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AD HOMINEM ARGUMENTS

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Abstract:

Ad hominem arguments (in one sense) argue that some opponent should not be heard and no argument of that opponent should be heard or considered. The opponent has generally pernicious views, false and harmful. Moreover he is diabolically clever at arguing for his views. Thus, the ad hominem argument is essentially a device by which non-intellectuals try to wrest control of a dialectical situation from intellectuals. Stifling intellectuals, disrupting the dialectical situation, is an unpleasant conclusion, but no fallacy has been shown in what leads up to that conclusion.

There is no such fallacy as argumentum ad hominem. Ad Hominem arguments do not constitute a fallacy. In arguing this thesis, I shall be arguing a thesis already well argued by others and some of my points will be familiar.¹ My main new point will be that not only is there no such fallacy, but the idea that there is such a fallacy commits that very fallacy! Less paradoxically put, the idea that ad hominem is a fallacy is intended to defend certain principles of good argumentation, but in fact it violates those very principles.

Now 'ad hominem argument' is a phrase that has been applied to many different kinds of argument. In this paper I shall in the main be talking about one specific kind. My reason is that when I think about why we want ad hominem argument to be a fallacy, I find that there is one specific kind that we most want to say is a fallacy, and I shall therefore spend most of my time in this paper arguing that that one kind is *not* a fallacy.

Sometimes an argument is called "ad hominem" if it is directed to a specific person in the sense that the argument employs premises which are believed *by that person* even if they are not believed by the arguer himself. This usage of 'ad hominem' is not very current nowadays, with the exception of Henry Johnstone's use of it.² However, it is found in Locke, Watts, and Whately.³ Still, none of these four authors claims that such an argument is necessarily fallacious, and nor shall I.

Nowadays, we talk of ad hominem arguments when an argument is directed not *to* a person but *against* a person, in the sense that there is something bad or faulty about that person. Hereafter, I shall mean by an ad hominem argument that it argues from a claim that there is something bad or faulty about the person in question.

Now in logic books, we often find examples of ad hominem argument which have the form "My opponent is bad. He says that p. Therefore p is false." The badness of the opponent may be that he is stupid, ill-informed, or unintelligent, *or* it may be that he is somehow evil and deceitful. The conclusion is that his specific statement is false.

I however cannot take this sort of argument seriously as a supposed fallacy. A fallacy is supposed to be a bad argument, yes, but also a clever argument. The above sort of argument is too stupid to be a real fallacy. If my

opponent is stupid, ill-informed, or unintelligent, he cannot tell the difference between what is true and what is false. How then can I depend on his statements to be false? Suppose I ask someone whether this coin will come up heads or tails. He has no information on this, but guesses "tails". Still, there is a 50% chance that his answer is true. Suppose I ask him how many jelly beans there are in a certain jar and he guesses "131". His answer is very probably false. But the answer "131" does not become any *more* unlikely by having been given as his guess. If my opponent doesn't know anything, I should not conclude that his specific statement is false; rather I should pay no attention to what he says one way or the other.

If my opponent is evil and deceitful and knowledgeable, I may very well be justified in thinking that his main advice is false. But even then I would not be justified in thinking that everything he says is false. Surely even the most evil person is likely to decorate a speech of any length with *some* truths, if only to establish an appearance of credibility. And it is quite difficult to talk at any length without making at least one true statement.

Imagine the devil himself appears before me. He says, "You should kill your brother. I am always right. If I say you should kill your brother and I am always right, then you should kill your brother. Therefore you should kill your brother." Here we have an evil speech. But even in this one short speech the devil makes *one* true statement: namely, *if* the devil says you should kill your brother and *if* the devil is always right, *then* you should kill your brother. So even the devil himself cannot be reliably depended on to make only false statements!

Hereafter I shall suppose that an ad hominem argument does *not* argue that a given statement of the opponent is *false*, but rather argues that we should not *listen to* the opponent. It is my suspicion that when logicians give the former type of example, they are trying to warn us against some more serious type of argument, but they attack that type of argument by parodying it with an obviously unserious example.

Now when an argument argues that we should not "listen to" an opponent, this conclusion can be understood in two ways. It might mean that we should not give credence to the opponent's unsupported assertions. If the opponent is stupid, ill-informed, or unintelligent, we should give no appreciable weight to his opinions on difficult questions. If he is evil and deceitful, we should give no credence at all to his testimony about anything. An argument with this kind of conclusion would not be a fallacy. It would be a perfectly reasonable argument.

The more interesting way of understanding the conclusion that we shouldn't listen to an opponent is that we should not only give no credence to his unsupported assertions, we should also not listen to any *arguments* that he may give to support his assertions. I shall hereafter suppose that an ad hominem argument has this more controversial kind of conclusion.

Now if the premises say that the opponent is stupid, ill-informed, or unintelligent, the conclusion will only say that it would be a waste of time to listen to the opponent's argument. Still, we might have no better way to waste our time; maybe there's nothing interesting on TV. No doubt we shall probably learn little from the opponent's arguments, but there is no positive harm in listening. The conclusion is rather weak.

I shall suppose therefore that the premises are of the other sort. The opponent is not stupid, ill-informed, or unintelligent. Rather the opponent is regarded as evil, deceitful, and diabolically clever. The conclusion is a strong one: we had *better* not listen to the opponent's arguments; we listen to such arguments at our peril.

The opponent is a Communist, or a godless atheist, or a defender of a homosexual lifestyle. His views are thought to be dangerous, ungodly, or perverse. He is supplied with brilliant dialectical arguments, the help of the devil himself, or direct insight into the perversity deep in us all. If we listen, he *will* be convincing. And that is why

we shouldn't listen.

Now before finally giving a concrete example, there is one further clarificatory point. Sometimes in logic books we find the example "My opponent is a Communist, so what he says is false" and we can clean this up right away to read "My opponent is a Communist, so don't listen to his arguments." But then, in further developing the example, the book may explain that really the opponent *isn't* a Communist after all; he is merely a liberal Democrat or a socialist. I am not going to consider examples like this.

I here articulate a rule: I call it Rule Number One for serious fallacy discussion. If you are going to maintain that a certain argument is a *fallacy*, you must first assume or imagine the *premises* of that argument are true, absolutely true, warranted, and known by everyone involved to be true.⁴ If the premise says that the opponent is a Communist, he had better really *be* a Communist. A *fallacy* is supposed to get us from true and warranted premises to a false and unwarranted conclusion. We have been provided through the centuries with a completely *different* sort of argument for getting from false and unwarranted premises to false and unwarranted conclusions. We call that sort of argument ... a *valid* argument.

So, in sum, as I shall use the phrase hereafter, an *ad hominem argument* argues that the opponent is of a sort supposed to be evil. He is a Communist, an atheist, a defender of homosexuality, for instance. He really is of this sort. It assumes further that he is diabolically clever. He really is a very good arguer. The argument concludes that we should not listen to his arguments.

Now a concrete example.

We are all fellow citizens of a small town. We all know each other. You all know me and you all know my opponent, Elroy. Elroy, as you all know, is a Communist. And when I say that he is a Communist, I don't mean that he is, say, one of those friendly democratic Italian Communists. He is what we mean by a Communist: he is a proponent of things we don't like: pillage, riot, murder, bombings, and blood in the streets.

Now it's true that Elroy has never actually committed any crimes. Our good County Sheriff Fred wisely has one of his deputies following Elroy every hour of the day and night to make sure Elroy doesn't commit any crimes. But Elroy does *urge* violence.

You all remember the day Elroy was arguing concerning Mary the librarian. And Mary is a wonderful woman. She finds good books for our children to read and enjoy, and she encourages them in the love of reading. And she finds enjoyable novels and mysteries for us adults for slow weekends. And if anyone is interested in any topic, she finds exciting and informative books on that topic. You all know Mary. So what did Elroy argue? Many of you heard him. He argued that, as a blow against the capitalist intellectual establishment, someone should beat Mary to death with one of her own library books and stuff her body on one of the library shelves!

And then there was the case of Tom the policeman. You all know Tom. He helps our children across the street on their way to school. He makes sure us adults, when we get a bit tipsy over at Arthur's, get home all right. And he protects us against the occasional miscreant who wanders into town. A wonderful man. And what did Elroy argue? That, in order to protest the capitalist legal system, someone should grab the gun from Tom's holster and shoot poor Tom right between the eyes with his own gun!

And then there was Joe the groceryman. Joe provides us all with fresh meat, fish, and poultry, and with the freshest vegetables and fruit. He periodically sends food baskets to the poorer members of our community. He

employs many of our kids and teaches them the ethic of working. A wonderful man. And Elroy? *He* argued that, to smite the capitalist economic system, someone should beat Joe to death with one of his own frozen fish and stuff Joe's body in his own meat freezer!

So when I say my opponent Elroy is a *Communist*, I am saying just what it sounds like I'm saying.

Now in arguing that because Elroy is a Communist, we should not listen to his arguments, I am supposing, of course, that Communists are diabolically clever in arguing to the unwary. They have all that materialistic dialectics stuff, and they appeal to our dissatisfactions with our society. Well, maybe there are Communists who aren't diabolically clever after all, but we all know that *Elroy* is *extremely* clever.

You all remember when he was arguing about Mary and Tom and Joe. His arguments sounded as conclusive as mathematical proofs. A few of us were even taken in for a bit, but, fortunately, our families noted the glazed look in our eyes, and dragged us home for a good long talking to. Of course, most of us *didn't* buy his arguments, but that was only because of the repugnance of his horrible conclusions. We are, after all, simple people. We had to admit that if we allowed ourselves to *listen* to his arguments, they *sounded* absolutely conclusive. Unlike Elroy, we don't know all that fancy stuff about logic and dialectics and the deceptive art of argument. None of us have ever been able to find any flaws in Elroy's arguments.

Now today we are having a town meeting on an issue that has no life-threatening or horrific aspects. [Maybe we are discussing a school bond issue or which of two roads to pave first.] The issue is rather innocuous. Elroy's view disagrees with my view but his view is not horrific or repugnant. I have, earlier in the meeting, given my arguments for my view on this issue. I am a simple man, untutored in argument. My arguments simply gave sincere considerations in favor of my view. Though I hope I persuaded many of you, I certainly did not establish my view as a mathematical theorem with apodeictic certainty. And some of you may reasonably disagree with me.

But now *Elroy* wishes to speak against my view. I would strongly urge that you not listen to him. You know in advance that his argument is going to sound extremely convincing and compelling. His arguments always sound extremely convincing and compelling, quite independently of the truth or falsity of what he is arguing for. It would be best not to allow him to speak, but if he does speak, put cotton in your ears and hum softly to yourself. Just don't listen to his arguments!

Thank you for your attention.

...

That is my example of an ad hominem argument.

Now let us look at this argument. On close examination, we realize that all the bad things said about the opponent Elroy are not the real center of the argument. The point of these bad things is not that Elroy is *bad*, but merely that he can in no way be *trusted* to be arguing for a true or probably true conclusion. The real heart of the argument is that the opponent is extremely clever in arguing and can make his conclusion seem to be compellingly established quite independently of whether it is actually true or even plausible or whether it is really false and ridiculous. Elroy is skilled at argument. I shall say he is an *intellectual*.

And he is an intellectual *compared to us*. For the other crucial part of the argument is that *we*—those who are

not to listen to the argument—are *not* skilled at argument. If we *listen* to his arguments, we will be struck by the distinct impression that he has conclusively established his conclusions and we will be totally unable to find in the arguments any flaws that will dispel that impression. We are non-intellectuals. Therefore we must not listen to his arguments. Either we should not *hear* them at all or if we must hear them, we should not listen but should push his arguments forcibly from our minds.

But is the ad hominem argument a *fallacy*? There is no doubt that we, myself at least included, *hate* ad hominem arguments and *want* them to be a fallacy. For though in the example we were non-intellectuals, in reality we are the intellectuals. I am here the author of a paper about logical matters, and you are a professional audience for such a paper.

But intellectuals *hate* ad hominem arguments. Taken generally, these arguments amount to a re-writing of the rules of dialectic. The intellectuals, whose clever arguments can lead convincingly to the most perverse and unusual conclusions, are to be stifled in the interests of protecting truth, and the discussion should be left in the hands of honest simple people who can only succeed in making plausible that which really *is* plausible.

In *normal* dialectical discussions, the intellectuals always win and the non-intellectuals always lose.⁵ So the intellectuals enjoy a "good debate", while the non-intellectuals hate "a lot of arguing and disagreeing." Contrariwise, ad hominem arguments are beloved by non-intellectuals and hated by intellectuals.

It is like Fair Baseball. When I was young, I was lousy at sports and nobody wanted me on their team. So I hate sports. But I have invented the game of Fair Baseball. In Fair Baseball, duffers like me who can't hit the ball with the broad side of a shovel are allowed to bat in the usual way, but skillful batters are required to stand at bat with their back to the pitcher so they can't see when the ball is coming. Then they wag the bat ineffectually around back of their shoulder trying to accidentally make contact with the unseen ball as it whizzes by. And, of course, duffers like me who can't run three steps without tripping over our feet are allowed to run around the bases in the usual manner. But good runners are required to run backwards, and really good runners are required to crawl backwards on all fours. Of course, while *I* enjoy Fair Baseball, the good baseball players for some reason seem to dislike it.

In the same way, I personally *hate* ad hominem arguments. When I was young, I remember talking to some of my fellow pupils, and I was just very enjoyably getting into full throttle in my argument that there was no rational basis for belief in God. Inevitably someone piped up "My preacher says we shouldn't listen to you. You argue bad and godless things. You're just too clever for your own good! We shouldn't listen to anything you say!" Needless to say, I was *most* frustrated with this argument, and no doubt snapped back as quickly as possible "Ad hominem argument is a fallacy! You can't say that!"

And, indeed, how is one to deal with an ad hominem argument when you are the target of one? One cannot deny that one has somewhat unusual views. What intellectual would want to claim—or even admit—that he had only popular views?! Nor does one wish to deny that one is diabolically clever. That, after all, is the most *agreeable* premise. One wouldn't want it to get around that one *wasn't* diabolically clever!

One could of course admit to being *very* clever and yet insist on one's own sincerity, one's own sincere interest only in truth. But to have to urge one's own sincerity is a bit uncomfortable. It's a bit like the fellow who found himself saying "What do you mean, I'm the biggest bald-faced liar you've ever met?? I personally assure you that I have never told a lie in my entire life!"

But the most important difficulty in replying to an ad hominem argument is that the argument raises the question whether you should even be allowed to participate in the debate. To reply is to participate, and if it is a question whether you are permitted to participate, your right to reply at all is in question, and if you give a reply you would seem to be begging the question!

From a practical point of view, therefore, if one is going to reply, the reply must be *swift* and *immediately* effective. If you reply, your reply must be quick, so as to stifle the ad hominem argument before the ad hominem argument has a chance to stifle you.

Now, normally, in replying to a view you don't like, you would marshal all your dialectical and logical skills and give a pyrotechnic display of dialectical brilliance to thoroughly and decisively refute the unwanted view. But in the present case you are, as it were, deprived of your usual strengths. In replying to an ad hominem argument you need to avoid saying anything brilliant. For the main charge against you is that you are diabolically clever, and you need to avoid giving the ad hominem arguer the opportunity to blurt out "See! What did I tell you!" Your reply must not only be *quick*—it must be, as it were, *brainless*, not exhibiting any cleverness whatever.

How then is one to make an effective reply? One seems to be well trapped.

But, from a practical point of view, a wonderful and effective solution lies ready to hand! For logic books are written by our friends—other intellectuals. Non-intellectuals don't get to publish logic books. And our fellow intellectuals have taken care to write in big red letters somewhere in their logic books the statement that ad hominem arguments are a fallacy. When faced with an ad hominem argument, we simply grab the nearest logic book, open to the big red letters, stab our finger at those letters, and assert "Ad hominem! Ad hominem! Fallacy! Fallacy! Fallacy! You can't say that! Nyah! Nyah! Nyah!" And here we have a reply which is quick, effective, and unchallengeably brainless.

The idea that ad hominem argument is a fallacy is a godsend in practice. But is it true? I don't think so.

Let me illustrate why.

The Communist argues for Communist conclusions. "Communist fallacy!" say the right wing. But "No," say we logicians, "you can't call an argument a fallacy merely because you don't like the conclusion. You have to examine the argument leading up to that conclusion and find some fallacy in it."

"But," say the right wing, "these conclusions lead to pillage, murder, bombings, blood in the streets, and the collapse of our whole social order!" "Courage," reply we logicians. "Poof! on blood in the streets and the collapse of society! We can't be frightened by such piffles. The argument must be examined!"

The atheist argues that there is no God. "Atheist fallacy!" say the religious. But, "No," say we logicians, "you can't call an argument a fallacy just because you don't like the conclusion. You have to examine the argument leading up to the conclusion and find some fallacy in the argument itself."

"But," say the religious, "these conclusions threaten our faith. If we are deprived of our faith and lose our belief, our souls will be condemned to spend eternity in eternal hellfire." "Courage!" say we logicians, "Poof! on eternal hellfire! The argument must be examined!"

The defender of homosexuality argues that the homosexual lifestyle is not wrong. "Homosexual fallacy!" say the moralists. But "No," say we logicians, "you can't call an argument a fallacy just because of its conclusion. You

have to look at the *argument!*"

"But," say the moralists, "the conclusion of *this* argument threatens to lure us into perversion, degradation, decadence, and unnatural acts!" And not to mention as a bonus, the aforesaid eternal hellfire. But "Courage!" say we logicians, "Never mind about perversion, unnatural acts, and the aforementioned bonus! We must be brave. We must *examine* the argument and not reject it out of hand!"

But ... now ... the ad hominem arguer argues that certain intellectual opponents should not be heard from. "Ad hominem fallacy!" says someone. "Fallacy of trying to stifle intellectuals!" "Fallacy of trying to distort the dialectical situation!" And, of course, it is we logicians who are saying these things.

But what has happened to our vaunted courage? We were unperturbed in the face of such piffles as blood in the streets, the collapse of society, eternal hellfire, degradation, perversion, and more of the aforementioned bonus. But now it is threatened to disturb our *dialectical situation!* That is *too much!* Our courage vanishes. We shake. We tremble. Our knees buckle.

The argument ad hominem must not be tolerated! It must be labeled as a fallacy!

Now there is no doubt that ad hominem arguments are, as I shall say, a "dialectical inconvenience." But a dialectical inconvenience is not the same thing as a fallacy.[6](#)

Suppose I am the target of an ad hominem argument. I reply "Aha! I've got you! You're committing the fallacy of ad hominem argument! You can't do that!"

What do I mean by "fallacy"? If I do not explain what *I* mean, what really matters is what my opponent *thinks* I mean. My opponent takes me to be saying that I have seen some fatal flaw in his reasoning and have thus defanged his unwelcome conclusion. But, in fact, I have found no such flaw at all, for I have not even bothered to examine my opponent's argument. I simply find his *conclusion* that I should shut up to be an unpleasant conclusion.

Suppose I were to re-phrase my remarks so as to be more clear about my meaning. Thus: "Aha! I've got you. You have, as far as I can see, absolutely and conclusively established your conclusion that I should be stifled. However I find that conclusion *very* inconvenient. So there!" My remarks seem to have lost their punch.

I conclude that ad hominem is *not* a fallacy.

Moreover, the idea that ad hominem is a fallacy is intended to protect the idea that an argument which is offered should be heard and examined. To reject an argument unheard because we do not like its conclusion or because we do not like the general type of conclusions the particular arguer is likely to argue for is thought to be wrong. And so ad hominem is thought to be wrong. But I have argued that the idea that ad hominem is a fallacy violates the very principle in question. For an ad hominem argument *is* ad hominem because of its *conclusion* and if we reject it as a fallacy because it is ad hominem, we are rejecting an argument precisely because we don't like its conclusion.[7](#) The idea that ad hominem is a fallacy turns out to be not merely false but so to speak "dishonest", a violation of the very principle it is intended to defend. It is like jailing anyone who dares to speak against freedom of speech.

I have now given my argument that ad hominem is not a fallacy.

Let me now give two examples of ad hominem arguments which seem to be hard to call fallacies.

The sophist Euthydemus comes from one of Plato's dialogues to modern times. He wanders around town "proving" arbitrarily chosen propositions. None of us can find the flaws in his "proofs". One day he was arguing with my friend John.

John's dog Petunia had just had puppies. So, borrowing from the dialogue named after him,⁸ Euthydemus argued "So your dog had puppies. So she is a mother. But she is *your* dog. So she is yours and a mother. So she is your mother. So your mother is a dog. So you are a dog and not a human being!"

Now John and I are simple people. We can't find any flaw in Euthydemus's argument. And John is all depressed by the thought that he is not after all a human being but only a dog.

I say "Look, John. Everyone knows that Euthydemus is a sophist. He's been all over town proving all kinds of ridiculousities. Just pay no attention! Of course, you're a human being! Ignore his arguments!"

Is this a *fallacy*—or just good advice!?

Another day I am sending my son to school.

I say "See that man on the corner? He's a drug dealer. If you listen to him, he'll fill your body with terrible drugs which will hurt you. He's bad. Just don't listen to *anything* he says. Just say 'No, No, No' and run away!"

Was *that* a fallacy?

And yet, there is no difference in principle between *that* advice and the advice the preacher gave, that so annoyed me many years ago!

I now consider some objections.

It may be objected that ad hominem must somehow be logically faulty since no logician can give such an argument.⁹

But consider the following argument:

1. I know very little about logic.
 2. If I know very little about logic, I ought to take some logic courses.
- I ought to take some logic courses.

Although no logician could give the above argument, I think few will want to be critical of it!

In ancient China, there was an argument against education: "the perfect man does not learn." To which, Confucius¹⁰ replied "The perfect man and the fool do not learn." In other words, what cannot be done by a perfect man may still be good.

The only reason a logician cannot give an ad hominem argument is that one of its premises is "I am not a logician."

It may be objected (as Hans Hansen warned me) that ad hominem arguments obviously do commit a fallacy

since they commit the fallacy of incomplete evidence, by attempting to exclude the evidence of the opponent's arguments.

But there are three difficulties with this objection. First, there is a difference between recommending a fallacy and committing it. Thus the argument

1. Anything that looks like Modus Ponens is valid.
2. Affirming the Consequent looks like Modus Ponens.
Affirming the Consequent is valid.

recommends affirming the consequent. But it does not *commit* that fallacy, it only *concludes* that we *should* commit it. Indeed the argument itself is (roughly) a Modus Ponens, not a consequent-affirming. (The argument does not commit *any* fallacy. It simply has a false first premise.)

It is not true that ad hominem arguments *commit* the fallacy of incomplete evidence even if we admit that they *conclude* that it ought to be committed. If one wants to defang that conclusion rather than just argue against it, then it still remains to find a fallacy or false premise in the argument leading up to that conclusion.

Second, it is not clear that the ad hominem really is recommending commission of the fallacy of incomplete evidence.¹¹ At least the ad hominem arguer can argue that he is not recommending that fallacy. For it is not so clear exactly how the Rule of Complete Evidence is to be explained. We *are* allowed, presumably, to exclude the results of polls known to have been conducted in a biased way or to ignore testimony of obviously lying witnesses. The ad hominem arguer will argue that he has taken *some* account of Elroy's arguments by noting that they exist and have no clear relation to the truth and has concluded that we should exclude them from further consideration. He will then argue that his procedure is no different in principle from that of discounting biased polls and lying witnesses. In reply, we would have to be very clear about what exactly the principle of complete evidence requires.

And finally, even if we agree that the ad hominem argument recommends commission of a fallacy X, and is in effect argument that X is not a fallacy in the particular case of Elroy, it seems question begging¹² to object to the ad hominem argument by citing the very fallaciousness of that very fallacy as the reason for rejecting the argument.

A very important objection that needs to be considered is this: if ad hominem is so obviously *not* a fallacy as I have made out, then why was it so standardly believed to be a fallacy?

Now I have already in one sense responded to this objection, for I have discussed why we *want* ad hominem to be a fallacy, our *motivations* for saying that ad hominem is a fallacy. But the objection and I myself assume that an idea will not become standard merely because we *want* to believe it. There must have been the appearance at least of some epistemological reason for that idea.

Nextly we must distinguish between two classes of people who think that ad hominem is a fallacy. Some recent thinkers (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst—see, footnotes 6 and 7—and Doug Walton, for instance) would say that ad hominem is a "fallacy" because they have re-defined that term to *mean* a dialectical inconvenience, and ad hominem really is a dialectical inconvenience.

However the re-definition was motivated by a desire to make the definition of "fallacy" fit the already standard

application of the term to specific examples. It was, *prior* to the redefinition, already standard to call various mere dialectical inconveniences *fallacies*—that is fallacies in the *traditional* meaning of that term.

Our present concern is with the prior people who thought that various mere dialectical inconveniences were *fallacies*, fallacies in the traditional sense. Now we do not know where the idea that ad hominem (in the present sense) is a fallacy first arose. But we *do* know where the, in my view, bad habit of referring to dialectical inconveniences as "fallacies" comes from. It comes from the Port Royal Logic.[13](#)

Now in interpreting the Port Royal Logic, I am going to exercise poetic license. In other words, I am going to say what I think or suspect even though I cannot prove it.

The Port Royal discussion of fallacies has two parts. The first part discusses traditional fallacies stemming from Aristotle. These are mostly real fallacies and do not concern us here. The second part introduces *new* so-called fallacies, referred to (Hansen & Pinto, p. 46) as "Bad Reasonings ... Common in Civil Life and in Ordinary Discourse" or in other words, fallacies in everyday life. It is this part which concerns us.

In this part we have as fallacies the following, either explicitly listed or suggested: argument from authority; argument from wealth, well-spokenness, and high position; appeal to force; and what amounts to hasty generalization. (And, in addition to these four, in a part omitted in Hansen & Pinto, there are obvious arguments from self interest, such as (Dickoff and James, p. 266) "I am a native of country X. Therefore I must believe that Saint so-and-so preached in country X." I shall confine my discussion to the sub part concerning the four listed. It will turn out that they too involve self interest—in the form of fear.)

Now here's the "poetic" part. This discussion of fallacies in everyday life has very little to do either with fallacies or logic or ordinary everyday life. It is really a political manifesto very very very carefully *disguised* as a mere innocuous discussion of fallacies. It is really a very very very veiled critique of the Church's methods (at that time) of thought control. Of course, I cannot *prove* this interpretation; if it were provable, the Port Royal Logicians would have suffered some terrible fate: being burned at the stake perhaps.

Still, we know that the Port Royal professors were constantly in trouble with the Church.[14](#) They were familiar with the Church's methods of stifling dissent from their own experience. They publish the Port Royal Logic anonymously. They insist repeatedly that the fallacies they are discussing are, of course, *not* committed by the Church but by ... by ... by ... well, someone-anyone-else. Perhaps your neighbor over the back fence claims to be an absolute authority and threatens to burn you at the stake. Maybe it is some fellow shopper at the A & P Supermarket. No doubt it is the leaders of some heretical sects. Even perhaps the fallacious reasoner is *God!* (Hansen & Pinto, middle of p. 48) But *of course* it's not the Church! Yeah, Right.

Yet the Port Royal Logic is rightly revered as the opening shot of the Enlightenment, in turn the freeing of our minds from the Church's methods of thought control, of stifling dissent. The Logic is an important document in the history of human freedom.

I propose to imagine that the Port Royal Logicians *knew* who they were really attacking and to interpret their supposed fallacies accordingly.

Let us begin with argument from authority. Now to infer p from the fact that some real authority says that p is no fallacy. To avoid this problem, the Port Royal logicians say that they are talking about arguments from *insufficient* authority. However to say that the Church's authority is insufficient would seem to be a bit question

begging, especially since the Church is supposed to be the appointed spokesman for God himself. And, anyway, the idea of a fallacy of insufficient authority is incompetently drawn.¹⁵

A supposed authority may argue from his own authority. But the person who actually *infers* that p from the statements of the supposed authority is a *non*-authority,¹⁶ someone who follows the authority of others. But a *non*-authority cannot ultimately distinguish between a *real* authority and someone who only *appears* to be an authority. In either case, the non-authority infers from the same thing: the appearance of authority. So if his inference is fallacious when the authority is spurious, it is equally so when the authority is genuine. Thus all argument from authority (*inference* from authority) would be fallacious. And if one says that the fallacy is committed not by the follower who follows the authority but by the supposed authority himself in claiming to be a real authority when he isn't one, this false claim is not a fallacy either: it is just a lie. Of course, it may be convincing, but lies in general may be convincing.

But now, in order to find a more interesting supposed fallacy, let us bring in the Church. What objection do we ourselves and also the Port Royal logicians have against the way the *Church* argued from authority. The objection is that the claimed authority was also claimed to be exempt from all questioning or challenge. One was not allowed to question or challenge the authority. One was *compelled* to merely accept it. I shall call this the Argument from Compulsive Authority. Thus the Port Royal logicians say (Hansen & Pinto, p. 53) "it is wrong to *compel* others [my italics] to take as true everything that we believe and to defer to our authority alone," and later they quote St. Augustine (p. 54) who says (roughly at least) that the proper way to argue, if your views are not obvious to your audience is, even if these views are very clearly known to yourself, to put them forward as questions to be examined.

I shall suppose then that the first supposed fallacy is the Argument from Compulsive Authority. The idea here is that a *real* authority would admit open and free debate, and thus a compulsive authority is by that very compulsiveness convicted of being insufficient.

The third supposed fallacy is the appeal to force. But really this is the same as the first—and, indeed, though later tradition separates the two, the Port Royal Logic treats the appeal to force as merely an aspect of the first and does not list it separately.

At any event, the supposed fallacies amount to the same thing. In one you are forbidden from questioning the authority—or else you will be burnt at the stake, excommunicated, or sent directly to hell. In the other, you are burnt, excommunicated or sent if you disagree with the supposed authority.

The real essence of all this is that you'd better agree or else. We are dealing with threats rather than real arguments. These are methods of stifling dissent.

The second supposed fallacy argues that someone is right because he is rich, well-spoken, and has high office. This is really just a parody of the argument from compulsive authority. No one actually infers from clothes and a smooth voice *as such*. Rather, from the red robes, the gold statues, the beautiful church, and the attainment of high education, we know this man is a high official—in the Church. As such he speaks with the compulsive authority of the Church itself.

The fourth supposed fallacy is hasty generalization. Port Royal refers to it as "defective induction" or as "incomplete induction".

I myself have never seen anywhere a competent explanation of what this supposed fallacy is supposed to be, and doubt whether there is any such fallacy. Nor does Port Royal explain it. Sometimes they seem to be suggesting that an induction really needs to be *complete*—in effect, deductive, and that all actual induction is fallacious. Putting aside this unsatisfactory idea, what exactly *is* hasty generalization?

A competent account must first indicate that feature (or complex of features) which makes an inductive argument *illegitimate* and the contrasting feature which makes an inductive argument legitimate. These features must be *internal* to the arguments themselves and must *not* depend on whether the *conclusion* of the argument is true or false. For a *legitimate* induction may, if it is really inductive, turn out to have an unluckily false conclusion. Hasty generalization must be distinguished clearly from *legitimate* inductions which turn out to have false conclusions.

Then the account must give examples of arguments which have the feature of illegitimate induction *and* which *also* appear to have the *opposite* feature, that of legitimate induction. It must be made clear that the example *fails* to be legitimate and also clear that it *succeeds* in *appearing* legitimate.

And nor can the example be a mere borderline case, where some may say it is legitimate though *weak*, and others say that it is too weak to be really legitimate. Such an example may seem to satisfy the conditions for a fallacy because it will be illegitimate (on the more demanding standard) and yet *seem* to be legitimate (to those with the less demanding standard). But such an example does not clearly satisfy either requirement, since it is not clearly illegitimate but is a borderline case, and therefore does not clearly only seem legitimate either.

There may actually *be* a satisfactory account of the required sort out in the literature and so an actual fallacy. But I doubt it![17](#)

At any rate, the Port Royal account is not that account. Most of their examples have no clear appearance of goodness. And one example seems to be an example of a legitimate induction with a false conclusion, for surely the idea (bottom of p. 45) that nature abhors a vacuum was very extensively supported in its day, though it turned out to be false.

Well, let us leave aside the question whether hasty generalization is a fallacy. Unlike authority and force, hasty generalization has as such no special relationship to the Church or to thought control. Have the Port Royal logicians decided to include an *actually* innocuous kind of argument in their discussion to further disguise its political nature?

They have not. For though the supposed fallacy has in general no relation to thought control, some of the particular *examples* of it are much more interesting.

Start with this quotation (p. 47): "From some particular actions we infer a habit: from three or four faults we conclude a custom, and what happens once a month or once a year, happens every day, at every hour, and every moment, ..."

The potentialities of *this* way of thinking are rather ominous. Suppose I am an Inquisitor with the power to burn people at the stake more or less at whim. I say to you "I see you just dropped your gum wrapper on the sidewalk. This suggests a complete disregard for law and good order. I suspect you are a vicious criminal [long ominous pause] ... Don't you think you'd better pick that wrapper up!"

Much very carefully orthodox behavior can be motivated by this approach!

Another quotation (p. 47): "There are light and loose women: this is sufficient for the jealous to conceive unjust suspicions against the most virtuous, and for licentious writers to condemn all universally."

This reasoning is blamed on "the jealous" and "licentious writers". But surely it is just as likely the reasoning of the pious and righteous. If one woman flirts with her neighbor's husband, let's launch a full scale investigation into the probability that hordes of women are engaged in sex crazed and perverted promiscuities!

And finally (p. 47): "There are some persons who hide great vices under an appearance of piety; libertines conclude from this that all devotion is no better than hypocrisy."

Here it is "libertines" who suspect impiety everywhere. Is it really? Of course not!

Taken together, the various examples of hasty generalization suggest a picture of a kind of moralistic religious McCarthyism. If the Inquisitors and powerful Church authorities take every isolated and insignificant departure from orthodoxy as proof of widespread horrific sin and heresy, the effect is to terrorize the populace into absolutely complete orthodoxy in even the smallest things.

So, taking all the supposed four fallacies introduced by the Port Royal logic together, they are essentially one, the appeal to force. But an argument from force neither gives nor appears to give any warrant whatever to its conclusion. Why, then, should it be thought to be a fallacy?

Elsewhere¹⁸ I have suggested a simple unsubtle explanation. Before going on here to develop a perhaps more subtle way of concluding that such arguments are fallacies, let me briefly recount the simple way.

The argument "Believe p or die!/So, p" neither gives nor itself appears to give any warrant for p. However, arguing on the meta-level, one may see that this object-level argument gives a *motive* for believing its conclusion and one might fallaciously conclude (equivocating on "reason for") that it gives warrant for its conclusion and thus think that one has warrant for p. We have in other words an argument X which does not itself even appear to support its conclusion and another argument Y which appears to prove that X supports its conclusion. So X appears to support its conclusion by virtue of the apparent correctness of Y. On my analysis, X is not a fallacy; the real fallacy is in Y. For any bad argument X whatsoever can be backed up by a fallacious Y,¹⁹ and if this were enough to make X a fallacy, all bad arguments would be fallacies.

I now wish to develop a more subtle way of coming to think that arguments such as we are considering are fallacies.

I am the ruthless dictator of a small principality. In my principality we have one library. In that library there are books arguing that p is true and other books arguing that p is false. The librarian is our old friend Mary, who (in this paper) seems to have very bad luck in her choice of employment opportunities.

One day, though I myself have no opinion as to whether p is true or false, I decide that all my subjects should believe that p is true.

I go to Mary and say "I have decided that p is true. If you do not believe p, I will have you executed. If you do not remove from the library all books against p, I will have you executed. Therefore p."

Mary is understandably frightened, and being a sensible person, she immediately responds, "Of course. P! Yes, indeedy! I couldn't agree more! You are right, as usual, oh August and Wonderful Surveyor of All Truths!

Whose word can never be doubted!" So I go back to my palace, much mollified.

In the privacy of her own mind, however, Mary thinks, "Why doesn't that monster die! Some believe p, some don't. I personally don't believe p. But now I'll have to go around pretending to believe p. And I'll have to remove all those wonderful books arguing against p." So Mary removes the books in question from the library.

Note: my argument was bad, if it even deserves to be called an "argument". And Mary was, quite rightly, completely unconvinced by my argument. My argument was *not* convincing.

But, people come to the library sincerely wondering whether p. I shall call them "the library users." These people ask Mary what she thinks. She replies, "Oh, p, of course. Yes, I surely think so." The library users are impressed that such an intelligent person as Mary thinks that p.

The library users then go and look at the books concerning p. Not having any way of knowing that the selection of books has been biased in favor of p, they quite reasonably and non-fallaciously conclude²⁰ that since the great weight of arguments points to the truth of p, no doubt p is true.

They are convinced that p. And this conviction is a result of the effects of my argument to Mary. Thus my argument finally has brought about their being convinced that p.

My argument is thus a bad argument which nonetheless brings about conviction that p. In this case, the people who are convinced that p never even *heard* my argument. It is obvious therefore that an argument which brings about conviction that p is *not* the same thing as an argument that itself convinces people that p. However in other cases, where the people that hear the argument are the same as the people who end up being convinced or convincing themselves that p, the distinction will not be so obvious and it will be easier to think that the argument is both bad and *convincing*, and thus a *fallacy*.

I believe that this is really why the Port Royal logicians, and hordes of logicians ever since, think that Compulsive Authority, appeal to force, and the like are fallacies. Because, in actual historical fact, such arguments *do* lead to people being convinced of the views "supported" by such "arguments".

Now it remains to see whether some version of *ad hominem* can be fitted into this general picture. In presenting such a version, it will differ in two ways from the *ad hominem* argument I considered earlier in the paper. First because I am no longer concerned to find an example that might seriously be proposed as a *real* fallacy, I shall drop the requirement that all the premises must be true and warranted. Second I shall imagine that the argument is offered by an official with the ability to punish and so the argument involves an element of terror.

A high official is himself an intellectual who wishes to keep doctrinal control of his non-intellectual flock. His position is endangered however by an intellectual opponent (who, for some reason, is exempt from punishment). This opponent has argued very convincingly against many of the official's views and has deprived the official of some members of his flock. The opponent is now proposing to argue that it is not true that p. The official however wishes his followers to believe that p.

The official therefore argues that the opponent is a heretic, and diabolically clever and that his followers should not listen to the opponent. Implicit in this argument is a threat: people observed listening to the opponent will be punished, being found guilty (of heresy) by association.

The implied premise that the opponent routinely argues convincingly for *falsehoods* is not warranted, for all that

is really clear is that the opponent routinely argues for views contrary to those of the official. Still though the argument does not argue with adequate warrant that the opponent is *misleading* and so should not be listened to, it much more satisfactorily argues that the follower should not listen to the opponent if the follower wants to escape punishment.

The argument may be formulated as follows:

1. The opponent (who argues against p) routinely argues very convincingly for false conclusions.
2. If 1, then it would be (epistemically) bad to listen to the opponent's arguments.
3. Believe everything I say or die.
4. So, It would be best (epistemically) not to listen to the opponent.

Now 1 and 2 yield the conclusion 4. But 1 is unwarranted. However 2 and 3 are warranted. In particular, the threat in 3 is credible.

This motivates every attempt to follow the pseudo-derivation rule: the official says that p/so, p.

Thus 3 motivates not only the alternative conclusion

4*It would be best (from self interest) not to listen to the opponent;

it also motivates belief in 4 itself

And in 1. Thus, in a sense, we could say that 1 is not really the *ultimate* premise, but rather the *true* alternative 1*: *the official says that 1*. From 1*, we then "derive" 1 by the pseudo-derivation rule.

Thus, in a sense, we can restore obedience to Rule Number One that the ultimate premises must be true, locating the fault in the pseudo-inference rather than in a premise.

But those who want to say the official's argument is a fallacy are not really concerned with the conclusion that the opponent should not be listened to. Rather they reason that the *purpose* of the argument is ultimately to sustain the belief that p by protecting it from the opponent's argument. Thus the *ultimate* conclusion of the ad hominem argument, the belief which it is ultimately attempting to bring about, is p. And the argument, though it gives no evidence whatever for that ultimate conclusion, *does* succeed in helping to sustain that conclusion. Therefore it is a fallacy to *that* conclusion.

I believe that it is for the above sort of reason that ad hominem was traditionally thought to be a fallacy.

At this point, some readers are bound to raise an objection to my discussion of the Port Royal approach to fallacies. I accept certain core instances as real fallacies. I then complain about other supposed instances. I make some *very subtle* distinctions to show these supposed instances are not really like the core instances. I have to distinguish between an argument that commits a fallacy and an argument that recommends a fallacy. I distinguish between an argument that appears good in itself and an argument that appears good only because it immediately suggests an obvious meta-argument for its goodness. I distinguish between an argument that convinces and an argument that rather convinces people to convince themselves. Pretty subtle stuff.

And the very subtlety of these distinctions means that the supposed instances are very subtly different from the

core instances. Or, the other way around, they are very *similar* to the core instances. But there is nothing more natural (as Aristotle and Wittgenstein have pointed out) than to *extend* a term from its core applications to other very similar applications. Why then do I accuse Port Royal and others of fallacies when it would be more charitable to say they have merely made a natural extension in the meaning of "fallacy"?

I freely admit that there is much justice in this objection. However I fear that letting the concept of "fallacy" grow like topsy will deprive this concept of any real use.


Imagine for instance that arguments from self interest ("I want p to be true/so p") are admitted as a fallacy, as Port Royal suggests.

Someone comes to me with an argument: Anselm's Ontological Argument. I reject the argument. I am asked to therefore point out some fallacy in the argument. Normally this would require me to point out subtle scope ambiguities involving modal operators. But instead I simply reply "Anselm *wants* his argument to be a proof of God's existence, so he thinks it *is* one! He is committing the fallacy of self interest!"

And then I reflect that *all* my philosophical opponents are committing this fallacy—and I don't even have to *look* at their arguments! For they all *want* their arguments against me to be correct, and they therefore wrongly think their arguments *are* correct!

And indeed, not only does such a method of "analyzing" the "fallacies" of opponents tend to deprive analysis of fallacies of all content, but there is another paradox here. If I maintain, with the Port Royal Logic, that my opponents hold the views they do because of self interest, fear of authority, desire to kow tow to the rich and famous, and the like, fallacy theory itself has become one huge *ad hominem*!


Notes

1. For instance, Alan Brinton in "The Ad Hominem" p. 212-222 in Hansen & Pinto's *Fallacies* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) makes many of the essential points. 

2. Johnstone, Henry W., Jr., *Philosophy and Argument*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1959. 

3. See the selections from these authors in Hansen & Pinto. See p. 56, p. 59, and p. 83. 

4. A technical qualification is needed here. I am speaking of the *ultimate* premises of the argument, perhaps upon some reconstruction. For instance in the argument "My father is mad and you shouldn't listen to crazy people, so don't listen to my father" the premise "my father is mad" has a true reading (he is angry with me about some infraction) and a false reading (he is crazy) and the false reading is derived from (supported by) the true reading, by means of an equivocation.

The above example is adapted from one in Merrilee H. Salmon, *Introduction to Logic and Critical Thinking*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1984, p. 296. 

5. Unless of course, the intellectuals disagree, which fortunately they usually do, in which case the non-intellectual


can join one of the sides and hope to be on the winning side. 

6. Here I am disagreeing with, for instance, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, who define a fallacy as a dialectical inconvenience: "a fallacy is a hindrance or impediment to the resolution of a disagreement ..." (see Hansen and Pinto, 131).

In this, they are following Hamblin. Hamblin had argued that, since so few so-called fallacies fit the Standard Definition of fallacy, we might as well give up on the standard definitions and just develop a theory of things *called* fallacies, whether they really are fallacies or not.

Of course, in disagreeing with the re-definition, I am disagreeing with Hamblin as well as the later thinkers. Partly I have argued that Hamblin's psychologistic reading of the definition of fallacy exaggerates the extent to which examples don't fit (See my "The One Fallacy Theory," pp. 302 ff., *Informal Logic* Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring 1995). For the rest, the so-called fallacies that really do not fit should not be called fallacies! Later in the paper I discuss why some of them came to be called fallacies in the first place.

For Hamblin, see his *Fallacies*, 1970, Methuen, London. I take it that on p. 190, he is arguing that the tradition about fallacies is so "unquenchable" that there "must be ... something of importance in it." It is our duty therefore not to worry about the definition, but the "misconceptions" are just as important. He then proceeds to look for an account of all generally recognized "fallacies".

On p. 255, he says that discussions of fallacy are really oblique ways of trying to introduce us to the subject of Formal Dialectic, the real *raison d'etre* of those discussions all along. 


7. My analysis of what *ad hominem* is and why we don't like it turns out to be very similar to Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's analysis of what it is and why it is a fallacy, except, of course, that I don't agree it is a fallacy. In "*Argumentum Ad Hominem: A Pragma-Dialectical Case in Point*" in Hansen & Pinto, they articulate a "first rule for critical discussion" which says that no one should be stifled: "Parties must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints." (p. 224) They then say that "All three variants of the *argumentum ad hominem* are violations of the first rule for critical discussion. In effect, they all amount to a party claiming that the other party has no right to speak." They then note that the abusive form (the one I am discussing) "denigrat[es] his intelligence, experience, or good faith." (p. 225) And they conclude "It is therefore, without any exception, a fallacy."


Now I admit that I do not completely understand the Pragma-Dialectical approach, and I am sure that its defenders will bring up some points that I have missed or misunderstood.


However:


(1) Does the *ad hominem* argument *really violate* the first rule, or does it rather argue for that rule's being rescinded? (2) If the first rule really *forbids* the *ad hominem* argument, doesn't it violate its own restriction against trying to forbid standpoints from being offered? (3) Since the argument for the first rule seems at least as iffy as the contrary argument for stifling Elroy, and since the latter argument argues against the first rule, isn't it a bit question-begging to *cite* the first rule as an argument against the *ad hominem* argument?


...

One further point. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst seem to suggest that ad hominem is only a fallacy for them (see top of p. 227) if the arguer is attempting to reach an agreement. But with who? With Elroy? Of course an ad hominem arguer is never trying to reach agreement with the target of his attack! He is trying to exclude that target from the discussion. 

8. Euthydemus 238 d. 

9. I mean no logician can argue "*We* are non-logicians so *we* must not listen to that clever opponent." Of course a logician might say to his non-logician followers "*You* are no logicians so *you* should not listen to my opponent who is too clever for *you*. At least don't listen when I'm not around." But in this case the people who actually conclude that *they* shouldn't listen are non-logicians. 

10. Analects 17:3. See Chan, Wing Tsit, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton U., 1963, p. 46. 


11. For the record (since I deny the existence of many supposed fallacies) I *do* agree that there is such a fallacy as the fallacy of incomplete evidence. 

12. In the present paper I say rather often that something or other would seem to be question begging. I thus confirm my remark in an earlier paper that I would no doubt continue to hurl charges of question begging around even though in that same paper I argued that question begging was *not* a fallacy (but an incompetent form of argument not rising to the level of fallacy) and that question begging *never occurs in philosophy!*


Readers who know of that earlier paper may justifiably wonder what is going on!


I think the paradox can be resolved in terms of the further observation in that paper that an actual fallacy will under pressure of criticisms tend to break down into merely question begging components.

In other words, when I say that something would seem to be question begging, I am saying it is losing its initial plausibility.


These issues were discussed in a paper read at the 1995 conference at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, entitled "One Fallacy vs. Begging the Question." 

13. Hamblin states that the Port Royal discussion, in its "modernity", is "the origin of some of the misconceptions and inconsistencies we have criticized in the modern treatments of fallacies." p. 150


Hamblin (p. 156) goes on to say (at first concerning self interest "arguments" and then further down on the page concerning the other Port Royal kinds of argument) that Port Royal is less interested in "explicit arguments" than in motivations as "the predominant causal factor." 


14. For the Church's various attacks on the Port Royal school, see the "Introduction" by James Dickoff and Patricia James to their translation of the Port Royal Logic: *The Art of Thinking*, Pierre Arnauld, tr. by Dickoff and James, Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1964, pp. xxvii-li. 


15. Hamblin (p. 157): "And the truth is that Arnauld does not give us any firm criteria anywhere in this chapter, for distinguishing the not-so-bad extrinsic arguments from the plainly vicious. In this failing ... he was ahead of his

time." 

16. I am here making use of a very useful distinction made by Bob Pinto between an argument-presentation (he called it an "argument") and an inference. The first proposes the second. I suppose—though Pinto might not agree—that *fallacies* are in *inferences* and only derivatively in argument-presentations.

Pinto made this distinction in a paper read at a conference at York University a while ago. 

17. My doubt is supported by Bob Pinto's declaration, in a discussion of the at least quite similar "fallacy" of Post hoc, that "... there can be no storable rules that pick out the good inferences from the bad ones ..." (in his "Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc" in Hansen & Pinto, pp. 302-311, see p. 310 bottom). 

18. In "Equivocation," see pp. 288-289, in Hansen & Pinto. 

19. *Any* bad argument X can be backed up by a fallacy Y. I assume here that an argument by equivocation is a real fallacy even if the equivocation is silly. (When, earlier in this paper, I said that some argument was 'too stupid' to be a fallacy, I meant that it had no clearly specifiable appearance of correctness.)


Let X be "My brother wears eyeglasses. Therefore: Nixon was a great President." I provide two different Y's. Y#1 says "It is obvious upon examination that X is valid. Just *look* at it! *First* there is the premise. *Then* there follows that important little word 'therefore'. And finally, the conclusion follows. *The conclusion follows!* So it's valid!"

For those who didn't enjoy Y#1, here's a second Y, based on an argument pointed out to me once by a Teaching Assistant in an actual introductory student paper.

Y#2 says "Is X valid? Well, let us carefully consider this question. In order for X to be valid, it is necessary that the conclusion follows. So it is *necessary* that the conclusion follows! So it *must* be valid!"



20. In another paper, I examine a case much like the present one, and though it involves card stacking, I find no fallacy or bad argument in it. Whether I am right in that paper does not matter here, for here we are only interested in the argument the dictator gave to Mary.

The other paper is my "What is a 'good' argument," read at the Third ISSA Conference on Argumentation, Amsterdam, 1994. See the Proceedings, *Sic Sat*, Vol. II *Analysis and Evaluation*, International Centre for the Study of Argumentation, Amsterdam, pp. 182-202. 

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