

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 12: Evidence, Persuasion & Diversity

Jun 4th, 2:01 PM - 3:00 PM

Commentary on: Michael Gilbert's "Understanding the embrace of fallacy: A multi-modal analysis"

Jean Goodwin

North Carolina State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Goodwin, Jean, "Commentary on: Michael Gilbert's "Understanding the embrace of fallacy: A multi-modal analysis"" (2020). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 23.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA12/Thursday/23>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Commentary on Michael Gilbert’s “Understanding the Embrace of Fallacy: A Multi-Modal Analysis”

JEAN GOODWIN

Department of Communication
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695
USA
jegoodwi@ncsu.edu

Abstract: If the goal is to inquire into, understand, and respond to what it means for someone to be “anti-vax,” the concept of fallacy seems the wrong tool to pick up.

Keywords: Fallacy, humanities, vaccination controversy

It is one task of the humanities—

I confess that I’m not sure what verb to put next. “To capture what it is to be human?” seems too violent. “To remind us what it is to be human”? Better, but a bit Platonic. “To induce us to be human more deeply, more intensely, or simply more often”?

Whatever the precise phrasing, it seems apparent that the best work in the humanities is going to engage with human being in as many modes as there are (assuming one wants to parcel out modes). This certainly has proved true for the best inquiries into vaccine hesitancy; being more familiar with that literature, that is what I will stick with here.

In her extended essay *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (2015), English professor Eula Biss weaves threads from mothers’ chat, the news, internet search rabbit holes and scientific research into the warp of her experiences as a new mother. The book as a whole leaves no doubt that this daughter of a doctor thinks vaccination the right decision. But Biss gets to this ending through a sustained meditation on the possibilities of thinking otherwise. “If the opposite of the press is a poet, I am both” she comments, which turns out to be a good description of her method of sitting with irresolvable tensions: “the paradox of feeling responsible for everything and powerless at the same time,” achieving immunity against threats without by injecting foreign substances within, our bodies as both dangerous and vulnerable, our independence and dependence. She concludes urging acceptance of both our own bodies, and the collective body of society, and both as inevitably contaminated, but still worthy of our care.

Vaccine: The Debate in Modern America (2012) is Mark Largent’s mapping of the same terrain. (It’s currently open access on the publisher’s website, so snag your PDFs!) An historian of science and medicine influenced by rhetoric and argumentation studies, Largent concludes that the debate over vaccination is a stand-in for larger issues about the trustworthiness of medical, pharmaceutical, and governmental systems. Parents who endorse vaccination can have understandable concerns about the potential harms of the multiple shots required on the current schedule. When they express these concerns, they are dismissed as anti-science by doctors under pressure to cycle through patients quickly. This silencing response, Largent argues, drives parents to try to reclaim their role as primary decision-makers for their children by deploying scientific-seeming arguments. He finds similar cycles of negative reinforcement operating at higher levels; it is easier for regulators, tightly linked with medical associations and pharmaceutical companies, to apply the “anti-vax” label than it is for them to engage with critics. But this stonewalling orthodoxy gives credence to the claims of their opponents, advocate-entrepreneurs whose

livelihoods depend on continuing the controversy. Maintaining trust in vaccination and securing public health paradoxically requires opening up to, not resisting, doubting voices.

I hope it's evident from even these brief descriptions that both these excellent studies extend across multiple "modes." Some quick word searches reinforce this impression (Table 1; note that the two books are roughly equal in length). While Largent's more analytic work privileges argument, Biss' essay does not downplay the importance of evidence. She speaks directly of a mother's fears, while Largent focuses more on diffuse parental anxieties. And as a poet, Biss is comfortable with bodies. (I wasn't sure what terms might express "kiscerality," so that isn't represented in this table.)

	Biss	Largent
Argu*	26	88
Evidenc*	44	87
Fear*	85	33
Anxi*	15	81
Body	106	20

Table 1: Frequency of Terms in Biss and Largent on Vaccine Hesitancy

What neither humanist dwells on, however, are fallacies. Biss uses the term not at all, and Largent only once, in recounting how vaccination proponents accused their adversaries of "promoting fallacies." The *OED*-suggested synonyms "error/erroneous, mistak*, false" are similarly rare, and "illogic*" and "unreason*" do not appear.

I don't think the absence of fallacy-talk is due to inattention or ignorance. Both Largent and Biss achieve the complexity, nuance, range—the "multi-modality"—they do by adopting a stance of openness to whatever comes at them in the vaccine controversy. They listen, even to "anti-vaxxers," and they nudge us to listen, too. When the goal of humanistic scholarship is to capture, remind, or induce human being, there seems to be little call to start labelling bits of human struggle "fallacious."¹

So it seems to me that the question facing informal logicians is not whether considering multiple "modes" can enliven the theory of fallacies, but, rather, why it is that we should expect the theory of fallacies to help humanists gain insights into humans, all the "modes" of them, tangled in controversies like that over vaccines.

References

- Biss, E. (2015). *On immunity: An inoculation*. Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press. [E-book].
 Largent, M.A. (2012). *Vaccine: The debate in modern America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹ Of course, the humanities have tasks other than capturing (etc.) human multi-modality. I'm confident the concept of fallacy can be of service for some of them.