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PHILOSOPHY



AND POLITICAL FALLACY



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WHEN CANDIDATES SUPPLANT REASONED DEBATE
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BY TOM FOURNIER



PHILOSOPHY IS GREEK for “love of wisdom.” Given the raucous nature of political campaigns, one might think them a disagreeable environment for lovers of wisdom. Nonetheless, there is a long history of philosophy’s entwinement with politics, as famously illustrated by Socrates and his oratory encounters with the Athenian sophists – another Greek term meaning “wise men.”

In 400 B.C. Athens, skilled sophists could make a living teaching debate to the offspring of the elite. The political structure was such that winning public debate could lead to realizing one’s business and power ambitions. Therefore, students were taught a win-at-any-price strategy, and debate was rarely about discovering truth or good. Socrates disdained this “sophisticated” approach, and he routinely embarrassed sophists by exposing fallacy in their reasoning. His proficiency in that effort led to criminal charges of impiety, traitorous corruption of Athenian youth and ultimately his death.

Two thousand four hundred years later, our Western politicians display the same sort of unscrupulous sophistication in their ambition to win arguments via the use of fallacy. We don’t let them sentence their detractors to death by hemlock; however, perhaps we could hold them to a higher standard of reasoning. Here we are with the presidential election season upon us once again, and the swell of bombastic rhetoric has begun. We can make this political milieu more palatable by thinking of it as a kind of hunting season. The wild game we seek is fallacy, and it routinely spews from the mouths of politicians like pheasant fleeing footsteps in the grass. Fallacy thrives on politics, and it flourishes on either side of the political divide. You can use this election season as an opportunity to impress, annoy and confuse your friends all at once by putting aside your own political leanings and making your goal the relentless exposition of fallacies.

In what follows, I will review several of the fallacies politicians routinely employ to win arguments while avoiding the complexities of actually wrestling with ambiguities.* But first, if you are sincere in your desire to declare open season on *all* fallacies, be prepared for a little intellectual discomfort. By staying true to the goal, you will be rewarded with a large volume of good reasons to doubt not only the candidates and positions you would normally be against but also the candidates and positions you would normally support. What better reward than growth?

Ad Hominem

Take as a first example the ubiquitous *argument ad hominem* fallacy – or, simply, ad hominem. The term is Latin for “against the person,” and it is a means to avoid honest debate by simply disparaging the character of the opponent. For example, from the right you might hear: “Candidate Lloyd proposes a massive tax increase to support

impoverished families, yet his claimed devotion to families is hardly credible given his admitted illicit affair.” Ad hominem distracts just as well when hurled from the left: “Candidate Boyd proposes drastic limitations on access to safe abortions claiming his pro-life stance is driven by a strong commitment to family values, yet his commitment to family is hardly credible given his admitted illicit affair.”

The ad hominem attack diverts attention from the issue that needs to be debated – e.g., impoverished families or access to abortion. It’s not just that ad hominem attacks are usually unfair. Acceptance of the ad hominem argument is a reasoning error broadly categorized as an error of relevance. It clouds consideration of the facts by switching the debate to a topic not particularly relevant to the issue under debate.

Argument Ad Populum

Argument ad populum is another fallacy of relevance especially popular among politicians. As hinted by the *populum* term, this fallacy amounts to an emotional appeal “to the populace.” Rather than giving honest consideration to the possibility that their favored position has negative effects, campaigners make emotional appeals to the core values of the population, such as love of country, liberty, justice, equality, etc. For example, from the right you might hear: “Leaving Afghanistan before the Taliban are defeated would mean our soldiers who died gave their lives in vain.” Alternatively, when employed from the left: “Allowing corporations to pay huge executive bonuses is but one more tactic in the war on the middle class.” Seemingly only a despicable, unscrupulous person would support our soldiers dying in vain or a war on the middle class. In truth, the unscrupulous person is the one who attempts to hush honest discourse about the reasons for ending a military campaign or paying executive bonuses by creating an emotional atmosphere hostile to reasoned dissent. Here again, it is not just that the fallacy is an

*There are many common fallacies – far more than can be covered here. The ones I reference (and many more) can be found in the following three resources: 1) Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), see “argumentum ad” pg. 22. 2) Brooke Noel Moore and Kenneth Bruder, *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas, Sixth Edition*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), pp. 7-10. 3) Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic, Twelfth Edition* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 125-173. The Copi and Cohen text provides the most extensive treatment.

False choice fallacies make a reasoning error of assuming there is an exclusive, either/or choice between two possibilities when, in fact, there is a third option such as something in between or the coexistence of both.

unfair gimmick. Buying into the ad populum argument is another reasoning error of relevance. It clouds consideration of the facts beneath the issue by introducing emotionally charged content aimed at making it socially unacceptable to consider both sides of the issue. A particularly sneer-worthy example of ad populum fallacy is any political discourse (right or left) employing the name Hitler.

Ignoratio Elenchi

Within the broad class of fallacy of relevance there is a subclass that is sometimes more subtle and deals more narrowly in irrelevant conclusions as opposed to emotional appeals for or against a topic or person. Philosophers refer to this as *ignoratio elenchi*, meaning “ignorance of the refutation.” Consider the *strawman* fallacy. It is part of the *ignoratio elenchi* family, and politicians routinely employ it to make their opponent’s position seem ridiculous by extrapolating that position to an unintended extreme. For example, a left-sponsored federal healthcare regulation offering patient counseling for end-of-life-care options might be unfairly extrapolated by the right as intending to establish federal death panels to determine who is worthy of continued medical care. Similarly, a proposal from the right to reduce corporate tax in an effort to spur economic growth might be unfairly extrapolated by the left as intending to force 99 percent of the population to become subservient to 1 percent of the wealthiest. The idea behind employment of this type of fallacy is to create a fictional strawman that is easy to bludgeon. This tactic not only unfairly characterizes its victim’s intent but also attempts to prevent the audience from focusing its critical thinking skills on the actual proposal. It forces the victim to defend against a preposterous position, thereby creating the presumption in the minds of the audience that the preposterous position somehow needs explanation or is a likely outcome. Worse yet, if the victim refuses to address the preposterous false conclusion, the audience is left to wonder whether he or she is hiding something. The best defense against a strawman is an intelligent, aware and vocal audience. You!

Red Herring

The *ignoratio elenchi* subclass also includes the *red herring*. Rather than extrapolating a competitor’s position to a ridiculous and unintended extreme, the red herring

specialist attempts to divert attention away from the topic under debate by simply changing that topic. For example, a proposal to increase government assistance for college tuition in an effort to spur higher education of the underprivileged might be met from

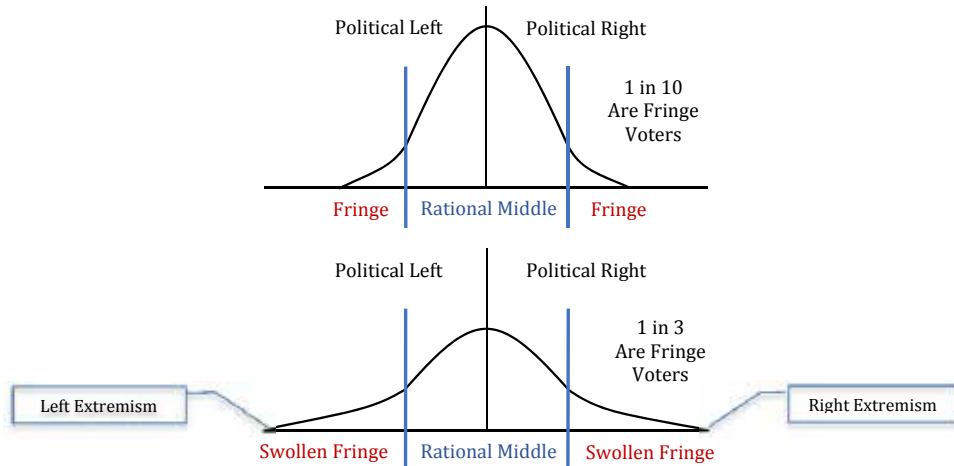
the right with, “These sorts of liberal tax-and-spend policies have ruined our country.” The red herring is the purported ruined state of the country, and the antagonist hopes to have switched the debate to that topic and away from alleviating the sociopolitical stagnation of the underprivileged. On the other side, a proposal to implement broader communication surveillance in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks might be met from the left with, “If you are so committed to protecting our citizens from physical harm, then why do you refuse to support regulations curbing the unhealthy content of the products foisted on us by the fast food industry.” Unhealthy fast food has become the topic, and its politically odiferous nature is introduced to draw attention away from an area the antagonist has difficulty dealing with: namely, the inherent discord between freedom and security.

The red herring fallacy was named after a competitive hunting tactic whereby a spoiled, smelly fish is dragged across the game trail in hopes of confusing the hounds onto the fishes’ trail and away from the game. When you encounter a red herring fallacy, my obvious counsel is to avoid the temptation to argue over a smelly fish. It’s not very becoming. You will be better served by declaring, “Ignoratio Elenchi!” followed by an oratory exposure of the red herring fallacy. On the other hand – depending on your audience – you might do just as well by blurting out, “Hey, Elvis! I ain’t no hound dog.”

Argument Ad Verecundiam

Fallacies are not limited to trickery associated with relevance. There are many other fallacies stemming from errors of inductive or deductive reasoning. *Argument ad verecundiam* is a slightly more insidious form of fallacy often applied to politics, and it is the result of such defective reasoning. In fact, it has become so prevalent that we are all but blind to it. *Verecundiam* stands for “appeal to inappropriate authority.” You are assaulted by this fallacy when you hear utterances like, “Oprah supports Senator Lloyd!” or “Ted Nugent supports Senator Boyd!” What is it about show business that qualifies Oprah or Ted Nugent to be any more authoritative on politics than your neighbor Stella or your Uncle Fred? To get a sense for how insidious this type of fallacy is, ask yourself whether one of the two previous utterances about Lloyd or Boyd seems less worthy of consideration than the other. If so, you might have a blind spot for ad verecundiam fallacies, and that blind spot is likely driven

Our Imminent Political Landscape?



by a propensity to like one of the celebrities or the platform he or she champions more than the other. You'll do just as well with Stella's or Fred's opinions.

False Choice

While we are on insidious fallacies of reason, it's worth considering the *false choice* fallacy, also known as false dilemma, either/or and black-or-white. The false choice fallacy is also adept at hiding in the open. I recall a National Public Radio broadcast from February 2014 that captured my interest because they interviewed an old gentleman who had failed as a Japanese kamikaze pilot during World War II. On the way to his target, his engine died. He survived, and the war ended before a second attempt could be mounted. The radio program provided a nuanced discussion as to whether the thousands of kamikaze pilot deaths were a tragic waste of youth or, instead, a noble sacrifice for society and family. Not until the show was nearly over did I realize I was buying into a false choice fallacy. There is no logical necessity for the exclusive disjunction. That is, nothing prevents the deaths from being both a tragic waste of youth and a noble sacrifice for society and family. False choice fallacies make a reasoning error of assuming there is an exclusive, either/or choice between two possibilities when, in fact, there is a third option such as something in between or the coexistence of both.

You can be on the lookout for false choice fallacies this election season by paying particular attention to the intersection of financial and social policy. One example would be, "Either we cut spending or we raise taxes!" – as if it were not possible to do both. Similarly: "Either we care about the impoverished or we continue with fiscal austerity!" – as if the two were mutually exclusive. When a political candidate is worried that some portion of his or her opponent's position has merit, he or she often attempts to dishonestly frame the issue in a false choice fallacy so that the attraction you might have to the competing argument is soured by a false either/or illusion of a heavy price to pay in trade.

Legitimizing Extreme Views

Our vote is, of course, a genuine either/or choice among several candidates. Unfortunately, today's candidates favor fallacy in pressing for their positions. Why should we care? Isn't vote pandering via deceitful argumentation an unavoidable feature of politics? Maybe so. However, the standard that we hold our politicians to during their political discourse influences not only the quality of their arguments but also the mindset of their followers. Unchallenged political fallacies often legitimize the more extreme views of fringe voters, and extreme views on one side encourage retributive extremism on the other. Imagine a bell curve with 90 percent of the voters occupying the rational middle and 10 percent split between the right and left fringes. Now imagine those fringes swelling over time as we allow our political leaders to legitimize fringe views through their use of fallacy. The swollen fringes come at the expense of the rational middle as borderline voters feel increasing pressure to adopt fringe views in response to the swelling fringe on the other side. The outermost fringes widen into extremism on both left and right. Swollen fringes or not, the rational middle must shoulder responsibility for detecting and openly challenging political fallacy. Otherwise, imagine moving from a political environment where reasoned discourse needs to mediate the extreme views of only one in 10 voters to a more alarming political landscape where the ratio is one in three.

We are to blame for the current unbridled use of fallacy in our politics. We reward campaigner deceit with political office, and we reward biased media pundits with high viewer ratings even when they parrot fallacies unchallenged. What to do? Hunt for and boisterously expose fallacies! Show no mercy – especially to the candidates you are inclined to support. Have fun confusing your friends as to where you stand. When they ask which platform you support, reply: "I am not a liberal. I am not conservative. I am not libertarian. I go wherever reason takes me!" 🗳️