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Commentary on Turner

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In Response To: Dale Turner's *Fallacies and the concept of an argument*

Dale Turner's paper "Fallacies and the Concept of an Argument" examines some recent theories of fallacious reasoning. Not only is Professor Turner interested in these theories in their own right, but also in the theories of argument of which they are a part. If a certain theory of fallacies goes down, he notices, it often takes a theory of argument down with it. Turner looks at four different accounts of the concept of fallacy. He finds some truth in each of the theories but ultimately rejects them and constructs an alternative account. In this commentary, I first briefly summarize the four approaches he mentions, and his criticisms of them. In passing, I discuss why I do not think that his objections hold up against the Fogelin/Duggan approach, the third alternative he looks at. In contrast to Turner, I do not think there is much that is problematic about textbook lists of commonly committed fallacies. I end my commentary by raising two objections to his alternative account of fallacies.

Turner first criticizes what he calls the "standard treatment", as expressed by Hamblin. This account says that a fallacy is an argument that "<u>seems to be valid</u> but <u>is not so</u>". Turner thinks that the standard approach has several good aspects--especially the way it anticipates his idea that a fallacy <u>tempts</u> us into thinking that it is a good argument. Like Hamblin and others, however, Turner also sees problems with the standard approach. Turner's main objection to it is that its concept of "fallacy" is too narrow. The standard treatment considers fallacies to be bad arguments and what it means by bad arguments are formally invalid arguments. Turner, however, rejects the idea of evaluating arguments in terms of their formal validity or lack of it. According to Turner, valid arguments are not necessarily good arguments--they may beg the question, for example--and invalid arguments are not necessarily bad arguments. For example, many inductive arguments are good arguments, though formally invalid. The argument he presents about the oil on the driveway is a good example of an argument that is both formally invalid but non-fallacious.

It is at this point that Turner introduces a theme that he develops throughout his whole paper: that a fallacy theorist should construct a theory of fallacies based on the way the word "fallacy" is actually used instead of trying to make all fallacies fit some antecedent theory that one has about what a fallacy is or is not. The standard approach presumes, antecedently, a deductivist model of what good and bad arguments are, paying no attention to the set of argument forms that philosophers and others have traditionally called fallacies. This is not to say, however, that Turner supports the traditional list of fallacies; he is saying, rather, that a good theory has to be able to account for the continued attention they receive in philosophy.

Next Turner turns to the pragma-dialectical approach. This approach sees rational thinking not as an end in itself but as a tool to settle disputes. While

Turner sees some good things in this theory, he ultimately rejects it and does so for two reasons: First, he does not think that the pragma-dialectical approach does justice to the fact that one can commit a fallacy when reasoning with oneself. His second objection is that fallacies cannot be strictly identified with bad moves in conflict resolution because some bad moves--while counterproductive--are not fallacies. One example of such a move would be switching to a language that the other does not understand in the middle of an intellectual argument.

As was the case with the standard treatment, the core mistake that the pragma-dialectal treatment makes goes to the concept of argument of which it is a part. The purpose of argument in the pragma-dialectical approach is rational dispute resolution. Turner reminds us that arguments have multiple purposes: they also play a key role in rational inquiry, exploration and rational discourse between two or more people. Turner neatly sums up his objections to the pragma-dialectical view of argument in this way: dispute resolution is closer to negotiation than reasoning.

The third approach is the Fogelin/Duggan approach. Of all the approaches, as I have said, I find this to be the most promising. This approach prides itself on being able to account for the wide range of things called "fallacies". Fogelin and Duggan define a fallacy as a belief-fixing procedure that has "a high tendency to produce false or unfounded beliefs".

Turner has two objections to this approach--neither of which is convincing, in my opinion. Turner's first objection is that by calling a fallacy a "tendency", one is suggesting that no particular instance of a fallacy would necessarily be a bad argument. Yet, he says, the Fogelin/Duggan approach clearly favours talking about fallacies as abstract argument forms.

I do not think this is a good objection. I agree that an abstract fallacy form is incomplete without a context and that in some contexts it may be possible to produce a good argument with such a form. But for all of that, I argue, it is still useful to be aware of argument forms that tend, in most contexts, to produce bad arguments. This is a crucial point. It is on this basis that Turner decides that there is no formal reality to fallacies--that they are essentially local and context-bound and cannot be talked about in the abstract. I believe that Turner's mistake is analogous to someone's saying, in the field of ethics, that one can never say that lying is immoral because one can always think of a case where lying might be one's best alternative. True--sometimes telling a lie might be the best thing to do. But it does not follow from this that lying cannot be said to be generally immoral. And it likewise does not follow that some argument forms, minus their context, cannot still be called "fallacies".

Turner's second objection to the Fogelin/Duggan view is that Fogelin and Duggan should never have, on their account, endorsed traditional lists of fallacies. Why? Because, according to Turner, what are traditionally called fallacies may not, <u>as a matter of fact</u>, be argument patterns that tend to produce false or unfounded beliefs. The reason Turner gives for raising such a

doubt is again his point that in some circumstances, arguments that are supposedly fallacious in form actually constitute good arguments. The one example he provides, however,--the argument about the rain and the aluminum roof--is problematic. It is supposed to be an argument from ignorance that is not fallacious. My problem with his example is that I do not see the argument as an argument from ignorance. In an argument from ignorance, one says that because you can not disprove what I am saying, what I am saying is true. Turner's "rain argument" does not fit that pattern. Rather, the argument is almost a classic <u>modus tollens</u> or denial of the consequent:

> If it were raining, you would hear a loud pinging (on the aluminum roof).
>
> There is no loud pinging.
>
> Therefore it is not raining.

Turner, then, doubts whether traditional, textbook fallacies, as a matter of fact, have a tendency to lead one rationally astray. I suggest that Turner needs to provide evidence for his doubt and that so far he has not done so. Until it is provided, I see no reason to doubt that ad hominems, appeals to popularity, hasty generalizations and the like are in fact patterns of argument that, as Fogelin and Duggan say, more often than not produce beliefs that are either false or unfounded.

I thus continue to see the Fogelin/Duggan definition of a fallacy as still being a strong one, though, unlike Turner and like Wreen, who I am about to turn to, I think that Fogelin and Duggan ought to be talking about "arguments" rather than "belief-fixing procedures". I will say more about this, later.

Wreen's approach, then, is the fourth one that Turner mentions. The main aspects of Wreen's approach, for Turner's purposes, are (1) that it restricts fallacies to "bad inferences" or to "inferences that should not be made" and (2) that it suggests that it is not possible to create a list of fallacious argument types, because the context of an argument is all important and contexts cannot be formalized. Turner raises two objections to Wreen's approach. First, Turner points out that fallacies are not always bad inferences. One example would be attacking a strawman. Second, Wreen's account is unable to distinguish pathological arguments from fallacious ones, both of which make inferences that should not be made.

Turner's own account borrows from each of the above approaches. From the standard approach, as defined by Hamblin, a fallacy is something we are tempted to make; from the pragma-dialectical approach, and from Wreen, he recognizes the importance of context. From the Fogelin/Duggan and Wreen's approaches, he endorses the idea of that there are a wide diversity of the things we call fallacies and that they, as opposed to some antecedent theory of a fallacy, ought to be our guide in constructing a theory of fallacies. Finally, also from Wreen, Turner supports the idea that there can be no sacrosanct list of fallacious categories. From all these pieces, then, Turner puts together his own

theory of what a fallacy is. There are four parts to his definition. A fallacy is (1) an important mistake, (2) of a cognitive nature, (3) that we are tempted to make and (4) which occurs in a context of reasoning.

What are we to make of Turner's alternative account? I think it is a good attempt to define what a fallacy is. But there are two problems with Turner's theory. My first and biggest objection to his definition does not concern the definition of fallacy itself, but what Turner thinks logically flows from it. It is a problem I have already mentioned above, namely that it belittles the importance of gathering, listing and categorizing fallacious argument forms. Above, we saw that one reason he criticizes fallacy-lists is that fallacies are context-bound and lists can not capture context. I tried to show what was wrong with this by my ethics analogy. Now, Turner gives us more detailed account of why he thinks that traditional fallacy lists are problematic: what is and is not a fallacy he says, is partly a function of the individual's level of competence and what the individual finds tempting or not. I agree with Turner that the notion of "temptation" has a place in fallacy-theory but I do not think that the concept is as subjective--that is, related to the individual and his or her competence--as he does.

Turner argues, for example, that an accusation of a fallacy in a pedagogical context is different from one in an academic context. In a pedagogical context, he says, the accusation of a fallacy points to a genuine incompetence in the student while the accusation of a fallacy in an academic setting is never taken as a refutation, rather it is either taken as something like a request for further discussion and clarification, or as an indication of deep disagreement.

There are two problems here: The first is that Professor Turner is over-generalizing about why people commit fallacies and the kind they commit. I suggest that incompetence in reasoning is not the only reason that people, whether they be professors or anyone else, commit fallacies. People from every corner, even those who are otherwise competent thinkers, may commit fallacies because of laziness, cowardice, complacency, bias, habitualness, greed or spite. Maybe they are in a state of depression or despair. Maybe they are becoming more stubborn as they get older. Maybe they are tired, stressed or intoxicated. Maybe they are angry. So I think that Professor Turner is forgetting about how even the best of thinkers can commit simple fallacies just like everyone else. My second point concerns the relevance of the fact, if it is one, that the significance of being charged with committing a fallacy differs according to who is charged and what the context is. I fail to see how that would affect the evaluation of the reasoning under question. An ad hominem is still an ad hominem, whether it comes from the logic professor, an undergraduate student, or someone who has almost no formal education.

My second complaint with Turner's definition has to do with its attempt to shift fallacy-theory away from "bad arguments" to the wider category of "cognitive mistakes within a reasoning process". I do not think he justifies his position and I think his new category of fallacy is too wide. His case for the shift from

bad arguments to cognitive mistakes rests entirely on his understanding of two examples: the so-called hardware fallacy and the so-called fallacy of opting for the medium instead of the mean as a measure of a central tendency. Each of these can plausibly be called fallacies--yet they cannot, according to Turner, be characterized as arguments. Turner just does not say enough about these alleged fallacies, however, and why he thinks, along with Fogelin and Duggan, that they are so difficult to fit into usual fallacy categories. Is the hardware fallacy, or the medium-instead of the mean fallacy, as he understands them, committed in a context of reasoning in the sense of reasoning that is used in his definition? If so, then these fallacies can each be described as a procedure whose rationale consists of one or more bad arguments--thus fitting the pattern of a fallacies as bad-argument forms. If they are not committed in a reasoning context then Turner expanded his theory for no good reason since, by his own account, they would not be fallacies in any interesting sense to the argument theorist.

My second objection against Turner's attempt to shift fallacy-theory away from bad arguments to cognitive mistakes is that in doing so, Turner is creating a category of "fallacy" that is too wide, given what the purpose of fallacy-talk ought to be. I agree with Turner that any important intellectual mistake we are tempted to make in a reasoning context can rightly be called a fallacy. A common, faulty argument-pattern, however, is a also a fallacy, but in a different sense. It is this second sense of the word "fallacy" that is of value to practical argument theory. By folding both senses of "fallacy" into one category, something important gets lost.

What now falls under Turner's category of a fallacy is, for example, almost every philosophical mistake discovered in the history of philosophy. If Wittgenstein is right, a lot of thinkers in philosophy commit what might be called the failure-to-command-a-clear-view-of-the-way-language-functions fallacy. If Plato is right, many people commit what might be called the visible-things-instead-of-Forms fallacy. If Hume is right that ideas extend no further than experience, then many people commit what might be called the "metaphysical fallacy". All of these--if they were actual mistakes--would not only fall under Turner's category of important cognitive mistakes we are tempted to make in a reasoning context, but would become paradigm examples of fallacies, in his sense.

What would be wrong with this? I think it would take us too far away from the main purposes of fallacy-talk, which is to help us reason better and teach reasoning to others. Fallacy-talk at its best provides us with neat summaries of where we often go wrong and of where we need the most reminding. I know that Turner disagrees and I am aware that I merely stating my thesis here more than defending it. I agree that existing lists of fallacies can always be improved upon. But to replace these lists of traditional fallacies with the kinds of deep, complicated, multi-layered mistakes that philosophers discover is to squeeze out of the picture one of philosophy's shining achievements: that list of logical mistakes, found at the beginning of many introduction-to-philosophy books,

that both academics and people at large make in their everyday arguments. There is a use in philosophy for that list. The kind of simple fallacies it points to should be distinguished, for practical purposes, from the deep intellectual mistakes that are discussed in first philosophy--otherwise they will get lost in the mix.