

On the Fallacies VI

The temptation to oversimplify is behind many of the instances of the fallacies of beside the point. It's much easier to write history as a chronicle of good men against bad, without complicating the story with dull considerations of trade, climate, politics, etc. The desire for over simple explanation results in two subspecies of this fallacy: proving too much and proving too little.

Exaggeration in argument results in the fallacy of proving too much. It can be argued that organized youth programs reduce juvenile delinquency, but to argue that they eliminate it would be to prove too much. Those who would argue that freedom of the will is such that no external factors can influence it would also be to try and prove too much.

An exaggerated contention in politics or religion is liable to create an equal and opposite exaggeration by way of reaction. Insisting that the Protestant Revolt of the 16th century was due in part to people being sick of all the repetitive ceremonies, who couldn't wait to get rid of them (I heard this from a preacher on the radio), can produce exaggerated claims about how happy everyone was in that time. There is a good book on this—at least for England—called *The Stripping of the Altars*, by Eamon Duffy. He does not describe 16th century England as Elysian, but he does refute well any notion that everyone hated devotions. But I know of another book which tries to paint a rosy picture of everything at the time regarding the state of religion, and it commits the fallacy of proving too much.

The counter-fallacy to this is proving too little. This is the familiar device of the half-truth, very common in controversy, since often, "A half-truth, like half a brick, carries better." The fact that *something* has been proved gives the illusion that the point at issue has been settled, whereas what has been proved may be in reality a good deal less than what was originally in question. "I don't know, Mussolini might have been good for Italy. After all, he got the trains to run on time and suppressed the Mafia." "Hitler almost eliminated unemployment and established a great network of highways."

While the ways of diverting an issue or missing the point of an argument are endless, there are some distinctive forms of beside the point which stand out as particularly insidious:

- a. **Abusive Speech (*argumentum ad hominem*).** This is a tactic of attacking the character or motives of a person who advances an argument, rather than the merits of the argument itself. Often it comes in epithets: "As my radically liberal friend said..." or "Being a dyed-in-the-wool neocon, he thinks that..." are examples of this. Sometimes this kind of fallacy is employed by labels such as: "kill-joy," or "bleeding heart," or "un-American."

The worst form of this fallacy is outright character assassination, the tactic which Cardinal Newman called "poisoning the well," i.e. that the water which comes from a particular well must be bad. Here the aim is to damn the very source of the argument ("Just consider the source..."): Do not listen to *anything* this person tells you because he is a liar by preference. "How can you recommend people listen to Mozart, when you know he was a Mason?" "You should not read anything he wrote, since he was an adulterer." "Should he be nominated as a judge when we know he is a devout Catholic?"

A fallacy closely allied to this is the *tu quoque* argument ("you, too"), where the method of response to an argument is to make a countercharge: "The evidence is that you are a thief." "Oh yeah, well if I'm a thief you're a bigger one." Or, "Practice what you preach." Or, "How can you say that is bad for my health? Don't you smoke?"

- b. **The Misuse of Authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*).** A misplaced regard for authority is the opposite of the fallacy of abusive speech. There are situations where it is perfectly proper to appeal to authority, as when the matter at issue involves the specialized areas where only the trained expert can be expected to have adequate knowledge. But if the acknowledged competence of the specialist is transferred to unrelated fields, the reputation is being improperly exploited. Albert Einstein was not necessary qualified to speak about the morality of atomic warfare. Barbara Streisand might be an expert in pop music, but that does not make her points about American foreign policy any more cogent than those of a member of the Rosa Mystica Society.

The fallacy may take the form of an uncritical acceptance of anything a great man says. Cicero said of the Pythagoreans that whenever in debate they were asked to justify an assertion, their defense was, "The Master (i.e., Pythagoras) said it." Statements prefaced by phrases such as "Freud holds that..." or "Hawkings concluded that..." or even "John Paul II always maintained that..." might be true, but if they are true they are so, independently of who said them. The fallacy is even more glaring when the authority is not even named: "Expert opinion holds..." or "Doctors say..." or "Four hundred leading specialist affirm that..."

Just as there are labels which slant an argument adversely, so there are words intended to give a favorable bias. They are lying labels, but this time with overtones of flattery: "realistic" as opposed to "starry eyed" or "thinking men" as opposed to those who do not agree with the stated position, or "artiste" as opposed to circus performer.

The appeal to antiquity is a variation of this fallacy. "But this was what was always done!" "What was good enough for Grandpa is good enough for me." The converse of this is the argument based on modernity, or the appeal to novelty: "The up-to-date person holds that..." or "On the other hand, if you want the *latest* views on the subject..."

This will be continued on the next insert.