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The fallacy of composition and meta-argumentation

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ABSTRACT: Although the fallacy of composition is little studied and trivially illustrated, some view it as ubiquitous and paramount. Furthermore, although definitions regard the concept as unproblematic, it contains three distinct elements, often confused. And although some scholars apparently claim that fallacies are figments of a critic's imagination, they are really proposing to study fallacies in the context of meta-argumentation. Guided by these ideas, I discuss the important historical example of Michels's iron law of oligarchy.

KEYWORDS: democracy, economic fallacies, fallacy of composition, logical theory, meta-argumentation, oligarchy, parts vs. whole, Robert Dahl, Robert Michels, Seymour Martin Lipset

1. THE PROBLEM: SIGNIFICANCE VS. TRIVIALITY

Vices may be regarded as the opposite of virtues; and fallacies are, arguably, vices of argumentation (cf. Finocchiaro, 1980, p. 338; 1981, p. 17; 2005, p. 116). Thus, one may study the virtues of argumentation indirectly by studying fallacies. In any case, of course, the study of fallacies is a well-established area of logic and argumentation theory (cf. Hamblin, 1970; Woods, 2013), and so no elaborate justification and motivation are needed.

Now, among the fallacies, there is one—the fallacy of composition—whose importance has been widely claimed. For example, in 1826, in the *Elements of Logic*, Richard Whately explicitly named and discussed this fallacy, saying among other things: “there is no fallacy more common, or more likely to deceive, than the one now before us” (Whately, 1826, pp. 174-75). Moreover, at least since the epoch-making contributions of John Maynard Keynes (who died in 1946), economists tend to regard the fallacy of composition as the single worst pitfall in economic reasoning; they also consider the exposure of it to be the greatest accomplishment of the modern science of economics; they deem the avoidance of it the most important lesson one can learn from this science; and such claims are easily found in the writings of economists of both the left and right wings of the ideological spectrum (cf. Hazlitt, 1979; Nelson, 1999; Samuelson, 1955; Samuelson & Nordhaus, 1989; Wray, 2009; and Finocchiaro, 2013a). Additionally, in 1981, an article was published in the journal *Informal Logic*, dealing with “part/whole fallacies,” of which composition may be regarded as a special case; the author argued that there is “a virtual epidemic of part/whole fallacies perpetrated on an unsuspecting public”

(Pole, 1981, p. 11). Finally, in 2006, Trudy Govier saw it fit to devote to the fallacy of composition her keynote address to the International Society for the Study of Argumentation; in it she followed her usual realistic and judicious approach, and thus examined some important recent examples of this fallacy, involving issues such as individual vs. national reconciliation in South Africa, and individual vs. collective actions and blame in the post-nine-eleven relations between Islam and the West (Govier, 2007, 2009; cf. Finocchiaro, 2013a).

However, despite such attention and such claims, scholars in logic and argumentation theory do not seem to have done much work on the fallacy of composition, although textbooks tend to pay lip service to it. For example, the journal *Informal Logic* has not published any more articles on this fallacy in the intervening thirty-one years (i.e., through 2012). Furthermore, there is no sustained discussion of it in the volume on *Fallacies and Argument Appraisal* of the Cambridge University Press series on critical reasoning and argumentation; instead, the author only mentions it briefly in some introductory remarks on problems with language (Tindale, 2007, pp. 57-58). And in his latest book on *Errors of Reasoning*, even the inimitable John Woods (2013) does not get around to elaborating a critique of this particular fallacy, as he does for at least fourteen others of the so-called gang of eighteen traditional fallacies; however, here it must be added that this book is full of insights and should serve as a model to emulate, both with regard to the substantive theory of fallacies and to the methodological approach of naturalism which it develops (cf. Finocchiaro, 2013a, 2013b); moreover, he does give it due coverage in his history of fallacies (Woods, 2012).

Sometimes this scholarly neglect of the fallacy of composition is explained and partly justified in terms of its rarity or infrequency. For example, in the 1973 edition of his textbook *Logic and Philosophy*, Howard Kahane has a brief discussion of this fallacy together with its reverse twin, the fallacy of division. Here are his revealing words: “since non-trivial real life examples of these two fallacies ... are unusual, textbook examples tend to be contrived or trivial” (Kahane, 1973, p. 244).

Obviously, this explanation of the scholarly neglect conflicts with the ubiquity thesis reported earlier. Thus, the question arises whether the fallacy of composition is common and important, or uncommon and unimportant; although such a question arises for fallacies in general (cf. Finocchiaro 1981, 1987; Woods 2013), in this case the problem is more serious because the conflict seems deeper. The issue is largely an empirical question, to be resolved by following an empirical approach. However, the investigation cannot be conducted with a *tabula rasa*, for we need to be clear about what we mean by fallacy of composition, and also we need to examine real or realistic material which typically does not come with the label ‘fallacy of composition’ attached to it. In other words, we need to be mindful of the fact that observation is theory-laden, and that the examination of this material must be guided by some definition of what this fallacy is, and by some idea of what to do with the material under examination so as to test it for the occurrence of this fallacy.

2. GUIDING IDEAS: AMBIGUITIES AND META-ARGUMENTS

The ubiquity thesis, stated above, besides generating the problem just formulated,

may also be regarded as a guiding idea for its solution, at least in the sense that it defines our task as being that of determining whether it is true.

Besides the ubiquity thesis, another guiding idea is this: there are three senses of fallacy of composition that are prima facie distinct, but often confused with each other. First, there is reasoning from premises using a term distributively to a conclusion using the same term collectively; for example, “because a bus uses more gasoline than an automobile, therefore all buses use more gasoline than all automobiles” (Copi, 1968, p. 81). Second, there is reasoning from some property of the parts to the same property for the whole; for instance, “since every part of a certain machine is light in weight, the machine ‘as a whole’ is light in weight” (Copi, 1968, p. 80). And thirdly, there is reasoning from some property of the members of a group to the same property for the entire group; the so-called tragedy of the commons can illustrate this notion, that is, “if one farmer grazes his cattle on the commons, that will be beneficial for him; therefore if all the farmers graze their cattle on the commons, that will be beneficial for all” (Govier, 2009, p. 95).

The association of the second and third notions with each other is very common, whereas the association of all three is relatively rare. Nevertheless the three-fold association is embodied in a dictionary definition from an otherwise authoritative source, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*: “fallacy of composition: the fallacy of arguing from premises in which a term is used distributively to a conclusion in which it is used collectively or of assuming that what is true of each member of a class or part of a whole will be true of all together” (1976 edition, p. 818).

Besides this tripartite distinction and the ubiquity thesis, there is a third guiding idea that needs to be at least mentioned and tentatively stated before we proceed. In a previous work, I criticized textbook accounts of fallacies, and on its basis I formulated a problem and advanced an hypothesis. The problem was formulated in terms of the following questions: “do people actually commit fallacies as usually understood? That is, do fallacies exist in practice? Or do they exist only in the mind of the interpreter who is claiming that a fallacy is being committed?” (Finocchiaro, 1980, p. 334; 1981, p. 15; 2005, p. 113). Although these were not meant to be rhetorical questions, but rather open questions that required further investigation, it is perhaps unsurprising that some readers did view them as rhetorical questions, and concluded that I was claiming that fallacies are merely figments of critics’ imagination and “are in fact an illusion” (Jason, 1986, p. 92; cf. Govier, 1982).

Later, I tried to be more explicit and more constructive about this issue when I elaborated a general approach to the study of fallacies. One element of that approach was connected to, and extracted from, Strawson’s (1952) *Introduction to Logical Theory* and his notion of “the logician’s second-order vocabulary”; that notion was extended to include ‘fallacy’ terminology, “since it ordinarily occurs when someone wants to comment about some logical feature of a first-order expression of reasoning. This means that the best place to begin with in the study of fallacies, or at least a crucial phenomenon to examine, is allegations that fallacies are being committed” (Finocchiaro, 1987, p. 264; 2005, p. 130). From this, some elaborated the idea that fallacies are more like theoretical entities such as quarks in

physics, rather than like concrete objects such as buttercups in everyday life (Woods, 1988). This elaboration was a constructive suggestion and critical appreciation, and I am far from denying its viability.

However, I now believe that the project can be articulated more clearly, incisively, and constructively in light of the notion of meta-argumentation (cf. Finocchiaro, 2013b). Let us distinguish a meta-argument from a ground-level argument, and define the former as an argument about one or more arguments, or about argumentation in general. Then a ground-level argument can be defined as one about such things as natural phenomena, historical events, human actions, abstract entities, or metaphysical beings. A prototypical case of meta-argumentation is argument analysis, in which one advances and justifies an interpretive or an evaluative claim about a ground-level argument.

What I am proposing is that we search for fallacies of composition primarily in meta-argumentation rather than ground-level argumentation. However, this is not meant in the sense that we should be looking for meta-arguments that commit the fallacy of composition, but rather that we try to find meta-arguments advancing explicit conclusions that some fallacy of composition has been committed, i.e., that some ground-level argument embodies or commits a fallacy of composition. The working hypothesis is then that, at least as a first approximation, the fallacy of composition is primarily a concept of meta-argumentation, useful in the context of understanding and/or assessing ground-level argumentation. Whether this is also the case for other fallacies is not being addressed here, and is left as an open question.

3. MICHELS'S IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY

Let us now begin our empirical search for real or realistic material pertaining to the fallacy of composition. One of the most important discussions of the fallacy of composition I have come across is found in the field of political science. It involves one of the most famous and widely-discussed principles in that field—the so-called “iron law of oligarchy”: that every bureaucratic organization has oligarchical tendencies which are impossible to overcome, and that this applies even to democratic institutions, which are thus doomed to become undemocratic. This “law” was first advanced in a book published in German in 1911, translated into English in 1915, reprinted many times, and revealingly entitled *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (Michels, 1962).

Now, an important criticism of Michels's law has been advanced by Robert Dahl, who is one of the most widely respected political scientists and the founder of the field known as democratic theory (Dahl, 1956; 1989). The criticism is that Michels began by studying the workings of political parties, in particular the German Social Democratic Party; he discovered that even parties advocating democracy had insurmountable oligarchical (i.e., anti-democratic) tendencies; he concluded that what was true of political parties was also true of governmental institutions or societies as a whole; and thus he committed an error of reasoning, consisting of illegitimately inferring from parts to the whole (Dahl, 1989, pp. 275-77).

Although Dahl does not speak of “fallacy of composition,” it is obvious that he is attributing this fallacy to Michels. Furthermore, if Dahl’s criticism is accurate, then Michels’s argument provides an example of fallacy of composition which is real, important, substantial, and interesting; again, infinitely more robust than the hackneyed and trivial examples of logic textbooks. For these reasons, it is valuable to quote Dahl’s words:

From the perspective of later political science, then, Michels committed an elementary mistake in generalizing from political parties to the government of a polyarchal system. His generalizations were derived from the study of a single organization, the German Social Democratic Party. His famous “iron law of oligarchy” explicitly referred to political parties ... But even if we grant that political parties are oligarchical, *it does not follow that competing political parties necessarily produce an oligarchical political system*. Business firms are among the most “oligarchical” organizations in modern societies; but as I pointed out, Michels’s mentor, Pareto, writing as an economist, would never have said that these competing oligarchies produced monopolistic control over consumers and the market. Not even Marx, who saw business firms as despotic organizations, made such an elementary mistake. Quite the contrary: It was competition that *prevented* monopoly. If Michels had strictly limited his conclusions to political parties, his case would have been far stronger. But as the quotations given earlier show clearly, Michels went on to draw the unwarranted conclusion that democracy is impossible in a *political system* because it was, he believed from his study of one party, impossible in a particular *element of the system*. Had he been writing today it is inconceivable that he would have moved so casually from his observation of oligarchy in a political party to the conclusion that oligarchy is inescapable in a political system in which the political parties are highly competitive. Michels’s elementary mistake reminds us that for the most part the theorists of minority domination discussed here had little or no experience with systems of competitive parties in countries with a broad suffrage or, certainly, with systematic analysis of competitive party systems. (Dahl, 1989, p. 276)

Here, Dahl’s talk of generalization may give the impression that he is interpreting Michels’s reasoning as an inductive generalization, and criticizing it as a hasty one. However, applying the principle of charity at the level of Dahl’s own meta-argument, I would say that it is preferable to interpret Dahl as attributing to Michels an argument from analogy, and criticizing it as involving a weak analogy. In fact, Michels was claiming an analogy between political parties and political systems as a whole, based on similarities such as the following: (1) administration by the majority is technically impossible; (2) the better elements of the people or mass get constantly re-elected; (3) the first leaders have an advantage over newcomers; (4) the leaders control party machinery, such as the press; and (5) leaders change psychologically in their attitude due to the salary they receive, the power they exercise, their interaction with the ruling class, their age, and their attachment to their own accomplishments. Without necessarily denying such similarities, Dahl is stressing that there is an important dissimilarity, which Michels is ignoring—competition; in political systems that allow competition among political parties, the oligarchic tendencies that exist within parties are counteracted at the macro level of the whole political system.

On the other hand, whether Michels's argument is criticized as a hasty generalization, or as an incorrect analogy, in either case the criticism would be consistent with attributing to it a fallacy of composition. For Michels's argument remains an argument of composition, because it reasons from parts or elements being oligarchical to the whole system being oligarchical; and it is being criticized as incorrect or fallacious. In other words, adapting an argument by Govier (2007, 2009; cf. Finocchiaro, 2013a), I believe that arguments of composition are not a distinct kind, but can also instantiate other types, especially inductive generalizations and arguments from analogy.

Another important criticism of Michels's iron law of oligarchy also relates to the fallacy of composition. It is advanced by Seymour Martin Lipset (1962), a distinguished political sociologist who wrote the introduction to the English translation of Michels's book. Lipset's key criticism is that Michels failed to appreciate that a whole society can be democratic (i.e., anti-oligarchical) even though it is composed of institutional parts that are oligarchical (i.e., anti-democratic). Again, although Lipset does not use the term, he is attributing a fallacy of composition to Michels: that because the particular institutions of a society are oligarchic, therefore the whole society must be oligarchical. Lipset can admit that Michels's argument is both compositional and analogical, as sketched above. However, Lipset questions Michels's analogy at another crucial point, thus undermining his compositional argument from analogy. For Lipset, there is one condition or property present in democratic societies, but absent in undemocratic societies and in particular institutions of democratic ones: a constitutional provision or traditional-historical practice that bans or prevents any one entity or group from exercising tyrannical or despotic power over opposing entities or groups.

This criticism strikes me as plausible and powerful. In fact, there is a tradition of political theory that regards such an anti-tyrannical or anti-despotic principle as fundamental (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 1961, p. 301; Mosca, 1939, p. 134; cf. Finocchiaro, 1999, p. 206), although here Lipset does not mention any such historical precedents. However, his words in the summary of his criticism leave little doubt that he has this principle in mind, as they leave little doubt that he is charging Michels with the fallacy of composition:

In essence, democracy in modern society may be viewed as involving the conflict of organized groups competing for support ... While most private governments, unions, professional societies, veterans' organizations, and political parties will remain one-party systems ... it is important to recognize that many internally oligarchic organizations help to sustain political democracy in the larger society and to protect the interests of their members from the encroachments of other groups. Democracy in large measure rests on the fact that no one group is able to secure a basis of power and command over the majority so that it can effectively suppress or deny the claims of the groups it opposes. (Lipset, 1962, pp. 36-37)

Dahl's and Lipset's critiques are related, insofar as competition and balance of power are substantively connected. More importantly for us here, however, their critiques are really meta-arguments, which advance the critical conclusion that Michels's argument is erroneous in its reasoning from political parties to the whole

political system. These critical meta-arguments could of course be elaborated, reconstructed, analyzed, and evaluated at greater length. They strike me as cogent. But even if they were not, the relevance to the present investigation would remain, in the sense that there would be serious issues at the metalevel, rather than at the ground level, about the fallacy of composition: what we mean by fallacy of composition, what the ground-level argument is, and how accurate and fair it is to attribute this fallacy to this argument.

4. EPILOGUE

With regard to the fallacy of composition, the problem of how frequently it occurs is more striking than for the case of the other fallacies, because the contrast is greater and starker between the scarcity of scholarly analyses and the triviality of textbook examples on the one hand, and the widespread claims made (especially by economists) about its prevalence and importance. Thus, the empirical search for real or realistic examples is a relatively urgent task.

Such a search, however empirically minded, must also be guided by some assumptions or working hypotheses. One of these is the self-same ubiquity thesis, whose truth is being tested. Another guiding idea is that there are three distinct senses of “fallacy of composition”; these three notions may turn out to be importantly related, but they are *prima facie* different and should initially not be confused. A third key guiding idea is what I have called the meta-argumentation hypothesis: that the best places in which to search for fallacies of compositions are meta-arguments whose conclusion attributes (explicitly or implicitly) such a fallacy to some ground-level argument.

Guided by these ideas, I discussed the case of the criticism of Michels’s argument for the iron law of oligarchy; that is, the argument that political parties inevitably become oligarchic even if they claim to have democratic aims; and therefore, a democratic society inevitably becomes oligarchic. Dahl objected that such reasoning fails because there is a crucial disanalogy between the parts and the whole: a democratic society allows significant competition among its parts, but a particular party does not. Similarly, Lipset objected that there is another crucial difference: a democratic society has an anti-tyrannical system of checks and balances in its written or unwritten constitution, but political parties and labor unions do not.

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