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Understanding the Embrace of Fallacy: A Multi-Modal Analysis

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Abstract: For a very long time now, I have been arguing that what I call a multi-modal approach to argument and, indeed, communication, is essential if we are to understand human dissensual interaction. While the logical mode is certainly extremely important and omnipresent, it is not the only rational means of communication. The other modes are the emotional and visceral (or physical, kisceral, intuitive, or mystical). I have explained and defended these alternative modes vigorously, and frequently elsewhere, and will not do so here (Gilbert, 1994, 1997, 2014, among many others). Rather, my goal today is to illustrate the utility of this approach in a practical way, in particular, in the discussion of fallacies. Just as I am not going to reiterate my defence of multi-modal analyses, I am also not going to enter into the extensive debate of just what a fallacy is. I believe that in this context, regardless of the imprecise definition, including one that denies their existence, what I say will still make sense (Blair & Johnson, 1993; Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987; Hahn & Oaksford, 2006; Hamblin, 1970; Hintikka, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Massey, 1981; Reygadas, 2001; Tindale, 1996; Walton, 2005; Walton, 1991; Wreen, 1997; among a multitude of others).

Keywords Anti-vaxxer, argumentum ad vericundiam, fallacy, innocent until proven guilty, #Metoo, multi-modal, post hoc ergo propter hoc, sexual harassment.

1. Argumentum ad verecundiam

Ms. Freelackers' parents, who she describes as loving and intelligent, were anti-vaxxers. As a result, she found herself at 27 without, to her knowledge, any vaccines. Ms. Freelackers was, at the time, applying for a grad school Ph.D. programme, and her thesis specialized in how controversial science was communicated. Suddenly, she came across information detailing how measles was on the resurgence due, according to her materials, to anti-vaxxers and the vaccine hesitant. This gave her great pause. As an intelligent, thoughtful woman, she felt responsible: "So many lives lost—and here I was. Unvaccinated. A part of the problem" (p. 6).¹

Upon investigation, Ms. Freelackers learned from her mother that she had, indeed, been vaccinated for MMR, measles, mumps, and rubella. However, she never received any of the booster shots. Why had her mother (there is little mention of her father in this regard), made this decision? In the end, she needed to push her mother for more information.

It turned out, first, that she had all her vaccines until she was three-years old, including MMR. So, what happened? Permit me a quote: "At first we let you get all of them," she continued. "But, you know, after what happened to Erika, we decided to stop" (p. 12).

I would like to begin by exploring a classical fallacy: *argumentum ad verecundiam*, appeal to expert authority. In particular, I will refer to a recent article in the Toronto Globe and Mail first published on 23 February 2020, entitled, "My parents were against vaccines. Getting immunized as an adult shouldn't have been so hard" (p. 1).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from Ms. Freelackers article in the Toronto Globe.

I could almost feel my mom's smile disappear on the other end of the line. Even all these years later, my parents still get upset whenever anyone brings up Erika's diagnosis. She was the daughter of a family friend who'd been diagnosed with autoimmune diabetes immediately after a vaccine for hepatitis B. Her mother, a medical doctor, assumed there was a link between the vaccination and the onset of the disease shortly after. When my parents found out, they were horrified. (p. 12)

Now a simple way to view this is as an example of *post hoc, propter hoc* [post hoc]. We must, however, not be hasty. There are, after all, many instances of single-instance experiments. If you burn your hand on a stove, you do not touch it again to make sure it wasn't a random occurrence. You just don't touch a hot stove again, and no one, not even an informal logician, will criticize you. And in this case, there was also information that the French had stopped Hep B vaccines due to public outcry.

So, did the elder Ms. Freelackers (Mom) commit a fallacy? Did Mom succumb to a post hoc? I suggest not. First, the person who she was using as an authority was appropriate, a medical doctor (MD). For Mom, her friend the doctor knew a lot more than she did and was someone from whom she may have regularly taken advice. Remember, "An expert is anyone who knows more than we do when we want to know it" (Gilbert 2008, p. 79). However, while one major component of a non-fallacious *ad verecundiam*, the authority should be appropriate, another, the belief in question should not be controversial, is not. MD ought, at the very least, have indicated to Mom that there was controversy regarding her belief.

So why did Mom fall into an *ad verecundiam*? For this we have to look at the alternative modes of analysis provided by Gilbert (cf. above). First of all, given the dreadful news that poor Erika had suddenly acquired Diabetes: (1) Mom was frightened. In other words, her emotional reaction coloured her decision, and, in fact overrode the logical considerations; and, (2) The event – a visceral mode occurrence – in conjunction with her fear for Alice, her own child, was enough to preclude further investigation.

Now what about Ms. Freelackers? For many years, regardless of her suspicions and discomfort, she avoided vaccines, primarily out of loyalty to her mother and a desire not to seem strange. In fact, if anything, it was primarily inertia.

By the time I started university, I'd seen many of my friends receive their vaccines. None of them had experienced the horrifying side effects my parents were so worried about. But although I no longer believed immunization was dangerous, I didn't see any reason to change the way things were, either. Rather than questioning my parents' views, I went along with them, nodding my head at any mentions of "risks" or "complications." For more than two decades, my missing vaccines remained little more than an occasional complication at the doctor's office. (p. 5)

However, the core of Alice's inertia was the idea that she did want to avoid, as she disclosed: "questioning my parents' views" (p.5). I suggest that to understand Ms. Freelackers' position we need to use an emotional-mode analysis. That is to say that her love and respect for her mother made the idea of questioning and doubting Mom's decision very hard. After all, Alice knew Erika and just how hard her parents took the news about her illness.

On a strictly logical mode, there were several fallacies committed. Mom certainly committed a post hoc, and MD a post hoc and hasty conclusion. Ms. Freelackers also held an *ad*

verecundiam for some time until she rehabilitated herself with research. So, to classify the fallacies, the logical mode is sufficient, but to understand them, to appreciate how and why they occurred, we need the alternative modes. Simply knowing that a fallacy has taken place is interesting, but understanding the dynamics using multi-modal analysis provides us with much deeper insights.

2. Argumentum ad Ignoratiem

I want to turn now to another topical example where understanding overweighs technical definition. This is in the #Metoo movement currently raging through the world, and especially the United States. At issue for us is not the rightness or wrongness of #Metoo but, rather, the principle of law that a charged person is innocent until proven guilty. This issue has certainly been discussed previously (cf. Wreen 1996, and his citations). In our case, a number of commentators have argued that #Metoo has used *ad ignoratiem* to indict people, almost all male, simply by accusation rather than by legal process (Boothe 2018, Dershowitz 2019, Gilmore 2018, O’Neill 2017).²

There are two forms of the *ad ignoratiem*. The first is that something is true if it is not proven false, and the second is the converse, something is false unless it has been proven true. The legal dictum “innocent until proven guilty” is of the second form. The consensus of the articles (and one book) cited below is that the #Metoo movement is committing an *ad ignoratiem* of the first form: someone charged with sexual harassment should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.³ It is not my purpose here to either justify or accuse. Like the great majority of women and men, I am horrified by the existence of the abuse of power in a sexual (or any other) way and am eager to see justice done. But it would also be naïve to suppose that every claim made under the umbrella of #Metoo is justified and legitimate (Dershowitz 2019, McLeod 2019).

So, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that some people, in the name of #Metoo, are committing an *ad ignoratiem*. That is to say, they are insisting that someone is guilty because they have not been proven innocent. In particular, the very charge made by someone, is enough to create the assumption of guilt. The purpose here is to try and understand what someone does by committing an *ad ignoratiem*. I believe there are two things that must be understood. The first is anger, and the second is empathetic identification. The former comes under the emotional mode, and the latter under the kisceral mode. Both, I will argue, stem from the same foundation. The foundation to which I refer is the silencing of a group within a socio/cultural system. When the group, in our case women, have been ignored, shunted aside, and demeaned when they have attempted to achieve their just status, anger results. Not only that, but when legitimate forms of protest, where ‘legitimate’ means methods and processes sanctioned by the power-holding groups within the culture, then illegitimate forms, or forms viewed as such by the legitimating body, will be used (Reygadas, 1996, 2001). When it comes to subjects such as rape, harassment, and abuse, it is generally accepted that for generations, evidence, testimony, and laws were prejudiced against women. The result, as women became more aware, more sensitized, more political, more supported, and more encouraged, is that the dam burst.

In addition to the resulting flood of anger, a component of the emotional mode, an important result arose from the kisceral mode—namely, the belief, feeling, and sense that a

² Note that in general the actual term *ad Ignoratiem* is not used.

³ Dershowitz’s (2019) book is an especially graphic and detailed account of the experience of being so accused, and then being proven innocent.

woman who accused a man of bad behavior is, generally, telling the truth. Why should the average woman not believe an accuser, when she herself has almost certainly experienced such behavior? She never reported it, or even worse, reported it and was ignored. We only have to look in our own backyard here in Canada to see a shockingly recent example (Ewing 2020): A male track coach at the University of Guelph, groomed and molested a young female track star, and destroyed a very promising, likely Olympian, career. Her first complaints in 2006 were ignored. The coach's comeuppance did not occur until 2020. Please understand that this did *not* happen in 1950, but now, in 2020.

So, we have many women who feel anger because they have not been heard, because the system, both legal and cultural, has excluded them, and their arguments and concerns have not been addressed, let alone met. Consequently, they believe the rules were not designed for them, not designed to protect them but, rather, to protect the perpetrators of the actions against them. When this happens to a group, they will eventually decide to abandon the rules that have not protected them and seek other means. One such rule is the maxim that one is innocent until proven guilty [IPG].

For many, many years IPG protected rapists and harassers. By the nature of the crime there were typically no witnesses and the claim of consent was hard to disprove. This resulted in the classic "she said/he said" situation. In the case of harassment, the response was that the actions were innocent or harmless or a joke. In general, the word of a male was always taken over the word of a female, various, outrageously violent circumstances excepted. Just in 2017, the Toronto Globe and Mail ran a very powerful series entitled, *Unfounded*, investigating the large number of rape cases that were deemed unfounded, that is, unsupported by evidence, and investigations dropped (Doolittle 2017).⁴

One might say, that the pot boiled over, at least with regard to rape and harassment, with the advent of the #Metoo movement. The application of the *ad Ignoratiem* was a demand that women be believed, and that male deniers were lying.

When there is a "she said/he said" situation, women were often not believed. Either they were imagining it, were too sensitive, or they "asked for it." Witnessing so many women being disbelieved because of their sex, *when one's personal experience* provided evidence that the charges were likely true, creates a climate in which many would now believe the women making the charges. Even I, as a cross-dresser, have experienced sexism and unwanted touching. As a result, the empathy generated for #Metoo women who have come out defies the IPG. The many women who have, to one degree or another, shared the experiences they describe, believe them and are empathetic. This is a kisceral response: just as a judge or jury has to *feel* that someone is telling the truth, so too are women who are embracing the *ad Ignoratiem*, recognizing the truth in the accuser's testimony.

Again, the charge of fallacy may be logically supported, but going into a deeper analysis using multi-modal tools provides much greater insight. In fact, we use the kisceral mode all the time. When a judge says she "did not find the witness credible," she is relying on her instincts and intuition. The difference in the #Metoo movement is that it is more of a blanket acceptance, than the individual case.

⁴ This is but the opening piece in this series. Much more is available in the [Globe and Mail archives](#).

3. Conclusion

I have in this paper argued that understanding fallacies needs a deep analysis of the various modes of argument used in marketplace argumentation (Gilbert 1994). This is not news. This has been considered the proper way to proceed since Hamblin (1970), and many others following him. What I am suggesting is that a multi-modal analysis can greatly add to an understanding of why and how a fallacy takes place. Note that I say, “takes place” rather than “is committed,” because I am not judging whether in any specific instance a fallacy is an error. We tend to agree these days that traditional fallacies, by and large, have legitimate usages, and each occurrence must be examined in its own lights.

The approach I am urging means that the analyst is not, as Toulmin would have put it, a geometer, but rather, as Willard would put it, an investigator (Toulmin 1958, Willard 1989). This kind of investigation can yield very interesting results. By understanding why a fallacy is used, one can thereby imagine responses that might appeal to the persuasive effects that impel the proponent. Examining, for example, why so many people adhere to an admiration and loyalty to U.S. President Trump, who is a virtual fallacy factory, may expose many emotional and kisceral factors that aid in understanding.

In analyzing the examples above, I tried not to let my personal prejudices show through, though I believe, nonetheless, that they do. Nor am I trying to excuse or justify what some see as egregious fallacies but, rather, I am creating a situation in which that judgment can be made intelligently and carefully. Clearly, I am taking liberties with the term ‘fallacy,’ using it sometimes as an error and other times as an argument type or scheme. But that is because I believe it is both misunderstood and important. Certainly, in the marketplace, a fallacy is an error, but within the Argumentation Theory community, it can be used in a more rarefied form. That is what I am doing here.

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