Research into cults has shown this to be another common factor in all of them. They need not agree on positive beliefs: what they need to agree on is what to reject, what to get away from. When the followers of Jim Jones first moved to Guyana and then committed suicide, what they agreed on was that society had nothing to offer them – a completely negative belief. There existed little, if any, agreement within Jones' group on positive principles. This is just another version of the fear of impending doom – to stay within the mainstream society will doom you, personally – it has nothing to offer to you. What it shows about the argumentation itself is that the people involved consider the argumentation to be irrelevant: they don't believe LaRouche's argument that the Queen runs drug dealing, and they don't care. They are acting not on the basis of argumentation but on the basis of emotion. They are, however, and this is important, *using the argumentation as their socially acceptable cover for acting as they do.*

To my mind, Argument C offers the most interest in this group of three arguments. As far as I can tell, it is made up out of whole cloth, yet when I tried it on subjects at random, more people believed it than A or B. A theory is needed to explain this. My guess is that A is too ordinary – too many people say, “Yeah, so there's gonna be another Depression, so where's the surprise?” If accepted as an inevitable part of reality, it offers them an insufficient motivation to follow the cult leader. B, on the other hand, is just too weird to motivate many people. C runs counter to all of our expectations, and yet begins to explain some things that maybe haven't made sense before. It's very improbability means that we do not come to it equipped with counterevidence against it, for we would not have prepared our minds with such counterevidence. The belief set most people carry around in the world apparently includes the idea that imminent disaster may be caused by misbehavior of the Supreme Court justices but is unlikely to be caused by misbehavior of the British Monarchy. If the cult leader can make out a plausible-sounding case for C, he can offer an explanation that is both a believable solution to a

real-sounding problem and a solution not being offered by mainstream media. This is what the cult leader needs in order to gain converts.

Strategy VI: Create The Problem, Then Offer The Solution

The way this works –with political cults, religious cults, or, if you will think about it, with advertisers trying to create a need – is to first create a problem and then hold out a solution because then you have to depend on them to give you that solution. Several decades ago, Vince Packard made this technique visible to us for the first time in *The Hidden Persuaders*, in which he showed us that our motivational patterns and buying patterns are systematically studied by advertisers using techniques borrowed from the psychological sciences. These same techniques are then used to create in us the impression that we have a problem or need.

Here is a firsthand account of how this is done in a cult, taken from an excellent book on cults by Thomas and Jacqueline Keiser called *The Anatomy of Illusion*. Richard, a young, idealistic sort of man who kept looking for answers, had been in this particular cult for “many stressful years”. Richard says:

If they are smart enough to know your faults, then they're smart enough to solve them, right? People just think that way. But suppose I create your faults. Maybe I don't know a thing about you, but maybe you eat three eggs for breakfast sometimes. You happen to be telling me about it and I think to myself, now I'm going to talk about your eating three eggs. “Isn't that a little bit greedy, gluttonous? What about the poor people who don't even have one egg?” Already I have you thinking there's something wrong with eating three eggs, so what? But now I'm playing on your guilt, I'm making it seem strange. “Three eggs! Just think of the enormity of eating three eggs. Isn't that awful. That's terrible! Maybe you can get over that horrible desire to eat three eggs.” See, already you're probably wondering how you can stop eating three eggs. So I've created the problem for you and now you're looking for help with it, without realizing it's not a problem. I've heard those things in the group, and those things were not problems, they were issues. They weren't bad things about me, they were characteristics. They were turning my characteristics into faults. That's very, very destructive to induce guilt over things that are not faults. Anything innocent can be redefined as evil. (55)

In the case of the LaRouche cult, any desire for material things – nice clothes, in particular – was always a “problem”, because that money could always have been used to stop the imminent disaster about to beset the American economy.

Systematicity of How Cult Argumentation Works

There are many more traits of cultic argument than those listed here. I won't have time to talk about all of them, but I've listed three more on the overhead. What I want to do now is just tie together the ones I have mentioned, because the important thing about them is how they function within the cult as a seamless whole. It is this characteristic of seamless wholeness that makes it possible for cults to function. Any one of the arguments I have given above, taken alone, would just be dismissed by a rational hearer as absurd. But these arguments are never taken alone, and that is the crucial point. Cults do their work by systematic appeal to and construction of an entire view of the world, so that each piece fits with all the other pieces. Let's look at some examples:

- Richard's "eating three eggs is your problem" argument makes perfect sense if it is placed against a backdrop of argumentation in which the assumption is that all of us middle class capitalist children have been brought up to consume too much at the expense of others. (And doesn't everyone know that is why there is poverty in the Third World?)
- That the Queen of England is the mastermind behind illegal drug running makes sense if it is placed against a backdrop of argumentation that the most powerful country in the world has been attempting to stop drugs for years and has been unable to do so; obviously we are being outwitted by someone seeking revenge for the American Revolution. (Yes, they actually say that!)
- When Jim Jones asked all his followers to commit suicide, he made sense of that by referring to a backdrop of poverty, homelessness, joblessness, racism, and hopelessness in the society from which they had come. Keep in mind that Jones' followers were generally among the disenfranchised of society in the first place. He said that since there was nothing for them to go back to, they might as well go forward to a better place.
- In the Sneaky Second Premise argument above, an appeal was made to the principles of the U S Constitution. That sets the backdrop. With that as the backdrop, the other premises are very easy to slide past an unsuspecting listener.

And so on. I think these examples are sufficient to make the point that no argument is ever taken out of context. What successful cults do is to weave all of these types of argumentation together into a net so tight that they have an answer for every objection. The interesting question then becomes, how is that different from what any of us do? All argumentation takes place within a frame of reference – you have one, I have one, everyone necessarily has one. Different cultures certainly have different ones, as do different religions: it is that which makes the dividing line between a religion and a cult so difficult to draw. For any of us, just as for a cult, our argumentation takes place within a worldview which forms a whole.

The Keisers, in their book mentioned above, mention three main differences between ordinary argumentation and cultic argumentation. They term the latter *destructive persuasion*. The three differences they list are:

1. Cultic argumentation aims specifically at the destruction and disintegration of the personality.
2. Cultic argumentation frequently appeals to emotion and self-esteem rather than to reason.
3. Cultic argumentation frequently conceals a hidden agenda.

I would agree with all of those, although in a moment I will add one more which I find necessary. Richard and the "three eggs" argument is an excellent example of the first two: it is an appeal to guilt, not reason, and if kept up in large doses, this sort of thing will completely disintegrate most people. The Queen of England running drugs and the Sneaky Second premise arguments above given by LaRouche each conceal the same hidden agenda: give me money so

that I can stop these evil goings-on. A great deal of cult argumentation is devoted to concealing that latter agenda.

The first of these three items deserves special attention because it often takes forms which we do not recognize as “argumentation”. We tend – at least those of us trained as philosophers do – to think of arguments as consisting of premises and conclusions. Much argumentation, however, may consist of methods of moving the hearer: we may have bathos, categoria, cohortatio, commiseratio, insultatio, eulogia, or pathos, just to cite a few of the well-known rhetorical figures in this category. This deserves mention here particularly because it helps to answer the often-asked question of “How do intelligent people get taken in by these cults?” Clearly, the answer has to be by some process other than logical deduction.

Gelber and Cook’s book *Saving the Earth* is of particular interest in this regard, because the clientele of their group bears the most resemblance to the followers of LaRouche. These were upper-middle class, educated persons, mostly well-to-do, and their agenda was for the most part a political one. They began as a spiritual group but by the end had transformed themselves entirely into a political group whose goals had to do with world peace, the environment, and similar causes. Quotation of a section from their book regarding a particular emotive form of argumentation is instructive:

Participants were asked to scour their memories and write down every negative thing they had done that caused them ‘guilt, blame, shame, feeling of unworthiness, pride, jealousy, etc.’ Simply writing it down was not sufficient, however... [T]he sins then had to be shared... By sharing their perceptions of one another’s faults, brothers and sisters in the kingdom gave one another the ‘opportunity and responsibility’ to mend their ways, or if the rebuker was incorrect to turn the criticism back on the originator. On the one hand, mutual criticism was sometimes described in gentle terms... The reality appears to have been much closer to the harsh than to the gentle. ‘The constant focus on what was wrong – constant criticism’ was the worst aspect of her affiliation with the group, reported a member, ‘it bred hurt and resentment – lots of hurt. Much of the confrontation was done through *public* humiliation. Many people felt very bad about themselves for years.” (144)

Of course, subjected to exactly the same humiliation, some people felt badly and other people felt liberated. I know – I was there. The LaRouche group used the same technique and I watched as some people had nervous breakdowns and marriages dissolved, while other people just loved it. Gelber and Cook say that one of the members summed up her feelings about the Rathbuns (the leaders of this particular group) as “my experience of God in persons, a demonstration of what a person can become.” (144-145) They comment that, obviously, no one would object to having his/her faults exposed by a leader such as this.

What happens, then, is that those unwilling to undergo the episodes of humiliation leave, if they can. In the Creative Initiative group run by the Rathbuns, people were free to leave; in the LaRouche organization, one had to escape. Either way, the description given by Gelber and Cook is accurate, in that “those who remained could view the defection of those who left as evidence that they had not truly made the transition into the new evolutionary state of being.” (145) What this shows us is that there is indeed an argument being made here, but it is an argument whose validity depends upon accepting a certain view of the world as its premises.

P1 The particular view of the world espoused by the group is the correct one.

P2 Some means (emotional or rational – doesn't matter) have convinced me that my behavior X or my belief Y don't fit this system.

Conclusion Therefore, behavior X or belief Y must be changed.

This sort of argument depends on the straightforward psychological principle of cognitive dissonance. People have an extremely difficult time living with inconsistent sets of beliefs, so they will resolve them, in this case either by leaving the group or by changing themselves.

Here is the point at which I feel that it is important to add a fourth characteristic to the three characteristics of cultic argumentation listed above by the Keisers. My additional characteristic is this:

4. Cultic argumentation assumes a closed system.

In the next section, we will see why this is very important.

Consequences – or, So What?

Very often, in dealing with competing claims in argumentation, be they political, religious, or any other kind, we seem to be seeing many of the characteristics outlined above. Superficial similarities between much of this language and an analysis of the transcripts of the 2000 US Presidential Debates are fairly scary. We had emotional argumentation, name-calling, hidden agendas, sneaky premises – much of what I have mentioned here. We need to ask a question, then, about how much of what passes for mainstream political argumentation resembles what I have described above. Perhaps the reason persons are taken in by cults is that the cults sound remarkably like what they hear in day-to-day life.

When assessing what appear to be competing sets of claims from political parties, we often ask ourselves questions of the form “Who's lying?” or “How do I know which one is lying?” In order to begin a comparative examination of mainstream political discourse with that of the cults, I have selected a very small segment from the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the confirmation hearings of John Ashcroft as Attorney General. These hearings should be good candidates for showing competing claims, as they were marked by very strong differences in opinion and political ideology. A major portion of the discussion centered around the issue of whether or not Ashcroft was a racist who had, throughout his career, actively opposed desegregation efforts in his home state. In the portion of text I will cite, Senator Kennedy is advocating this view of Ashcroft, and Senator Sessions is opposing it.

Both Senator Kennedy and Senator Sessions spoke passionately about Ashcroft's response to a major desegregation plan which had been opposed by Ashcroft in court while he was Attorney General of Missouri. For both of these men, the question of whether Ashcroft could be an adequate Attorney General was closely tied to how he had handled the desegregation case in question, and their discourse was an attempt to convince others to regard it as similarly important. Senator Kennedy (Lines 389-403 of the official Senate website transcript) describes Ashcroft as a “relentless opponent of voluntary desegregation”, and as having “unremitting hostility” to desegregation. He also states that it was Ashcroft's opinion that “the state of Missouri was not responsible for the segregation in St. Louis schools.” Then Senator Sessions, on the opposing side, says that (Lines 662-674) the plan was “one of the most extreme

desegregation plans in the history of the United States” calling for all sorts of expensive accommodations (pools, petting zoos, etc.), that it was opposed by members of both parties, and that the “Attorney General represents a state. That is his client.”

Do both of these speeches refer to the same entity in the real world and also meet sincerity conditions and Gricean maxims of cooperation? As to the reference part, I did the research. Except for the emotive parts of the speeches, which of course do not refer because emotions never refer, in general most of the facts do refer to the same incident. Statements such as those by Senator Kennedy about “unremitting hostility” and those by Senator Sessions about what is “fair” or what “Ashcroft deserves” are obviously matters of opinion and judgment which do not refer to external events. If all of those are removed from the two accounts and the public record is examined, the facts are pretty much entirely true in both accounts. They do, in short, in fact refer. *The speakers are, for the most part, not lying.* (I say “for the most part” because P2 is false: Ashcroft was not a relentless opponent of voluntary desegregation for the simple reason that there was no voluntary desegregation to oppose; I checked the record. This came as no surprise to me, since I have lived in St. Louis and wouldn't have expected to find any.) For the most part, the speakers were exaggerating for effect rather than lying. If we list the propositions stated by the two speakers, we will find something interesting:

- P1 Ashcroft has unremitting hostility to integration.
- P2 Ashcroft was a relentless opponent of voluntary desegregation.
- P3 Ashcroft stated that the state of Missouri was not responsible for segregation of St. Louis schools.
- P4 Ashcroft was incorrect: the state of Missouri was in fact responsible for segregation.
- P5 The court's plan was one of the most extreme desegregation plans in U.S. history.
- P6 The court's plan required millions of dollars of expensive building: pools petting zoos, gyms, etc.
- P7 The court's plan was opposed by some members of both political parties.
- P8 The Attorney General represents the interests of his state, and this plan was not in those interests.

P1 through P4 are the propositions stated by Kennedy; P5 through P8 are those stated by Sessions. The very interesting fact about this set of propositions is that there is no contradiction whatever in believing all eight of them. We should expect, since they are supposed to be arguing against each other, that the first four would contradict or at least imply that the last four are false, or vice versa, but they do not. The two sets have no logical relation to each other at all: they are predicating different things of entirely different entities. This returns us to a point mentioned much earlier: *paying attention*. If we were paying attention, we would notice that these two proposition sets have nothing to do with one another, and we could not be taken in. But we do not pay attention.

The workings of this proposition set contain, I would argue, what is possibly the most important lesson to learn about ideological discourse, namely: that what argument exists is often *internal* to the belief set or ideological framework being propounded. All of the convincing and persuading, if there is any, takes place at this level. It is unusual, I think, to find any valid inferences that can be drawn by argument from one side of a political argument and used to refute the other, because the two sets of propositions involved very often have no relation to one another. If that is the case, an inference drawn from one could not even be relevant to the other.

I suspect this of being a very careful and well-planned strategy: if one does not state any relevant proposition, then it cannot be argued against.

This conclusion, then, should be of help in dealing with the question of reference, and hence with argument. All of the above speech does refer and is, in some vague sense, “about” desegregation. But to what do the propositions actually refer? One of the easiest ways to make this visible is by looking at the subjects of the sentences. The first four propositions concern Ashcroft’s relation to an idea; the next three are about the features of a particular desegregation plan; and the last one is about the duties of an Attorney General. Without getting into all the complexities of reference that plague philosophers, we should be able to say that these propositions do refer to things or situations in the world and that they disagree not because they say opposing things about the *same* things or situations but because they actually refer to different entities in the world. As they refer to different entities in the world, the truth value of one cannot bear on the truth value to be predicated of any of the others. If the truth values of the predicates do not bear on one another, how can argumentation be relevant?

Finally, I want to use excerpts from the 2000 US Presidential Debates as an important example of this phenomenon. We will deal with just one issue – the issue of cutting taxes. In the table you have on your handout, I have excerpted statements from the transcripts of the debates. (Those interested in reading the complete transcripts can speak with me afterward for the web address.) Again, our interest here is in seeing whether the framing of the two positions allows them to pick out sets of propositions such that all the propositions on both sides can be true. I have tried to fairly pick out an equal number of propositions for Bush (B) and Gore (G) which would render what they said in the debates in a briefer form. That is the next page of your handout. We could spend all day just analyzing this stretch of text, but what I want to do here is situate it within the framework set by the discourse of cults as one extreme and the discourse of, say, Bush and his campaign advisers at the other. And where does the stretch of discourse from the Ashcroft hearings fit on this continuum? We need to answer this question in order to answer our larger question: who’s lying?

Looking at the Bush-Gore exchange, we note that there are points where some actual argumentation appears to be taking place, though not many and very indirectly. They succeed in making it quite clear that an ideological difference exists about treatment of the wealthy. Beyond that, however, no clear arguments are stated: neither candidate ever meets his opponent’s statement with a reply on the same terms which would actually constitute a counterargument; instead, he changes the terms. By switching ideological frameworks, the candidates thus make it difficult, and maybe impossible, to evaluate their arguments on equal merits. The nearest we come to clear counterargument is Bush’s statement B5, which Gore answers with G6. Even here, however, the terms of the argument are unclear. If the full argument were spelled out, Bush would be arguing that it should be given back in the same proportion as it was paid in, and Gore would be arguing that it should be given back according to need or some other criterion which is not here specified. We can see, however, that when painted with the very broad brush of American political ideology as a framework, the two men are arguing within the same given framework. This particular controversy, broadly tagged as egalitarianism versus anti-egalitarianism, has been present since before the Declaration of Independence. So we have a frame here that we all understand.

The Kennedy-Sessions discourse referenced above is a little less clearly understood to be in a common frame; the late twentieth century has been busy inventing new frameworks in socio-

political discourse, and these are not universally accepted. So while everyone “speaks” the language of the Bush-Gore disagreement, not everyone speaks both sides of the Kennedy-Sessions disagreement. For some, one or the other of these is beyond the pale, and constitutes a lie. Ultra-liberals don’t “speak Orrin Hatch” or the religious right; ultra-conservatives don’t “speak Kennedy”. They will tell you – they do tell me – that those people are lying.

How does this relate to cults? Cults are the ultimate example of this. What a cult does is completely and totally redefine not just parts of reality but all of it, so that statements like “the Queen of England masterminds all the drug running in the world,” “LaRouche is the world’s greatest economist,” and “Bertrand Russell was the most evil man to live in the twentieth century” become credible *to the person inside the belief system*. In order to make this happen, the cult has to first do a tremendous amount of destructive work on the mind of the inductee, to destroy a whole life’s set of beliefs which were already there – that process is what we normally know as *brainwashing*. The important point – and this is absolutely critical to see – is that the new beliefs are then credible to the person inside the cult system because from inside the system all the beliefs are consistent with one another. So are George Bush’s; so are Al Gore’s; so are Senator Kennedy’s; so are Senator Sessions’. That *IS* the point. Are these people lying? Where does the slippery slope to a lie begin, and where does it end? I absolutely believe that Bush, Gore, Kennedy, and Sessions believe all that stuff I quoted them as saying. I think half of them are nuts, and I’m not saying which half.

But there is a point at which it becomes a lie, and here it is. When a group – a cult, a political party, a religious group, or anything else – knowingly misrepresents its beliefs and employs strategies to make its ideas more palatable than they would be if stated directly, that’s a lie. When a person *inside* the belief system uses different language to talk to someone *outside* the belief system, our warning flags should go up. When a group of any kind attempts to make a person feel badly about what he or she believes rather than engaging in argumentation about what he or she believes, that is a sign that the argumentation cannot stand on its own two feet, and therefore that lying is going on. Above all, we must recognize that all of these things are matters of degree. We are all, all the time, engaged in attempts to persuade others to come over to our point of view, and there is nothing wrong with that. We may even become emotional about it. But does it become *destructive*? Cults are willing to destroy whole lives. Kennedy was willing to destroy Ashcroft’s reputation. I would suggest that argumentation, in its truest sense, need not destroy anything, and if it does need to do so, this indicates a weakness in the argument. I call the knowing exploitation of that weakness lying. You may place the name where you will.

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