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# Commentary on: Fabrizio Macagno's "What We Hide in Words: Value-Based Reasoning and Emotive Language"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Macagno's paper begins as if it were going to be a case study on some verbal character attacks from the most recent Italian parliamentary election campaign. But after this entertaining introductory part it very soon gets down to a fundamental discussion of the argumentative structure and persuasive power of what he calls "emotive words." There are actually two distinct questions he discusses, which are related to one another, but still of very different kind: The first concerns the structure of the chain of reasoning that leads from the predication of such emotive words to a decision to act; the second, and more difficult one, deals with the issue of what actually makes a word emotive.

## 2. ETHICAL – MORAL – EMOTIVE?

A first question in that respect concerns terminology. As a synonym for "emotive words," Macagno adopts (from Stevenson, 1937) the appellation "ethical terms." Yet what does "ethical" mean in that context? From a rhetorical point of view, there would be a big difference between terms "ethical" and "emotive." The first might evoke the concept of rhetorical *ethos* or character, whereas the second would point to the domain of *pathos* or emotion. To be sure, an association of "ethical terms" with *ethos* would not be out of the way, since employments of such words could easily be interpreted as instances of *ad hominem*, or "ethotic" arguments, as Walton called them (1998, pp. 38-42; 1999), more precisely of their abusive type, which is commonly regarded as fallacious. They aim at destroying an opponent's character and standing by application of denigrating epithets. Yet since the argument moves on from "ethical terms" (p. 1) to "ethical judgments" (p. 7) to "moral judgment" (p. 9), it seems evident that 'ethical' here means 'moral' in the sense of moral values. Some more clear-cut definition of these central terms might have been helpful.

## 3. CHAINS OF REASONING

Macagno's account (in Section 3) of the chain of reasoning that leads from the predication of an 'emotive word' to a particular action is based on earlier work he

has conducted with Douglas Walton and Chris Reed and which has resulted in a major book on *Argumentation Schemes* (Walton, Reed, & Macagno, 2008). The idea that emotive words actually function as implicit or condensed arguments related to value judgments, has been investigated in earlier papers (with similar titles), which, however, rather focused on the relationship of emotive words to persuasive definitions (Macagno & Walton, 2010a; 2010b). The notion of persuasive definitions has been left aside in the present paper, perhaps because emotive words seem to work best precisely by not giving a definition.

Instead, a closed chain of argument schemes is constructed that leads from the evaluation of a state of affairs to its classification, from classification to a value judgment (on desirability or undesirability), and from there to a decision to act. The argument schemes involved are all taken from Walton, Reed, & Macagno (2008) and have separately been experimented with in earlier papers (argument from classification: Macagno & Walton, 2010a, p. 19; argument from values: Macagno & Walton, 2010b, p. 2008; argument from goal to means: Macagno & Walton, 2010a, p. 21), but are here for the first time combined to form this unbroken chain of reasoning that very aptly links a particular impulse to action to a particular assessment of a state of affairs. It is the first step (the argument from classification), in which emotive words may be involved.

It would have been nice to see that scheme applied to one of the Italian election campaign cases. Here is a tentative try: Step 1 (argument from classification): If individual Silvio B. can be classified as falling under verbal category 'pied piper' (see p. 4), then he has the property 'deceiver;' Silvio B. can be so classified; hence he is a deceiver. Step 2 (argument from values): A deceiver is a threat as judged by the Italian electorate; Silvio B. is a deceiver; hence he is a threat. Step 3 (practical reasoning from goal to means): The electorate has the goal to see a good government elected; not voting for a person that is a threat is a means to realize that goal; therefore Silvio B. should not be voted for. It would be interesting to peruse the critical questions relevant to each step to determine the point when and where exactly such reasoning becomes fallacious.

#### 4. EMOTIONS, JUDGMENTS, AND ACTIONS

While this chain of reasoning will work smoothly once a certain state of affairs is evaluated in a particular way, it is much harder to tell how the use of emotive language relates to such initial evaluations. To bridge the gap between the descriptive and emotive functions of words, Macagno resorts to modern cognitivist approaches, according to which emotions are based on rational value judgments or actually *are* such judgments. According to those models, emotions have two components, one that consists in the evaluation of a state of affairs, and another that motivates actions.

It is interesting to note that these modern cognitive theories more or less accurately reproduce the ancient Stoic theory of emotions. According to the Stoics, an emotion is based on the perception or imagination of a specific state of affairs (*phantasia*); but the emotion itself consists in a false judgment of assent (*sugkatathesis*) by the commanding intellectual faculty of the soul; this judgment is a

judgement about the truth of the perception as much as a value-judgment about its desirability or non-desirability; *qua* value-judgment it is also regularly accompanied by an impulse to action (*hormé*) (Forschner, 1981, pp. 114-116). On pp. 11-12, Macagno actually quotes a passage from Quintilian, in which this theory is clearly alluded to.

In Macagno's reconstruction of the influence of emotive words and emotions on the perception and interpretation of reality, this original system seems curiously reversed. Whereas according to Stoic (and modern cognitive) theory the process leads from a perception of reality via a value-judgment to emotion (and action), in Macagno it apparently goes the other way: Emotion (such as contained in emotive words) first provokes a value-judgment; as Walton and Macagno write in an earlier paper: "On our view, a term is considered emotive if it leads the interlocutor to draw a value judgment on the fragment of reality the term is used to refer to" (Macagno & Walton, 2010a, p. 1). This value-judgment in turn induces a perception of "apparent reality" that is taken for truth. If I understand correctly, it is this mistaken perception of "apparent reality" that triggers the whole chain of arguments described above that leads all the way down again to ultimate action.

## 5. PERIPHERAL OR HEURISTIC ROUTES OF INFORMATION PROCESSING

Although on the face of it these processes seem complicated and circuitous, in real life they happen almost effortlessly and in practically no time. To explain this swiftness and easiness, Macagno makes use of the concepts of peripheral (vs. central) or heuristic (vs. systematic) routes of information processing. Both concepts belong to dual process models of attitude change: to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as developed by R.E. Petty and J.T. Cacioppo (1984; 1986a; 1986b; Petty & Wegener, 1999), and to the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) of Eagly and Chaiken (1993; Chen & Chaiken, 1999) respectively. It might have been mentioned, though, that both models are ultimately based on the so-called Cognitive Response Approach to persuasion (Greenwald, 1968; Cacioppo, Harkins, & Petty, 1981), which interprets persuasion as primarily based on the recipient's evaluation of his or her own cognitive responses to persuasive attempts.

Both models distinguish between a 'route' associated with elaborate rational cognitive processing of information, with high motivation and cognitive ability, and another route associated with low motivation and low cognitive ability that rather relies on cues or feelings. This second route works much more swiftly than the other and focuses on non-rational elements such as the authority or attractiveness of the speaker (that is, on typical elements of *ethos*), but also on influences by emotion (*pathos*).

It should be noted as a warning, however, that, according to both models, heuristic or peripheral processing, swift and easy as it may be, does not result in full internalization, and thus any attitude change resulting from this channel remains temporary and unstable. True attitude change only happens through the central or systematic routes. Consequently, persuasion through emotion alone will not result in sustainable attitude change.

Under which conditions, then, is this peripheral or heuristic route taken? It must necessarily be taken whenever there is lack of time, resources, information, or rational arguments. This would associate it with situations of what Herbert A. Simon (1957; 1991) has called 'bounded rationality' (see Gigerenzer & Selten, 2002; Kahneman, 2003b; Macagno, p. 14, quotes Kahneman, 2003a, but not for this matter). And Macagno rightly warns that the use of emotive words can in cases be "devastating to the other route" (p. 14), that is, to the only one that produces stable attitude change.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In sum, Macagno's paper makes a significant step forward towards a more appropriate analysis of the argumentative effect of 'emotive words'. It seems clear that they have both a logical function (as condensed arguments) and a rhetorical effect (by arousing emotions). Yet it is also obvious that what ultimately makes a word emotive is still far from being clear. What then do we hide in words? Sadly, after p. 2, Macagno does not get back to answering that question.

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