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Commentary on: Maurice Finocchiaro's "The fallacy of composition and meta-argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper on the fallacy of composition, Maurice Finocchiaro puts forward several important theses about this fallacy. He also uses it to illustrate his view that fallacies should be studied in light of the notion of meta-argumentation at the core of his recent book (Finocchiaro, 2013).

First, he expresses his puzzlement. Some authors have claimed that this fallacy is quite common (this is the ubiquity thesis) but it seems to have been neglected by scholars. This second point does not seem to be controversial but the ubiquity thesis is open to discussion. For instance, Finocchiaro reminds us that Kahane (1973, p. 244) granted that this fallacy has not been given much scrutiny and explained this lack of interest by its rarity. This comforting explanation clearly goes against the ubiquity thesis.

How is it that few studies have been devoted to this fallacy? There is certainly no obvious relation between the frequency of a fallacy and the interest that scholars pay to it. It is likely that a fallacy having many faces or depending on many circumstantial parameters will inspire more studies than a simpler one, but things may not be that simple. If there is a link between the ubiquity of the fallacy of composition and the fact that there are few studies about it, it may be because many compositional problems go unnoticed or are not identified as such. The difficulty to detect and qualify some compositional problems is quite compatible with the ubiquity thesis. In any case, Finocchiaro rightly stresses that this fallacy should be more precisely and more empirically documented.

2. PARTS AND WHOLE

First, it should be remembered that this fallacy concerns a relation which is often quite straightforward but is sometimes quite tricky. It is even the subject matter of a theory – mereology – having a far reaching root in philosophy and a lot of contemporary developments in logic, ontology, metaphysics and psychology. Mereology can be briefly defined as the study of parthood or of the relation between parts and whole. One of its basic claims is that compositional reasoning is quite frequent and a plausible explanation of this frequency is that the relation between

parts and whole would be one of the most elementary cognitive links.

However, it is not always the same link but rather a kind of relation for it has modalities much more diverse and complex than it may appear at first sight. This is certainly why inferences from parts to whole follow no common logical rule, are not always valid and are open to a variety of mistakes and confusions. If this is true, Finocchiaro is right to criticize some textbooks examples which are too gross to be faithful to the complexity of the parts-whole relation. Of course, in a didactic context you often need easy examples to show that the compositional inference that is valid in some cases is also blatantly false in others. But this does not account for the variety of relations which may exist between parts and whole. Just look at the following list of examples that is certainly not exhaustive:

- (1) My arm is part of my body.
- (2) The west side is the most typical area of this city. No! It's the north!
- (3) Each and every citizen is part of the country.
- (4) Paris, it's France!
- (5) Sorry, I missed part of your talk.

Mathematics is a field full of stimulating ideas about composition. Remember, for instance, Russell's barber, one of the most famous paradoxes that plagued early set theory. A crucial move to avoid it has been to make an explicit distinction between being a member of a set and being a part of this set. But this is not an easy distinction. It looks difficult and artificial for beginners. It is usually easy for them to understand that this or that integer or a small group of integers makes a part of integers. But it is more difficult to accept a sharp distinction between the number seven, one of the elements of the set of integers and the set having seven as only member, this set being a part, not an element, of the set of integers.

Infinite sets also provide puzzling examples against the common, but false, compositional principle that the parts are necessarily smaller than the whole. Many people 'intuitively' think that even integers are less numerous than integers. At first sight, they are two times less numerous since only one on two integers is even. But this is "a type of common but logically incorrect argument", namely a fallacy according to a definition offered by Finocchiaro (2005, p. 113). This mistaken reasoning is not isolated but typical and so, to keep on with Finocchiaro's normative vocabulary, it is a "logical sin" (2005, p. 116) or "a vice of argumentation" as he said in the first sentence of his talk. Fortunately, this collective mathematical vice had a happy end, for mathematicians finally triumphed over it and can now spread the good news that even integers are as numerous as integers. In this case, we should now not hesitate to bridge the gap from part to whole.

You do not need to call to the abstruse mathematics of the infinite to doubt the necessity of the "law" that the parts are smaller than the whole. My first example – "my arm is part of my body" – seems a paradigmatic positive instance of it. But look at the fifth one, "Sorry, I missed part of your talk". Who can say that it is not a polite understatement meaning "I missed the whole of your talk"? And what should we think of "I like the whole of your talk, especially the first part"? In my opinion, the pragmatics of composition (and division) in the field of politeness should suffice

to convince us of the ubiquity of compositional reasonings (at least in this field) and also of their fallacious versions. This strengthens my opinion that John Woods (2004) has a good point when he says that behind a fallacy lies a philosophical problem: the fallacy of composition and its twin sister about division certainly come out of a general difficult epistemic relation between whole and parts.

3. COMPOSITION

Michel's iron law is an example of a compositional move that you may (or may not) identify as fallacious. This is all the more difficult since the fallacy can have different structures. Finocchiaro distinguishes three possibilities: reasoning from premises using a term distributively to a conclusion using the same term collectively, reasoning from some properties of the parts to the same property of the whole, reasoning from some property of the members of the group to the same property of the entire group. If you stick too much to one structure you can miss another one.

T. Govier (2007) discusses another possibility. Some fallacies of composition can go unnoticed because they are assimilated or reduced to another fallacy. First, she considers two common verbal practices involving a compositional move. The first one is synecdoche, the figure of speech using a part to mean the whole. "Paris, it's France" is an example opening to others like "Yesterday, Paris met Berlin in Italy". The second one is stereotype, a notion that Govier briefly defines as the fact that "a group is cast according to the attributes of some few individuals within it" (p. 508). Compositional problems are present here but no reasoning, therefore no fallacious reasoning, is yet clearly involved.

When she gets to fallacies, Govier sees two candidates to welcome the fallacy of composition: hasty generalization and equivocation. First, let us note that these two fallacies are themselves not reducible to a simple scheme: they are what I will call generic fallacies. This feature is an advantage to host other fallacies.

One aspect of what is quickly called "the" problem of induction is that an (incomplete) induction, ampliative or not, is always more or less hasty. More or less, that is the question. This native vice of induction seems to have contaminated some fallacious compositional reasonings. And as far as equivocation is concerned, Finocchiaro reminds us that long before Van Eemeren and Grootendorst stressed that bridging the gap from part to whole is favored by equivocation, Aristotle dealt with composition and division in the section of *On Sophistical Refutations* devoted to fallacies "in dictione" where equivocation appears in several places. Thus, it seems quite possible that the study of the fallacy of composition spreads well beyond the academic works which are explicitly devoted to it. You should just look for it under different headings.

4. META-ARGUMENTATION

According to Finocchiaro, fallacies are neither theoretical concepts used only by argumentation theorists, nor ordinary arguments even though they are quite common. They should be considered as meta-arguments, that is arguments about ground-level arguments which are themselves what I have just called ordinary

arguments, that is argument about topics other than the argument at stake. This highlights a feature that seems to me quite essential for the study of fallacies. I am currently doing some research on the history of fallacies and I had the opportunity to browse the whole catalogue of the French National Library, the largest French library. This overview confirmed my former impression that there is almost no theoretical literature on fallacies in French. Of course, we know that there are important writings like medieval contributions and the famous chapters of the *Logique* of Port-Royal. But when you just look at the titles of books and documents from the eighteenth to the twentieth century there is almost nothing if you compare with the blooming English literature on this topic. I mean that there is almost no theoretical literature. But there is an amount of titles including eclectic charges of fallacy, all of them confirming an unsurprising constant: fallacies are committed by an opponent, by an opposing party. So, the charge of fallacious reasoning is not a privilege of remote argumentation theorists but is also widely used on the battlefield to disqualify the opponent's views. Just like meta-discursive remarks can be part of an ordinary speech, meta-arguments do not necessarily come after ground level arguments or only from critical outsiders like argumentation theorists. But ordinary arguers do not qualify them as meta-argumentation for they are not concerned by this kind of theoretical distinction.

Maurice Finocchiaro discusses Michel's "iron law of oligarchy" and its critics. It should be noted that these critics are convincing only if you assume that in a democracy, there is normally some competition between political parties or other groups playing a major political role. To make more salient the importance of this implicit normative assumption for the meta-arguments stressing a fallacy of composition, imagine a country claiming to be a democracy but where there are also strong connections or interpenetrations between the most influential political groups, for instance between political parties and the media, between the government and a party, or between unions and the state administration. In such a case Dahl's and Lipset's meta-arguments are certainly weaker, for the oligarchy that they acknowledge in the parties and the other politically influential groups could spread beyond their institutional limits, certainly in a hidden way, and contaminate the whole political system. So, the relevance of the charge of fallacy of composition depends on the political presumptions shared, or not, by Michel and his critics. I am not claiming that this conclusion stressing the dialectical side of the charge of fallacy applies in any case. It still has to be documented by further studies.

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