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May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Campolo

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Hoaglund, John, "Commentary on Campolo" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 71.
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In Response To: Christian Campolo *Fallacies and the preconditions of argumentation*

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Campolo investigates whether there might be preconditions of argument, conditions any discourse would have to satisfy in order to count as argument. Habermas apparently claims that there are, and employs them to defend his principle for validating moral norms any argument against the norm tacitly presupposes conditions that imply the truth of the principle that validates the norm. The obvious philosophical ancestor of this type of argument is Kant's in the Aesthetic and Analytic of the <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u> to space and time as forms of intuition and to the schematized categories e.g. substance-accident and cause-effect as conditions of the possibility of experience of a spatio-temporal world of objects.

Campolo finds the Habermas account of preconditions of argument less than satisfactory. There are difficulties formulating such tacit preconditions as rules, and the context-dependency of such rules mitigates against their claimed universal applicability. Specific rules cited by Habermas do not strengthen his case, e.g.:

Rule 1.1: No speaker may contradict himself.

This appears not to be a precondition of argument, since an argument may contain a contradiction and still remain an argument. In most cases an argument containing a contradiction will be a weak argument. But absence of contradiction is not even a precondition of an argument being strong. An extended convergent argument, for example - one with several premise groups - may contain a contradiction and still be a strong argument. The contradiction may be incidental and thus only negligibly weaken the support of a premise group, or it may be central and destroy the support of a premise group for a final conclusion that is adequately supported by other premise groups.

Indeed as Claude Gratton pointed out (<u>viva voce</u> in comment on Campolo), the discourse rules themselves appear to be contradictory.

Rule 3.2.b: "Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse."

Rule 2.1: "Every speaker may assert only what he really believes."

Rule 1.1 flatly contradicts Rule 3.2.b, which in turn contradicts Rule 2.1 also. Surely these rules are, as Campolo urges, far closer to "a list of conventions which we may accept or reject" than to necessary preconditions of argument.

Up to this point Campolo argues his case very well. The thesis he now advances is that what distinguishes a fallacy from a sound argument might be that the former (unlike the latter) fails to satisfy some precondition of argument, and hence that a fallacy might not be an argument at all. Fallacies in this case might help us identify preconditions of argument.

But there is an unwelcome equivocation in "precondition" that needs addressing. Do preconditions constitute or yield criteria such that any

discourse satisfying them counts as argument? In this case (Position 1) we would use them to identify arguments, to classify discourse as argument, and the preconditions would be non-normative or evaluatively neutral. The class of arguments would contain all arguments, the weak as well as the strong, and the task of distinguishing the weak from the strong would still lie ahead of us. Or do the preconditions constitute rules of argument strength such that any discourse satisfying them therefore counts as a strong argument? In this case (Position 2) the preconditions are clearly evaluative, but we are unclear whether discourse that failed to satisfy the rules would be wholly non-argument, or would contain both weak arguments and non-arguments.

Campolo launches his investigation from the stand that fallacies are failed arguments (Position 1), and makes port at the stand that fallacies are not arguments at all (Position 2). We must begin with them as failed arguments in order for us to be "seeing them in a new light" when we think "of them as non-arguments that look like arguments." When we start with fallacies as failed arguments, we seem driven to accept that some arguments are non-fallacious. The alternative is that all arguments are fallacious. If all arguments were fallacious, intelligent persons would have no interest in argument, since no argument would ever establish its conclusion. This OSSA conference attests that some intelligent persons are interested in argument; hence it is not the case that all arguments are fallacious.

From the propositions that fallacies are failed arguments and that some arguments are not fallacious we can infer that fallaciousness is not the factor that distinguishes non-argumentative discourse (viz. as fallacious) from argument. If fallaciousness were the distinguishing factor, there would be no fallacies as failed arguments because fallacies would not be arguments at all. So Position 1 is incompatible with Position 2. My remaining remarks touch briefly on advantages/disadvantages of each.

It might be objected against Position 1 that without fallaciousness we have no way of distinguishing argument from non-argumentative discourse. But this is not the case. The distinction is commonly drawn with reference to speech acts or language use. Argument consists in one or more statements being advanced in support of another, or (alternately) reasons or evidence being advanced in support of a claim. In a broad sense this distinction is evaluatively neutral, since reasons advanced in support of a claim (argument) may not constitute reasons actually supporting a claim (strong argument).

I refer to this distinction as commonly drawn because there is as much of a consensus on it as you are ever likely to encounter on any point among informal logicians and argumentation theorists, a notoriously cantankerous and quarrelsome lot. Textbook writers (Moore & Parker 2e 1989: 5) agree with argument analysts (Freeman 1991: 5). There are fallacy critics like Blair and Johnson (Johnson 1996: 92) who are dissatisfied with it. But they claim, not that argument is something other than some statements being offered in support of another statement, but that argument is this and more.

It might be objected to Position 2 that instead of providing the distinction of strong argument from all other discourse, it is itself dependent on a pre-existing distinction of argument from other discourse. On this position fallacies are non-arguments that look like arguments. Clearly we need to distinguish argument from non-argument in order to know what it is that fallacies look like but actually are not.

This is no mere theoretical problem. For that considerable portion of the

educated public as yet (alas!) unenlightened by instruction in critical thinking and informal logic, a fallacy is a mistaken belief, claim, or inference. This use of "fallacy" is sanctioned by lexicographers. There is a standard move in debate, when charged with committing a fallacy, to respond, "I have not committed a fallacy because I'm not advancing an argument at all. I'm offering X (X = an explanation, description, definition, etc)." This move depends on the assumption common to writers in the field now challenged by Campolo that a fallacy is a fallacious argument. But this response will not nonplus the educated but uninitiated opponent. She simply responds, "Of course it's a fallacy - it's both erroneous and deceptive," and lexicography backs her up.

The rebuttal to this opponent depends on distinguishing the fallacious argument from the fallacy that is not an argument, the very distinction Campolo would do away with.

To sum up, Campolo offers an intriguing idea. But we do need one or more plausible candidates for such preconditions to assess whether it can carry the weight proposed for it. And in particular we need to be convinced that this gain outweighs the loss of the distinction between the fallacious and the non-fallacious argument, which has proven quite useful.

References

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