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COMMENTS ON KRABBE AND THE FALLACY OF FIGURE OF SPEECH

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Erik Krabbe has done an admirable job of working out just what the fallacy of figure of speech, or to use the appellation he prefers, the fallacy of form of expression, might be. I confess to being among those informal logicians unable to find much of importance in either Aristotle's cryptic treatment of this fallacy (at *Sophis. Ref.* 4: 166b 10-19) or his more ample illustrations of it (at 22: 178a4 - 179a 10). Hamblin (1970: 25f.), as Krabbe notes, finds most modern writers ignoring it, while those who take notice have difficulty finding serious examples of it. Krabbe's paper is rich and suggestive, but a stronger case must be made for this to count as an important fallacy today. My comments are largely confined to two ancient illustrations of the fallacy, those associated with theories of vision and the Third Man argument.

1. Theory of Vision

The provocative examples with which Krabbe fleshes out the Aristotelian bones seem to locate this fallacy in the general area of that self-consciousness about language use so characteristic of the ancient Greeks, manifested in a love of puns, riddles, word play and verbal trickery. Of their riddles the following seems to me a bit more clever than the more famous one of the Sphinx.

Those we see we leave behind.
Those we don't see we take with us.
What are they?

Here too belong those oracular pronouncements of studied ambiguity from Delphi, such as the one disastrously misinterpreted by King Croesus as encouraging him to war against the Persians, or the one more felicitously interpreted by Themistocles that helped Athens survive the second Persian invasion of Attica.

Several examples selected by Krabbe, e.g. those turning on incompletely negated terms, appear to fit well into this category of puns and plays on words. He does an admirable job of fitting several into sample dialogues to illustrate how people enamored of such verbal trickery might employ them.

Krabbe's reference to the Aristotelian categories in particular illuminates how Aristotle himself might have found certain linguistic uses misleading or potentially so. For example we might mistake something passively felt or experienced for an active process, thus confounding the categories of passive and active. Krabbe's example of seeing or vision interpreted as an active process rather than passive is a good enough one to fit even Gilbert Ryle's (1963: 17-24) classification as a category mistake. In normal usage I would say *horao* for "I see" and *heoramai* for "I have been seen." Use of the active *horao* for "I see" can lead someone to think that seeing is active, requiring the one who sees to carry out some activity, rather than passively receive visual stimuli.

But at this point I would express a reservation. In order for people to either commit this fallacy or be deceived or confused by it, a Greek predicate in active voice would need to be a fairly reliable indicator that the referent of its subject was an agent carrying out some activity. Similarly, a predicate in passive voice would need to indicate that its subject referred to some patient or some thing passively being acted on. Absent these factors, the ancient Greek would seem to lack the linguistic expectations prerequisite to either committing or being deceived by this variety of fallacy of figure of speech.

My own experience of ancient Greek, desultory as it is, fails to attest to the presence of these factors. Shortly after I learned the distinction of passive from active voice I also learned of a class of verbs called deponents, verbs whose passive voice have active meaning. Here is an illustrative sentence from my Greek exercise manual (Person 1967: 3).

*Ek de ton agron kai ek tes nesou tes
tou Neilou potamou poreuontai pros ton
naon kai en te hodo pauontai kakon logon*

(They travel from the fields and the island in the Nile River to the temple, and cease their bad talk along the way.)

Here both *poreuontai* and *pauontai* are deponents, meaning respectively "they travel" and "they cease." The existence of an ample class of verbs whose passive voices have active meaning signifies that the voice of a Greek predicate is not an accurate guide to the activity or passivity of its subject's referent. Though this does not rule out, it does mitigate against forming linguistic expectations that would produce instances of this particular category mistake. So even though such an active-passive instance of this fallacy *might* occur, as both Aristotle and Krabbe hold, the danger does not appear great.

Before I pique the curiosity of the classicists among us (and reveal how little ancient Greek I've had time to read in the past 25 years), I hasten to a second reservation, perhaps a more serious one. It seems basic to a logical fallacy that it be a mistake in reasoning or a misstep in an argumentative process. Other factors may be present or desired, e.g. we may want to consider the P.T. Barnum factor, whether it actually deceives some people some of the time, or whether it occurs frequently, or whether it is committed deliberately or unawares. But vitiating reasoning or argument seems a *sine qua non*.

Krabbe does not appear to me to have discharged this burden of showing that the person who understands vision as an active process thereby commits a fallacy of figure of speech. The bare fact that a theory differs from the currently accepted one (or the one I favor) doesn't entail that the rejected theory is logically fallacious, or that someone who accepts the theory is committing a fallacy of figure of speech for doing so. On the basis of what we know now, the evidence for the accepted theory may simply be stronger, or the arguments supporting it more persuasive. Applied to the present case, we need to know that seeing is indeed a passive process on the part of the person referred to by the grammatical subject in a sentence like "I see the bucket by the well." Without this, we cannot even reject the active theory, much less convict its advocate of reasoning fallaciously on the basis of his advocacy alone.

It will be countered that we do indeed know from the physiology of vision that light rays are focused by our eye's lens to produce an inverted image of the bucket on the retina, which when transmitted by the optic nerve to the brain enables us to see the object. So seeing is indeed for us a passive process in which we receive rays of light through the iris of the eye.

My response is to concede that for us this is in the pertinent sense a closed question. But Aristotle didn't write or cite active-passive confusion in verb voice as a fallacy of figure of speech in the English or Dutch languages on the cusp of the 21st century. And for him the question whether vision was active or passive was an open one. In the *Timaeus* (45b - 46a) the eye is a fire which emits light through tiny slits to mingle with an external fire and constitute vision. This work was written by Plato in all likelihood while Aristotle was a student at his Academy. Aristotle mentions the *Timaeus* as a source for this theory, but to argue against it he quotes it in its Empedoclean verse form (*Sense and Sensibilia* 437b 26 - 438a 2). Aristotle's indirect argument against it is that if the emission theory were true, the eye would be able to see in the dark. It cannot, so vision isn't constituted by light emitted from the eye. (Not to be unfair to Empedocles, Theophrastus, commenting on *Sense and Sensibilia*, interprets the same Empedoclean verse to be consistent with the theory that the eye is a passive recipient of effluences from objects. See Fragment 389 in Kirk 1984: 308ff.) On the basis of this evidence, whether vision is passive was openly debated rather than settled at Aristotle's time. That someone taking one side in a debate about theory—even the weaker side—commits a fallacy of figure of speech by that very fact seems quite unlikely.

2. *The Third Man*

I would put the Third Man argument, advanced by Krabbe as exemplifying the fallacy of figure of speech, in a similar category. Not the same category because debate over the interpretation and strength or weakness of this argument continues today. The gist of Krabbe's discussion is that reference to any Platonic Form, e.g. the Form of Man, has the potential to mislead. We are tempted to assimilate "Form of Man" linguistically to "this man" and "that man." It is actually on a quite different linguistic level.

In the passage cited by Krabbe (*Sophis. Ref.* 22 178b 36-40) Aristotle doesn't state a Third Man argument. He points to what in Plato's theory of Forms he cannot accept, the equating of the attribute "humanity" with some separately existing substance, the Form of Man. In his *Metaphysics* (1059b 1-9; cf. 996a 35 - b 24) Aristotle maintains that Plato's Forms do not exist, and that if [contrary to fact] they did, there would be no third entity beyond the individual and the Form. For Aristotle, attributes and relations have no separate existence beyond the substances which they qualify or relate.

In his *History of Philosophy* (1962: 360) Copleston gives a simplified but instructive illustration of the argument. An adequate Form of Man must contain the idea of corporeality (man is corporeal), and containing this makes the Form of Man itself corporeal. Copleston comments, the Form of Man "will contain the idea of corporeality ... but there is no reason why it should itself be corporeal. ... The objection seems really to be a debating point on Aristotle's part ... and ... not a particularly fair one." Here again the arena is that of on-going theoretical debate rather than that of a settled issue such that someone taking one side ipso facto commits a fallacy of figure of speech.

The way Krabbe uses the Third Man argument leaves at least one important question open: Is this argument, directed against Plato's theory of Forms, a telling one? The argument originates in Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* (131e - 132b and 132c - 133a). Without mentioning that the argument originates with Plato, Krabbe gives us a fairly accurate dialogue version of it, and notes that it is directed against Plato's theory of Forms. At first I thought Krabbe assumed we all knew that the argument originated with Plato. But now I am puzzled about his understanding and use of it. Is Plato providing a telling argument against his own theory of Forms? Or is he providing a seemingly telling but actually fallacious argument? In the latter case, Plato's position is one of unusual

subtlety. He presents us with an apparently strong argument against the theory of Forms. Yet on close analysis the argument proves fallacious. This leaves the theory of Forms stronger yet for having withstood the force of a powerful counter-argument.

Let me illustrate the argument as I understand it, stressing the epistemological over the ontological aspect prominent in Krabbe's account.

Do you see that gurak over there?

What's a gurak?

Here's a picture of a gurak.

Yes, I recognize it now. But how do you know that that picture is a picture of a gurak?

I compared it with the International Animal Classification Society's picture of a gurak.

In this dialogue, the first man = the gurak, the second man (corresponding to the Form) = the picture, and the third = the IACS's picture. As an argument against Plato's theory of Forms, it runs as follows. If we need a separately existing Form of man to recognize an individual man, then we need a third man with which to compare both to ensure that we've selected the appropriate Form. This begins an infinite regress (fourth man etc.), and because the infinite regress is unacceptable, we reject the separate Form and instead claim we are able to recognize the individual man as a man without it.

So understood, the Third Man argument is an attack on Plato's theory of Forms. Challenges to the Third Man argument, e.g. the charge that it is based on an unacceptable premise, indirectly defend Plato's theory of Forms. Vlastos (1954) finds it dependent on at least these two stated premises:

1) We can apprehend objects e.g. a dog or a house as large only by virtue of the Form of Largeness.

2) We can apprehend a dog, a house, or the Form of Largeness as large only by virtue of the Form₁ of Largeness.

He points out that in (2) a Form is itself among the objects that are large, whereas the corresponding objects in (1) contain no Form.

Vlastos then finds (2) itself dependent on two assumptions (unstated by Plato), the Self-Predication Assumption and the Non-Identity Assumption.

SPA) A Form can be predicated of itself, e.g. the Form of Largeness is itself large.

NIA) No large thing is identical with the Form of Largeness by which we apprehend it as large.

Letting x = thing, F = large, and F -ness = Form of Largeness, the two assumptions become:

SPA) F -ness is F .

NIA) If x is F , x cannot be identical with F -ness.

Now substituting F -ness from the SPA into the NIA yields:

3) If F-ness is F, F-ness cannot be identical with F-ness.

As Vlastos points out, (3) being obviously self-contradictory means that of the SPA and NIA at least one is false. So (2) as dependent on both the SPA and the NIA cannot be asserted and we now have no regress. Cutting off the regress indirectly defends Plato's theory of Forms. But as Vlastos points out, Plato never explicitly formulated either the SPA or the NIA, so he did not himself so defend his theory.

Krabbe appears to locate the fallacy of figure of speech at "Man itself must be a man," which I take to be the SPA. What is not clear in his account is whether he finds the fallacy in the working out of the theory of Forms (thus vitiating that theory) or in the Third Man argument (thus vitiating the argument and indirectly supporting the theory of Forms). Addressing this question could clarify how the fallacy of figure of speech is involved in the Third Man argument, and indirectly contribute to a better understanding of the fallacy itself. Again we need to appreciate how it constitutes a false step in reasoning or argument.

3. Conclusion

In sum, Krabbe has made a good start in determining just what a fallacy of figure of speech might be. But more is needed to establish the relevance of this fallacy for argument today. If we are to take it from Aristotle and ready it for serious work, we need that handful of clearcut cases where people seriously reasoning or arguing commit it and it undercuts their work.

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