

article

Relevant Appeals to Force, Pity & Popular Pieties

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To get people to accept the conclusion that they should not drive under the influence of alcohol it is perfectly reasonable to threaten them with loss of driving privileges. We can read, however, on p.74 of I. Copi's popular text: Introduction to Logic 4th ed. Macmillan 1972, "The argumentum ad bacculum is the fallacy committed when one appeals to force or the threat of force to cause acceptance of a conclusion." A young man does not cite irrelevant facts when he tries to persuade me to conclude that I should award him a C grade for my logic course by appeals to pity. To lead me to accept the conclusion that I should, perhaps despite low test scores, give him a C it is relevant to point out how family problems affected his performance and how a grade lower than a C will cause him and his family to suffer. Yet, in Copi's text we read on p.77: "The argumentum ad misericordiam is the fallacy committed when pity is appealed to for the sake of getting a conclusion accepted." We can also read on p.79 of this text: "We may define the argumentum ad populum fallacy a little more narrowly as the attempt to win popular assent to a conclusion by arousing the feelings and enthusiasms of the multitude." But, of course if it is important that the multitude accept "The speed limit of 55 mph should be kept and obeyed" it is appropriate, and perhaps obligatory, to use devices capable of arousing the feelings and enthusiasm of the multitude in favor of such a conclusion. It is not significant to criticize Copi for his definitions of these fallacies of relevance. It is significant, though, to distinguish relevant from irrelevant appeals to force, pity, and devices for arousing the feelings and enthusiasms of the multitude, amongst which devices are popular feelings, enthusiasms, and beliefs. We have just reminded ourselves that for some use of 'accept a conclusion' such appeals are apparently relevant.

A typical logic course assignment is: Pick an argumentative passage from a current publication but not an advertisement, state the premises and conclusion of one of its arguments, and then write a paragraph or two evaluating the support, or lack thereof, which the premises give to the conclusion. Frequently, when the student's diagnosis is

ad bacculum, ad misericordiam, and especially when it is ad populum, the evaluation is superficial in a way which could lead to a type of dishonesty. The student finds expressions in the passage which are intended to get a conclusion accepted by provoking fear, stirring-up pity, or by inducing a belief that acceptance of the conclusion will bring about a desirable identification and solidarity with a desirable group of people. By using definitions such as those of Copi, the student finds plausible grounds for condemning the argument as ad bacculum, etc. Such analyses are superficial because they do not distinguish between what is relevant as a reason for acting from what is irrelevant for thinking that a claim is true. This superficiality of such analyses will be revealed by showing that they are based on a failure to distinguish between reading a conclusion primarily as a description as opposed to reading it primarily as a prescription. Such analyses can lead to dishonesty because they involve condemnation of ways of reasoning which the students will use in the future if they are to reason effectively about how people should act. As a matter of fact, and indeed quite rightly, we all are going to point out the undesirable consequences of accepting certain beliefs with the intention of causing people to accept or reject the beliefs in question. The practice of labeling as fallaciously irrelevant uses of language to cause people to accept certain beliefs can lead to the schizophrenic, if not dishonest, attitude that for logic the use of emotive words, etc., is bad but that in real life we need to use them. Some may even slip into the position that informal logic is practically irrelevant because it is thought that informal logic advises us to use only sober factual prose but no expressions whose primary effect is to cause acceptance of a conclusion for which we are making the effort to get accepted.

Consider an example of such a superficial ad bacculum analysis of an argument reported in a single paragraph of an article on p. 16 of the July 12, 1979 Columbus, Ohio Citizen Journal; hereafter CJ. It is reported that the Zimbabwe-Rhodesia Prime Minister Abel Muzorewa is to meet with President Carter to request that the U.S. lift economic sanctions against Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. The report predicts that Carter will not remove the sanctions. Despite the fact that the article is primarily a report coupled with a prediction, an observant student could recognize an enthymemic argument reported in the following sentence quoted from the article.

At the same time Afro-Arab foreign ministers meeting in Monrovia, Liberia warned the United States and Britain that lifting the sanctions would be considered a hostile act.

With the aid of background information about political and economic relations between Afro-Arabs, Britain, and the U.S., a student could reconstruct the following argument from the Afro-Arab nations to the U.S. and Britain.

Conclusion: The U.S. and Britain should not lift their sanctions against Zimbabwe-Rhodesia.

- Premises:
1. Lifting the sanctions would be regarded as a hostile act towards Afro-Arab nations.
 2. Afro-Arab nations can produce serious economic and political problems for the U.S. and Britain in response to hostile acts.

The student may now go on to charge superficially that the report attributes an ad bacculum fallacy to the foreign ministers. Certainly, it is not superficial to realize that the reporting service, UPI-Washington, has not argued, let alone argued fallaciously. It is correct, and rather sophisticated, for a student analyzing such material to realize that an argument, perhaps fallacious, has been reported as being given. It is important to evaluate reported arguments as well as arguments directly given. Where is the superficiality then? A superficial analysis is offered if it is merely claimed that the Afro-Arab foreign ministers have argued fallaciously because they threatened the U.S. and Britain. The relevance, or irrelevance, of their threats to whether we should lift the sanctions depends upon how we read the conclusion. If we read the conclusion as telling us that as a matter of sociological fact our standards or conditions for justifiable lifting of the sanctions have not been met, the appeal to force is fallacious. The fact that we will suffer if we act as if our conditions for lifting the sanctions have been met is not a relevant reason for concluding that these conditions have not, in fact been met. So, when 'The sanctions should not be lifted' is read as primarily descriptive in the way just suggested, the ministers' appeals to force are fallacious; they argue fallaciously in giving them while we would reason fallaciously by accepting them. Still, the conclusion can be read as primarily prescriptive. When the conclusion is read as primarily prescriptive, it directs us primarily to act in a certain way, viz., not to lift the sanctions regardless of whether or not our conditions have been met. On the primarily prescriptive reading the attention focuses on an action with some probability of being performed in the near future. Clearly, what someone else may do to us if we act in a certain way is relevant to whether or not we act in that way. The threats of those foreign ministers provide relevant reasons for acting, or in this case: for not acting. They do not argue fallaciously by offering us such threats nor do we think carelessly if we heed such reasons, viz., threats.

In general, a normative type of conclusion: X should be done, can be read as primarily descriptive or as primarily prescriptive. Read descriptively such a conclusion claims that the action X meets certain, usually unstated and vague, standards. When read descriptively we look to the premises for reasons for thinking that action X meets these standards. Read prescriptively such a conclusion directs us to do X or, if we are giving the argument, directs our intended audience to do X. When read prescriptively we look to the premises for reasons for doing X; we want consideration of the premises to

move us or our audience, i.e., to be a causal factor leading us or our audience, to do X. Occasionally, it may be undignified or immoral to evoke or to act in response to fear, pity, and popular enthusiasm; but it is not illogical to try to use such forces to cause action or to be caused to act by such forces. Many, if not most, conclusions of arguments in current periodicals are of the normative type and are to be read primarily, although not totally, as prescriptive. The fact that such conclusions are not to be read totally as prescriptions complicates giving a thorough analysis of arguments for them. A thorough analysis requires pointing out how the emotional appeals are relevant and how they are also irrelevant.

Before illustrating superficial, and then more thorough, ad misericordiam and ad populum analyses let us reflect on how the preceding superficial ad bacculum analysis can be morally and logically corrupting. A U.S. citizen who gave this type of ad bacculum critique of the Afro-Arab foreign ministers' argument may also think that the U.S. should threaten the Soviet Union with economic sanctions unless the Soviet Union improves the human rights situation for its citizens; especially Jews. This citizen may have a guilty conscience for his acceptance threatening the Soviet Union. He thinks that decent people should give only what they believe to be good arguments and thinks also that appeals to force are fallacies of relevance. Nevertheless this citizen may think that it is so important to improve the conditions for Jews in the Soviet Union that he endorses what he believes to be an illegitimate appeal to force. The seeds of moral corruption lie in the thought of our citizen that he has a right to give a bad argument. The seeds of logical corruption lie in our citizen's thought that the logical principles about relevance are inapplicable to serious situations.

The thesis that we have to distinguish carefully between considerations which are irrelevant as reasons for thinking but which are relevant as reasons for acting can be further illustrated by examining a superficial critique of an argument as a fallacious appeal to pity. Consider this paragraph from a June 30, 1979 CJ editorial criticizing a proposed gasoline rationing plan under which car-owners would be mailed entitlements, exchangeable at banks each month for gasoline coupons, for up to three of their cars.

Many poor and near-poor persons have to drive long distances to get to their jobs. Since coupons would be bought and sold on a "white market", a coal miner in Appalachia would buy coupons indirectly from a Wall Street broker who takes the subway to work.

This quoted paragraph presents one of several premises used to support a conclusion that the proposed plan "adds up to a deeply flawed plan" which can be paraphrased as the normative: The proposed plan should not be adopted. We have seen, though, that such normative statements are ambiguous between at least a primarily descriptive and a primarily prescriptive reading. Other premises offered are as follows.

1. The plan would have high costs.
 - a. Funds needed to administer the funds could not be used for energy research.
 - b. Costs to the banks would be passed on to consumers.
2. There would be inconvenience in picking-up coupons at banks, e.g., at the banks there would be longer, slower lines than presently at gasoline stations.
3. There would be mail-box theft of entitlements and coupons.
4. Some people would make large profits from selling junk cars.
5. Money would be transferred from rural to urban areas.

To these premises, the quoted paragraph adds a sixth premise.

6. Under the plan, poor and near-poor workers would suffer more than many rich people.

After doing the preceding fairly decent job of laying-out the editorial's argument, a student may write the following superficial type of critique:

I do not want to assess the merits of the whole argument. I want merely to call attention to the fact that at least one of the premises is an irrelevant appeal to pity for accepting the conclusion and, hence, should be ignored in the overall assessment of the argument. The premise which should be ignored is my sixth one which is taken from the paragraph which tries to lead us to accept the conclusion that the proposed plan is flawed by leading us to feel pity towards certain workers who will suffer under the plan.

The preceding critique is superficial because it is based merely on the recognition that a bit of language is used to evoke pity from us with the intent to lead us to accept the conclusion, in part at least, because we do have these feelings. There is insufficient attention given to whether or not the appeal to pity (fairness?) is relevant. (Some who aspire to "tough-mindedness" may regard appeals to fairness as appeals to pity.) To determine whether the appeal to pity is relevant we need to consider how the conclusion is to be read. If the conclusion is to be regarded primarily as a prescription directing us to take appropriate action in opposition to the plan, it is relevant to prod us to accept, in the sense of acting on, this prescription by arousing our emotions. When we consider reasons for acting, evocation of emotions may be ineffective, imprudent, or immoral but not irrelevant unless emotions are irrelevant to performance of the desired action. For example, getting people to feel pity when you want them to think coolly could be a type of an error of irrelevance. If we read the conclusion as primarily descriptive, the rather mild appeal to pity is irrelevant for acceptance of the conclusion descriptively taken. It is difficult to read this conclusion as primarily descriptive. But here is a suggestion on how to read it as primarily descriptive. Read the conclusion

as telling us that the plan involves careless and incompetent economic reasoning and should not be accepted as a good economic plan. We can distinguish between rejecting a plan as a good plan and rejecting a plan as one to follow. We can say objectively, contemptuously, but consistently: The plan we should follow, all things considered, is one of the worst plans considered just by itself. The fact that an economic plan has been worked out so that under it poor people suffer more than they would under some alternative plans and more than several rich people does not give much inductive evidence, let alone deductive grounds, for concluding that the plan has been poorly worked out. Clever economists may have intended that the rural poor should suffer and have reasoned well and carefully so that the urban rich came out best off. So, the appeal to pity is irrelevant for thinking that the plan is seriously flawed merely as a structure. But the appeal to pity is highly relevant to whether or not we should accept the structure as our way of allocating gasoline.

Ad populum can be used to label a form of argument or to label an only vaguely specifiable class of emotively provocative expressions which may be legitimately used to lead people to accept prescriptions even if they are frequently used illegitimately to mislead people to think that certain claims are true. The type of argument forms ad populum labels are those which provide at best weak inductive evidence for a statement S by citing the fact that many people of a certain class C believe S. (The main reason I tell students not to analyze advertisements is that among advertisements it is too easy to find this type of weak argument.) We could adapt Copi's definition of argumentum ad populum to say that ad populum expressions are uses in arguments of language which typically cause people to accept a conclusion by making them enthusiastic about being associated via acceptance of the conclusion with a group towards which they have a favorable attitude. (Similarly, we could use ad baculum and ad misericordiam to label both forms of argument and types of emotively provocative expression.) If we want people to accept a conclusion expressible as in 'X should be done' so that they use it as a guide for action it is relevant to our purpose to use language which makes them enthusiastic about following it. However, if our purpose is primarily to show that the norm meets certain standards for correctness or legitimacy it is not relevant to lead people to be enthusiastic about obeying the norm. So, whether use of ad populum expressions is relevant depends upon whether the conclusion is to be read primarily as descriptive or primarily as prescriptive. To close let us examine a possible ad populum fallacy.

Consider this letter from a Jan C. Sullivan in the July 15, 1979 Columbus Dispatch. I think that it employs fallacious (irrelevant) uses of ad populum expressions.

I am distressed to hear cries of protest against President Carter's decision to double the quota of Vietnamese refugees allowed to immigrate to this country.

My heart is saddened to think that so many of our upstanding citizens have lost sight of the great ideal that is America. It seems those people whose voices are heard the loudest in protest are those who are the most ignorant of their own ancestral "roots" and heritage.

Where would this nation be if the doors had been closed to Alexander Graham Bell, Andrew Carnegie, and Samuel Gompers; or even more recently Henry Kissinger, and Albert Einstein?

The United States is a nation of immigrants. To lock the door on the Vietnamese refugees would be like turning away our own parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents at America's gateway.

The Statue of Liberty stands as a reminder to us and to all the world that the United States embraces all who seek freedom and peace of conscience.

We can paraphrase the conclusion of this letter's argument as: U.S. citizens should support doubling the number of Vietnamese immigrants admitted. In the paraphrases of the premises I have tried to preserve the ad populum force of the original argument.

1. Opponents of doubling the immigration ignore one of America's highest ideals which is symbolized by the Statue of Liberty welcoming immigrants.
2. Opponents are shallow, unappreciative, and ungrateful citizens who are ignorant of, or indifferent to, their roots in a nation of immigrants.
 - a. They ignore the fact that they are descendents of immigrants.
 - b. They are unappreciative of the immigrants who became great Americans.
 - c. They are ungrateful citizens because they are unwilling to share America's blessings bestowed on them and their ancestors by earlier Americans.

A superficial, or poorly supported, critique of the above argument would charge commission of an ad populum fallacy on the basis of merely recognizing ad populum expressions. It is easy enough to point out expressions used to get us to accept the conclusion by causing us to feel un-American if we reject it. Nevertheless to support the charge that the ad populum expressions are irrelevant the argument's critic needs to make a case that the conclusion should be read as primarily descriptive. If the primary purpose of the argument is to cause people to support doubling the Vietnamese immigration, it is obviously relevant to use language designed to cause people so to act. The ad populum accusation could be supported by noting that the writer suggests that immigrants have made great contributions to the U.S. and claims that American principles favor immigration. You could go on to say that these suggestions and claims indicate that the conclusion is to be read as largely the description: Doubling

the number of Vietnamese immigrants is both practical and in conformity with national principles. When the case has been made that the conclusion is to be read in the descriptive way, it is appropriate to point out that devices to get us patriotically excited about accepting immigrants are irrelevant. Facts about the character of the immigrants, our ability to handle them, and clear statements of national principles are what would be relevant to supporting the above descriptive reading of the conclusion.

response

The Deductive-Inductive Distinction

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The viability of the traditional distinction between deductive and inductive arguments has recently been questioned in a number of different quarters, the most notable example being Perry Weddle's article "Inductive, Deductive" (ILN ii, no. 1). It is understandable that philosophers should call this distinction into question, but a strong case can be made for keeping the distinction. What is necessary is the recognition that arguments do not exist in vacuo but are person-related.

An important factor which has figured in the questioning of the deductive-inductive distinction is the difficulty in providing a good definition of each kind of argument. One thing is clear: if the deductive-inductive distinction is to be at all viable, any definition of the two kinds of arguments must leave room for both good and bad instances of each type. Unfortunately the writers of many logic books have not kept this in mind. For instance, Jack and Alice Kaminsky (Logic: A Philosophical Introduction, Reading, Mass., Addison Wesley, 1974, p. 248) describe deductive reasoning as that which is "'open and shut'--given the evidence the conclusion is inescapable." We are told that in inductive reasoning "the connection between premises and conclusion is probabilistic rather than necessary. We can only say the evidence 'points to' a certain conclusion, or that the evidence makes a certain conclusion 'plausible' or 'implausible'."