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Commentary on Powers

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COMMENTS ON LAWRENCE POWERS' "AD HOMINEM ARGUMENTS"

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The first thing to notice about this engaging paper is the liberty the author takes with the concepts of ad hominem argument and fallacy. A charge of fallacy is not that of an invalid argument; it is not even that of an invalid argument with a disposition to deceive. It is the charge of a *hyperinvalid* argument, an argument whose premises are absolutely true and warranted and whose conclusion is absolutely false and unwarranted. An invalid argument is a weaker thing. It is an argument of which it *might* be the case that the premisses are true and the conclusion false. As far as I can tell, no one before Powers has forwarded quite this view of fallaciousness. It seems an original contribution.

Ad hominem arguments also receive an original specification. They are not what you find in Aristotle, or Locke, Watts, Whately or Johnstone. They are not tu quoque arguments. They do not fit the abusive-circumstantial grid, so loved by writers of textbooks, in any obvious way. Rather, they are arguments in the form,

- (1) Arguer S is evil, deceitful and diabolically clever (EDD)
- (2) Therefore one should not listen to him; one should ignore his arguments.

The question which Powers puts is whether arguments of this form are fallacious in his own original sense of the term. He concludes that they are not. I shall return to this central claim, but for now I want to address what strikes me as an unprofitable detour. Powers appears to think that his ad hominem arguments are arguments addressed to an arguer by the person to whom the argument mentioned in (2) is directed. Taken this way, the ad hominem is a dialectical argument, an argument in the form

- (1) *You* are EDD
- (2) Therefore *I* should ignore the argument you are now addressing to *me*.

It would be well to emphasize that what we have here is an *argument*; it is not a withdrawal from the conversation at hand, and not a declaration that I'm not going to listen to you. It is not an explanation of why I am quitting the discussion. Rather, it is an argument designed to get you to concede that the person to whom you are directing your argument, namely me, should pay it no mind. If my ad hominem argument were sound, and if your EDD property is something you invariably instantiate, and if I know this, then I can only know that my argument will be unavailing. It is already guaranteed that I cannot succeed in making it, even if it is a perfectly valid argument. What this shows, as Powers suggests, is that there is something "wrong" with ad hominem arguments in this kind of dialectical context. My own view is that it is unhelpful to encumber ad hominems with this dialectical cachet. I agree that when used in this way, they will misfire. But this does not show that there is something wrong with the ad hominem, but rather that they are not admissible in such contexts. They are such as not to be useable in these ways. A hammer is wholly useless for screwing in screws. There is something wrong with a hammer in that use, even though it may be a perfect hammer.

Let me now leave this dialectical setting and get on with the main task. Powers says, "You can't call an argument a fallacy merely because you don't like the conclusion." The communist, atheist and homosexual argue for what others (here stylized as "we") take as atrocious conclusions. We shouldn't, he says call them fallacies on *that* account. I am not so sure. For consider:

(i) How likely is it that people who call these arguments "fallacies" do so in the sense of a hyperinvalid argument? Isn't it more likely that, on the model of the *reductio ad falsum* their complaint is one in the form, "Because your conclusion is obviously false, then your argument is either valid but unsound, or invalid"?

(ii) How often do we charge arguments with monstrous conclusions with fallaciousness? Whether on the more or less traditional view or on Powers' own, a fallacy is an argument which seems to be correct. It is quite true that there has always been the theoretically tricky problem of distinguishing arguments made bad by the obvious falsity of their conclusion from perfectly good arguments for utterly surprising and counterintuitive conclusions. But I am speaking of actual practice. Sometimes we do dismiss arguments simply for the lunacy of their conclusions. And sometimes we are right to do so.

In calling *ad hominem* arguments fallacies, Powers accuses logicians of violating their own—as he sees it—good advice in this regard ("Don't attribute fallaciousness just because you don't like the conclusion"). Well, no logician I've ever heard of has called what Powers calls "*ad hominem* arguments" what Powers calls "fallacies". When Powers' reconstructions are honoured, the complaint that *ad hominem* arguments are fallacious would be a complaint in the form:

Arguments in the form

- (1) S is EDD
- (2) Therefore one should ignore S's arguments

are such that even when (1) is absolutely true and warranted, (2) is absolutely false and unwarranted.

And, I say again, that no logician until Powers himself has made *this* complaint.

Well and good, but is the complaint true? If Powers' claim is that *ad hominem* arguments aren't fallacious as such, he is right by the peculiarities of his reconstructed concepts of *ad hominem* argument and fallacy. The claim is of a type that is neither original nor very striking. The same claim is routinely made by other authors, rejigged to fit their rather different conceptions of these things. But if Powers is saying that *ad hominem*s are, as such, not fallacious, the claim is both original and striking. (Even Locke's pressing a man with consequences of his principles and concessions can be mishandled). Is Powers right? It depends, I think, on what is built into the EDD—property and in the nature of the difference it provides between the arguer and the addressee. It also depends on features of the arguer's conclusion p . If the addressee's epistemic relation to p is that it is beyond the addressee's competence to judge except with the aid of argument for it, and if the arguer's EDD—state is such that the addressee is unable to make a competent assessment of the arguer's arguments, then if the arguer does make an argument for p , the rational thing for the addressee to do is ignore it. Suppose p is an arcane proposition from category theory, with respect to which the addressee has little competence. In some situations, say, where the addressee is a callow student and the addresser a professor of mathematics, the fact that the student can't follow the proof doesn't rationally preclude his subscription to p —not, to be sure, on the basis of

his seeing the proof to be sound, but rather on the basis of his belief that a proof of p exists, a belief that relies on the fact that a proof has been purported by someone he trusts and is right to trust. But this is not our situation. The arguer is not only one of Powers' "intellectuals", and so has competence which the addressee is unable to judge, he is also EDD, that is, untrustworthy! Thus the addressee is adversely positioned. Proposition p is a proposition that he cannot properly judge without proof, and a proof which he also cannot judge is advanced by someone whom he cannot trust. If that is the purport of the EDD clause, then ad hominem arguments are never fallacies.

It may be wondered whether this is indeed the purport of the clause. Powers' examples seem to suggest a different set up. Suppose our arguer is now a charming and commandingly attractive chap who is also a pedophile. His arguments for man-boy sexual relations are seductive and masterly. Of course, they are wrong, since their conclusions are morally monstrous. Yon youngster is about to be offered such an argument. I say, "Pay it no mind. He'll bewitch you if given a chance. You would be better off to walk away." So far so good; no fallacy here. But now suppose that the pedophile is also a master of category theory. This means that he gets category theory right, not wrong, and that his proofs are correct, not incorrect. Then the argument, "He is a clever and deceitful pedophile, so you should ignore his proof of mathematical proposition p " is silly. It is more than silly, it is a hyperinvalid argumentum ad hominem. The premise is absolutely true and warranted, and the conclusion is absolutely false and unwarranted. What is more, it is a *ad hominem* which many a logic textbook would welcome as an example of a fallacy. But it is not a fallacy in Powers' sense, even apart from its slight disposition to deceive. It is not a fallacious ad hominem because it is not an ad hominem. The arguer fails the EDD-condition in *relation to category theory*.

Powers secures his strong thesis that ad hominems are as such fallacy-free by, in effect, making the EDD-condition of the arguer always a relevant condition. Textbook ad hominems are often fallacies of irrelevance, as is the case we just considered. EDD-ness is always a matter of the arguer's evil, deceptive and diabolically clever ways with respect to whatever may be the issue at hand. In Powers' reconstruction, this is what ad hominems can never be, namely, fallacies of irrelevance. But, then, it must be said that Powers' strong result is got at the cost of its realism. In the real world, nobody fulfils the EDD-condition.

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