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Commentary on: Steve Oswald and Christopher Hart’s “Trust based on bias: Cognitive constraints on source-related fallacies”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Oswald and Hart have provided us with a very nice account of the cognitive constraints on identifying fallacies in argument processing. To accomplish this, Professors Oswald and Hart have borrowed from cognitive science and evolutionary linguistics. Although I believe they could have excavated more, their analysis, on the whole, provides the argumentation theorist with yet another tool in fallacy analyses.

Their exposition begins by situating how their account of the rhetorical effectiveness of fallacies is not the standard fare. That is, by examining three types of source-related fallacies Oswald and Hart would like us to accept their claim that “source-related fallacies exploit our processing mechanisms, which are usually reliable and accurate, but which are ... inherently fallible.”

2. THE DELIVERY

We begin with a standard, yet robust account of three fallacies using Walton’s argumentation scheme (Walton, 2006). Specifically ad verecundium, ad populum, and ad hominem are addressed due to their inherent similarities. That is, all three argument schemes play on the reliability and/or credibility of the third parties invoked. For ad verecundium it is the perceived reliability of an expert, for ad populum the weight of a widespread belief, and for the ad hominem the lack of credibility or reliability of the third party is invoked.

What we discover is that Walton’s critical questions -- the questions according to Walton which determine whether or not a particular instantiation of an argument scheme is fallacious – are in fact contained in our own cognitive competencies. These are referred to as “epistemic vigilance” in the literature.

The pragmatic necessity of having a stabilized language aside, epistemic vigilance is both content- and source-directed. For the former, obviously, plausibility and consistency are factors. Source-directed vigilance requires the audience to assess trustworthiness of the speaker, expertise, and more. On Oswald and Hart’s account, fallacies are objectionable, ie., effective, when they overcome
epistemic vigilance. Translated, this means that Walton’s critical questions do not yield cause for being even more vigilant – namely for the system to gather or mobilize additional information that would be critical on Walton’s account.

To make sense of how this can occur, Oswald and Hart hinge their argument on what could only be described cognitive science’s version of the Second Law of Thermodynamics: systems settle with least energy and maximum randomness. Likewise, human cognition has evolved to favour least processing effort – accessibility – while favouring epistemic strength. Relevance, on this account, play on accessibility (recall the source-related fallacies are, in the end, fallacies of relevance) while scaling with epistemic value. It would have benefitted the reader to see how Oswald and Hart would unpack relevance questions and their heuristic value.

Although relevance plays a role, an important one at that, in dealing with source-related fallacies, cognitive biases also come into play. The authors highlight, by example, a conformity bias that promotes social cooperation. For instance, one might find oneself in a community of colleagues who generally accept Walton’s use of argument schema. The conformity bias would urge us, in order to be prudent, to go along and accept Walton’s position. Failure to do so could compromise one’s social clout. By way of example. Indeed, Oswald and Hart claim: “It usually pays to go along with majorities because to do so is efficient and because not to do so compromises one’s social inclusion. It may pay to go along with authorities for similar reasons. Moreover, experts possess information in particular domains which hearers might not otherwise have access to and which, by virtue of their expertise, is usually reliable. It is therefore perfectly rational to take the word of an expert. Fallacies, in sum, work in convincing audiences because they exploit the inherent fallibility of heuristics which are, in the normal course of events, helpful.” Efficiency then amounts to intellectual laziness, an exercise in “amusing ourselves to death” to quote Postman.

Fallacy studies, on this account, cold benefit from understand the root of why fallacies work as rhetorical devices. That fallacies have certain forms or can be analysed in certain ways is one thing; with some liberty, if I may extend Oswald and Hart’s point, fallacy studies would be enriched instead of simply looking at “that p” but rather what should be examined is the “why p” – why the audience might fall for a fallacy.

3. CONCLUSION

I would suggest that the argumentation community might benefit in looking at the lessons from cognitive science. Oswald and Hart have given us a glimpse into this. It is not clear from their analysis how Walton’s schema could not accommodate as critical questions the heuristics and biases that could be used to defend against the rhetorical effectiveness of fallacies. To be sure, prior to reading Oswald and Hart, one could argue that argument schema and critical questions aid in addressing fallacious arguments and one could be forgiven for not disclosing all the relevant information needed to counter a fallacious argument. Indeed, many of us might teach logic (broadly construed) with Aristotle in mind: name we study reasoning so
that we can reason better and to appreciate good reasoning when exposed to it. After reading Oswald and Hart, one has a better sense of what has to be “unlearned” in studying reasoning, all the while knowing what are the right questions to ask.

REFERENCES

