May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

Commentary on: Frank Zenkers's "The polysemy of 'fallacy'– or 'bias', for that matter"

Michel Dufour
University Sorbonne-Nouvelle

Commentary on Frank Zenkers's "The Polysemy of 'Fallacy'– or 'Bias', for That Matter"

MICHEL DUFOUR
Department «Institut de la Communication et des Médias»
Sorbonne-Nouvelle
13 rue Santeuil
75231 Paris Cedex 05
France
mdufour@univ-paris3.fr

1. Introduction

Professor Zenker reminds us that fallacies are investigated by several disciplines in spite of the lack of a consensual definition, a situation which makes it reasonable to speak of a polysemy of the notion. Zenker's optimistic and ambitious project is a use-based analysis that would organize it. For this purpose, he introduces a synthetic classification of the conditions of fallacy in order to federate the various approaches of fallacies under a single set of normative conditions. He also highlights that each approach has specific connections with a subset of conditions and claims that the last conditions of his list matches up with three common views on human rationality.

2. Ecumenism

Zenker rightly stresses that most scholars' approaches have trouble providing a unified view of standard fallacies. They focus rather on some aspects of some fallacies or of their use. Zenker's optimistic project is to go further than a mere syncretic juxtaposition of the different views of fallacy. It is more appropriate to speak here of ecumenism, for his ambition is to unify them, without rejecting parts from one or the other. Granted that the different approaches focus on different aspects, how is a harmonious organization then possible?

First, note that the principle of his analysis is not to account for the uses of fallacy by arguers but to account for the uses of the word "fallacy" by scholars interested in the topic. The leading scheme of Zenker's account is the sentence "By performing action A in context C, subject SUBJ commits the fallacy, *if…*" Yet, the analysis is not over and Zenker invites us to cooperate to try to reach a kind of definition stating necessary and sufficient conditions. The provisory *if* should become an *if and only if*.

The ecumenism of the project can already be seen in the organization of the sixteen conditions listed up to now. The first six ones are not any conditions but are introduced as core conditions which would apply to "*any[1]* fallacy concept" (p. 10). This "narrow" and "traditional" and "non-pragmatic" view which takes a fallacy to be a bad inference would be shared by "most logicians, psychologists, epistemologists, cognitive scientists, and lawyers" (p. 3).

This seems reasonable, but if Hansen (2015) is right that "the desire [for a general definition of fallacy] is frustrated because there is disagreement about the identity of fallacy" you can still wonder if no fallacy escapes from these core conditions. Does *ad baculum* satisfy them? What theory T (cond. 4), what theorem (cond. 5) are concerned in this case? I guess we could

---

[1] Zenker's emphasis.

have a nice monster-barring game with the status of *ad baculum* among fallacious arguments (Woods & Walton 1989).

Zenker's conditions are not only organized, they are ranked. This accounts for the three "distinct but related" uses of "fallacy" that he acknowledges (p. 2), namely (i) an inferential error, (ii) a misaligned of "faulty" task-response and (iii) a suboptimal discourse contribution.

I wonder whether these uses are more than roughly compatible? Zenker assumes the polysemy of "fallacy," but polysemy sometimes allows us only to dream of monosemy. Moreover, although there are uncontroversial monosemies, this is not always the case. For instance, Woods writes "Pragma-dialecticians are pirates about fallacies. They have appropriated the name of fallacy and applied it to a concept significantly different from the traditional concept" (Woods, p. 503). Here, the polysemy seems to be the result of the split of a previous monosemy. Was "fallacy" really non equivocal before the time of pirates? I am not sure that it previously meant a single consensual traditional concept. I am not either sure that the gambler's fallacy is essential for the pragma-dialectical theory of argument (Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels). Even without the pirates, the meaning of "fallacy" does not seem to be the sum of its partial meanings as shown by the doubt raised by the frequency condition (cond. 12) about which Zenker finally writes: "Rather that endorse this (or any other) condition, we simply list it here." This careful attitude is a backward step from the previous ambitious ecumenism of his list to a more modest syncretic project.

3. The art of deception

Zenker's approach is normative, so he focuses on the adjective "bad." I would like to add a few words about deception which identifies fallacies among bad arguments. This idea of deception matches the "seem…but" of Aristotle's definition of *On Sophistical Refutations* (I. 164a23) stating that a paralogism is an argument which seems to be a syllogism but is not.

Deception usually involves the kind of evaluative contrast that is often implicit in "to seem…but." When you consider a suspect argument, you compare what it seems and what it is. This difference is appreciated by someone, typically a human being who is able to state two evaluative points of view.

According to me, Zenker is right to introduce a subject in his analysis of the notion of fallacy, but note that his subject (SUBJ) expresses no opinion about the argument she puts forward. Yet, when she does commit a fallacy it seems reasonable to think that she both believes that the argument is good and good-looking. So, the claim that it is good-looking, but bad, is an alternative view that comes from someone else if the subject commits a fallacy. It comes from someone who can see both the good-looking and the bad side.

I went too fast when I supposed that the subject who commits the fallacy is the arguer. It can be committed by someone who listens or reads the argument. Is this a reason to believe that the arguer also committed it? I do not think so. Both situations are possible: (i) the arguer, too, commits the fallacy, (ii) the arguer does not commit it. This suggests a question to Frank Zenker and to people who are only interested in the subjects of fallacies, the victims. Can a practical theory of fallacy be said general if no attention is paid to the culprit? I will call someone who does not commit a fallacy but makes someone else commit it, a sophist; even if this label is unfair for the Great Sophists of the Antiquity (De Romilly, Tindale). A sophist does not mix the good-looking and the bad side of an argument. This is not a privilege, for Aristotle himself

underpinned that a good dialectician is not only able to thwart the paralogisms addressed to him but also to produce others.

It is worth noticing that the three basic views of human rationality discussed by Zenker – panglossian, meliorist and apologist – share at least one common point: their perspective is therapeutic. Doctor Pangloss says "You look ill but, God's thanks, this is just an impression." Doctor Melior says "Your disease is genetic, but with a bit of transhuman surgery, you will become another man." Doctor Apolo explains : "This is just a chronicle disease. This is sad, but we can manage it. Don't you already feel better to know that?".

Life among physicians is not especially exciting. I invite you to turn away from these morbid concepts of rationality to a kind of Nietzschean fourth way, perverse but healthy – an "evil cousin" as Zenker says (p. 3) – illustrated by the sophist.

Just like a native speaker has a grammatical competence which suggests that he has a deep knowledge of the grammatical theory of his native language, the sophist behaves at least *as if* he had the knowledge or the mastership of Zenker's whole theoretical machinery. I do not claim he has it, but the result is impressive since he seems to have at least the command of all that is required by conditions 1 to 6, namely Zenker's core conditions and conditions about "the narrow sense of fallacy." For instance, he skillfully manages various theories T, and anticipates the requirements of their contexts of application C and C*.

For me, the sophist's most impressive performance is the risky bet he takes when he speculates on what will take place in his interlocutor's head and incorporates it into his own strategy. He must give the impression that both of them aim at the same goals by the same means; he must know that a fallacious move in context C* is very likely to be interpreted as non fallacious by the interlocutor who will interpret it in context C (cond. 10). He must also know the interlocutor's propensity to some mistakes, his flawed tendencies and his incorrigible sins (cond. 12, 13 ,14). Finally he must be an expert in the management of distances – especially small ones (cond. 15) – and of similarities (cond. 16).

Does a being endowed with all these rational capacities exist? I doubt that there are full-time or global sophists. But I believe in part-time sophists, experts only at making people commit some kinds of fallacy. In any case, my main point is that a theory of fallacy and of human rationality should take into account the sophist's brilliant communicational expertise about fallacies, even if most of us are only minor sophists.

References

Eemeren, F. H. Van, Garssen B. and B. Meuffels (2009). *Fallacies and Judgments of Reasonableness.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Hansen, H. (2015). Fallacies. In: Edward H. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/fallacies/.

Romilly J. De (1988). *Les Grands Sophistes dans l'Athènes de Périclès.* Paris: Editions de Fallois. English Translation by J. Loyd (1998): *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens.* Oxford:Oxford University Press.

Tindale, C. W. (2010). *Reason's Dark Champions: Constructive Strategies of Sophistic Argument.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Woods, J. (2013). *Errors of Reasoning: Naturalizing the Logic of Inference.* London: College Publications (*Studies in Logic 45*).

Woods, J. and D. Walton (2007). Ad Baculum. In: *Fallacies: Selected papers 1972-1982* (pp. 47-53), London: College Publications (*Studies in Logic 7*).