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Commentary On Enthymemes and Fallacy Gaps: Commentary on Paglieri

Scott F. Aikin
Vanderbilt University

Commentary on "Don't worry, be gappy!": On Enthymemes and Fallacy Gaps

SCOTT F. AIKIN

Philosophy
Vanderbilt University
111 Furman Hall
Nashville, TN 37240
U.S.A.
scott.f.aikin@vanderbilt.edu

Fabio Paglieri's essay, "Don't worry, be gappy!" has three main dialectical stages. The first two are critical, the third is constructive. The first stage is a review of the Fallacy Fork argument Paglieri (along with Boudry and Pigliucci 2015) has run against the popular conception of fallacies as attractive, universal, incorrigible errors. The second stage is Paglieri's reply to those who have theorized non-fallacious fallacy types, with particular focus on the recent work by David Godden and Frank Zenker (2015). The third stage is a brief overview of Paglieri's take on what direction fallacy theory should go in the wake of the first two critical points.

My focus for this comment will be on Paglieri's second and third dialectical stages. I will leave discussion of the Fallacy Fork for another time (See Aikin 2016). Pagilieri's main target of criticism is the Godden-Zenker (2015) line of defending the difference between fallacious and non-fallacious fallacy form instances. The Godden-Zenker thesis is that what makes the difference between instances of the two is whether background or contextual assumptions not explicitly mentioned in a given argument are justified – so the fallacies, for example, of *asserting the consequent* and *denying the antecedent* are "gappy." Paglieri's argument is that with this observation, the quality of the argument is not a matter of its gappiness or whether it instantiates a fallacy type, but whether its assumptions filling the gaps are acceptable. In this regard, Paglieri's argument depends on an analogy between these gappy arguments and enthymemes – in both cases, important pieces of information are left out of the explicit statement of the argument, but they are necessary for its acceptability. Insofar as the gap thesis is correct, then "whether (a fallacy-type instance) is problematic or not will depend on the same features that matter for enthymemes: namely, whether what is left unstated is controversial or unclear" (Paglieri, forthcoming). These, Paglieri holds, are now *empirical questions* and are not the special province of informal logic or fallacy theory. Paglieri shows this point with asserting the consequent, denying the antecedent, and the *ad ignorantium* fallacy forms.

To this line of argument, I believe the defender of the non-fallacious fallacies thesis could concede Paglieri's point about the background premises, but turn to note that the background commitments, if acceptable and appropriate for improving argument quality, must be of a certain form and logical type to do its job. The same, it is (on Paglieri's analogy) with enthymemes. So, with denying antecedents and asserting consequents, whether the suppressed premise is a properly formed explanation or whether it is a perfectly formed biconditional or an imperfectly formed conditional is important. With *ad ignorantium*, whether the case is one wherein absence of evidence is evidence of absence or not is the issue. And more could be said of many other fallacy forms: in circumstantial *ad hominem,* whether the conflict of interest is relevant; in *ad hominem tu quoque*, whether hypocrisy shows something significant (see Aikin 2008); and in straw man fallacies, whether the distortion is nevertheless on the road to improved understanding (Aikin and

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Casey 2011). The point is that the fallacy types still furnish us with useful information – namely, what type of background information must obtain for the argument to be good or not.

Paglieri closes his essay with an observation that given the drawbacks to fallacy theory, as it has been traditionally practiced, it should be massively reformed:

> Fallacies, if we insist to keep teaching about them, should no longer be framed as attractive mistakes that dumb reasoners are prone to make, but rather as *points of vulnerability that sophisticated arguers may try to exploit…* (2016)

And so fallacy theory could be refashioned as 'logical self-defense' or 'epistemic vigilance'.

I am, myself, very sympathetic with Paglieri's program here, but I do wonder about the significance of a 'point of vulnerability' is, if the Fallacy Fork is correct. It still must be a widely repeated part of an argument frame wherein certain normative features may be challenged. But if the Fallacy Fork is correct, there aren't any cases that live up to that descriptions – they either satisfy the normative failure phenomenon or they are not very common. Is Paglieri suggesting a *fictionalism* about fallacies so that the vocabulary can persist? Or is the point simply about the rhetoric of reasons?

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