



Introduction to the Special Issue on Fallacies

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Abstract

This short essay is an introduction to the essays included in this special issue of *Argumentation* devoted to fallacies.

In this special issue of *Argumentation* about fallacies I have used the Hansen and Pinto collection, *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (1995) as a backdrop. It was published more than twenty-five years ago and the editors of this journal have generously allowed us an opportunity to observe some of the ways in which the study of fallacies has developed since then. Accordingly, the first six essays are by authors who were contributors to the 1995 book and who have written especially for this issue. They are Frans van Eemeren, John Woods, Maurice Finocchiaro, James Freeman, David Hitchcock and J. Anthony Blair. Their new work shows that our understanding of the fallacy studies is becoming much deeper and wider than we could have anticipated when serious work on the fallacies first began in the 1970's.

The last four essays included are from more recent voices in fallacy studies. They show us ways in which reflection on fallacies is branching out from the traditional concerns to new areas of interest. We are fortunate to have contributions by Andrew Aberdein, Catherine Hundleby, Scott Aikin and John Casey, and Paula Olmos. Fallacies are controversial in many ways and critical reflection about them continues to stimulate innovative and important research that has implications for the more encompassing field of argumentation theory.

In “The pragma-dialectical approach to the fallacies revisited” **Frans van Eemeren and Bart Garssen** review the original motivation for the Pragma-dialectical theory of fallacies first given in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) and summarized in Hansen and Pinto's *Fallacies*. The pragma-dialectical approach models argumentation as attempts to resolve interpersonal disagreements under the normative model

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of an ideal critical discussion. The model is defined by a set of analytical stages and a set of rules that must be followed in order for the outcome of the discussion to be reasonable. Infringement of any of the rules results in a fallacy being committed, but because there is much more to reasonable interpersonal argumentation than just making and taking arguments (inferences) the pragma-dialectical approach recognizes a wider set of relevant norms and hence more fallacies than the logical tradition has bequeathed us.

Building on the early pragma-dialectical work on fallacies, van Eemeren and Garssen now supplement the theory in two ways. First, they report on subsequent empirical research that provides additional evidence that the Pragma-dialectical rules are conventionally valid, i.e., in agreement with the standards that most people find to be correct in their everyday argumentation. These research findings give additional credibility to the model of a critical discussion. The second noteworthy development in the Pragma-dialectical theory is the addition of the concept of strategic maneuvering. Arguers may be said to have at least two goals in the course of argumentation. One is to be successful and have their position prevail, whether it is to convince or resist being convinced. The other goal is to conduct themselves in such a way that they accord with the rules for critical discussions. A tension can arise for an arguer as s/he tries to satisfy both the requirements of being successful and of being reasonable. When the desire to succeed outweighs the commitment to abide by the discussion rules, when the strategic maneuvering takes an upper hand over dialectical reasonableness, then the argumentation may derail into the committing of fallacies. This essay connects the new insights about conventional validity and strategic maneuvering to many of the well-known fallacies thereby adding to the content and scope of the Pragma-dialectical argumentation theory.

In "Fallacies and their place in the foundations of science," **John Woods** continues his long-standing interest in Aristotle's logic and philosophy of science, now seeing Aristotle's work through the eyes of modern logic and proof theory. This leads him to what appears to be a seemingly paradoxical result, namely, that there are fallacies at the root of the sciences as Aristotle conceived them. Proof theory, Woods conjectures, as developed in the *Topics*, really rests on *ad hominem* argumentation, and in any science the first principles (axioms), according to the *Posterior Analytics*, will be established by a kind of *ad ignorantiam* argumentation where all but the most plausible *endoxon* is eliminated. Now, the *ad hominem* and *ad ignorantiam* sorts of arguments are not Aristotelian fallacies, nor did their baptizer, John Locke, think of them as fallacies although he did think they were sorts of arguments that were inferior to scientific arguments. Because these kinds of arguments can have weak instances they have, by a strange twist of intellectual history, subsequently been added to the modern inventory of fallacies. Hence, despite the attention Woods' essay gives to Aristotle works, the fallacies towards which he gestures in the title of his essay, have a post-Aristotelian genesis.

The fallacies of composition and division are some of the most difficult of which to give a satisfactory analysis. **Maurice Finocchiaro** has written about this fallacy before. His method combines a focus on historically important texts with a dialectical aspects that takes account of counter-arguments as well as the insights of other scholars. Also central to Finocchiaro's approach is a distinction between

ground- and meta-level arguments, the latter taking arguments themselves for their object. Thus, reasoning about whether an argument is strong, weak or commits a fallacy, is meta-argumentation which might itself also become the object of further meta-argumentation.

In the essay included in this collection, “Do arguments for global warming commit a fallacy of composition?”, Finocchiaro begins with a brief review of the basic concepts needed to understand the fallacy of composition: argument, fallacy, compositional argument, and fallacy of composition. Next, he considers a number a series of schemes of increasing complexity that lead us to a more insightful analysis of the structure of compositional arguments and then follows that by introducing three evaluative principles that can be used, in lieu of formal validity, to evaluate compositional arguments. This groundwork allows Finocchiaro to subject a much discussed compositional argument about global warming to critical scrutiny, disagreeing with earlier analyses. Important also is that in his critique the author carefully distinguishes the global warming argument from neighboring but different arguments about pollution and the effects of global warming. Furthermore, we find that employment of the meta-argument perspective also brings to our attention new possibilities for future case studies.

In his 1995 essay in *Fallacies*, **James B. Freeman** explored the conditions under which assertions were warranted by being backed by common knowledge. Such presumptions are defeasible and in his new essay for this collection, “The fallacy of misplaced presumption,” he undertakes a broader exploration of when someone’s word that a proposition is acceptable does in fact give it the status of a presumption. With an eye on the recent growth in our understanding about how our attitudes to race and gender can lead to unjust ascriptions and rejections of presumptions, Freeman builds on recent work on the nature of trust to give a detailed analysis of what he calls the fallacy of presumption. In its positive guise this fallacy occurs when we erroneously credit a claim as having presumptive status and the negative version happens when we fail to recognize that a claim is backed by presumption. Since good argumentation starts from correctly identifying the locus of presumption, being mistakes about which side of a dialogue does have the presumption can have negative consequences for our justifications for beliefs and actions, a mistake which is worthy of the name fallacy.

We have inherited our acquaintance with fallacies through the tradition of the logic textbooks. Hamblin’s book, *Fallacies* (1970), was motivated by a critique of the way that the fallacies were presented in those books. So convincing were his criticisms that it stimulated a voluminous literature that subjected each of the fallacies to analytical scrutiny and at the same time gave birth to the new field of fallacy theory. Nearly overlooked in the excitement of all this new activity related to fallacies, was the question of whether it was at all a good idea to teach the fallacies at the introductory level as the many traditional logic textbooks seem to have assumed. This question was not left out of the Hansen and Pinto collection, however: David Hitchcock argued the negative and J. Anthony Blair, with qualifications, argued the positive. In this present issue of *Argumentation*, they both revisit their earlier work on this question.

In his 1995 essay, **David Hitchcock** expressed his hesitations about teaching critical thinking via a course about fallacies (his reasons are repeated in Blair’s essay)

and he continues to hold this view, even more strongly based on his findings reported in this essay, “Textbook treatments of fallacies.” He begins by reviewing Charles Hamblin’s challenge to improve the presentation of fallacies in our teaching. As is now well-known, Hamblin thought the ways that the fallacies were presented in the textbooks of his day was “debased, worn-out and dogmatic ... tradition-bound, ... almost without connection to anything else in modern Logic,” (Hamblin 1970, 12) and now, 50 years later, Hitchcock looks to see whether Hamblin’s admonitions have had any effect on the recent textbook literature. He does this by giving a detailed review of just what it was that Hamblin was recommending and then proceeding to examine the treatments of fallacies in six of the most commercially successful current logic/critical thinking textbooks (all in at least their tenth editions).

What he finds is that even though Hamblin’s book led to a revitalization of theorizing about fallacies in journals and monographs, little of that research has been an influence on the treatments of fallacies in the new generation of textbooks. The analyses of individual fallacies largely remains superficial in several ways. Most important to notice is that the analysis of fallacies is not carried out within specified theories of good reasoning which might justify their inclusion and be the basis of their analysis. The verdict is that Hamblin’s complaints have not been remedied, and little has changed in how the fallacies are dealt with in the current generation of most widely used textbooks.

In his essay, “Teaching the fallacies,” **J. A. Blair** concedes that Hitchcock’s 1995 arguments against teaching the fallacies had the better case and he now agrees with him that we shouldn’t teach fallacies as part of critical thinking courses. And he goes further, strengthening Hitchcock’s original position by adding two new considerations against teaching the fallacies to undergraduates. Ironically, it is our newfound deeper and wider understanding of fallacies – wrought not only by the addition of dialectical and rhetorical insights, but also by multi-disciplinary perspectives – that advises against putting them in the introductory undergraduate course since their profitable study now require “a breadth of knowledge and understandings that are beyond the competence of most undergraduates.” This complexity of the fallacy literature not only makes the subject beyond the easy acquisition of students, it also implies that only those who are familiar with a good amount of the research literature on fallacies are qualified to teach about them, and such instructors are few and far between, thinks Professor Blair.

I (**Hans V. Hansen**) have included some of my own work in this issue. The problem addressed stems from a familiar view that fallacies can be deceptive, can hide their flaws and appear to be better arguments than they really are. My paper, titled, “Committing fallacies and the appearance condition,” proposes a simple model of what must obtain in order to commit a fallacy by perceiving an argument as being better than it really is, and it then goes on to distinguish different kinds of causal factors that could contribute to argument misperception. The causes include the object of perception itself (the argument); the time and space location of the perceiver vis-à-vis the argument; the social or discursive environment in which the argument is considered; and the condition of the perceiver. This very general discussion of how arguments might be misperceived is intended to be relevant for any normative standard of good arguments or argumentation.

Turning now to some of the more recent contributors to fallacy studies, we find that work on fallacies is reaching out in new directions. In their essay, “Free speech fallacies as meta-argumentative errors,” **Scott Aikin and John Casey**, like Finocchiaro, take the argumentation/meta-argumentation distinction as of critical importance. They further develop this distinction by bringing to our attention the existence of fallacies that are uniquely meta-argumentation errors. The strawman fallacy is of this kind since it stems from a misrepresentation of another’s argument, and a new fallacy the authors call *bothsiderism* consists of inferring that because there are reasons on both sides of an issue the correct view lies somewhere in between them. A consequence of the argumentation/meta-argumentation distinction is that unlike first-order arguments, meta-arguments will involve two arguments and two arguers, it is argumentation by someone about another argument and the author of that argument. The primary focus of the present Aikin and Casey essay is to make a case for what they call the free-speech fallacy as a meta-argumentative fallacy.

The authors distinguish two kinds of errors that may be associated with claims that the right to free speech is being infringed. The one is that in which criticism of a view is mistaken for censorship, and another is that when a view is excluded from discussion it is taken as an indication that the discussion is suspect or that the excluded view has some merit. Examples from contemporary political controversies are used to illustrate these different varieties of the free-speech fallacy. The essay concludes with a call to action for further research into meta-argumentative errors.

Andrew Aberdein has made important contributions to the development of virtue argumentation theory, the idea that arguing well can be specified by argumentative virtuous, and fallacies can be connected with argumentative vices. The theory has drawn some criticisms but here Aberdein saves it from some of them by distinguishing, on the one hand, argumentative virtues from moral virtues, making it clear that neither realm has a direct influence on the other, and, on the other hand, explaining that the virtue theory approach to good argumentation does in the long run dovetail with the more familiar cogency model of argumentation. What virtuous arguers strive for, in light of their virtues, is good, cogent arguments.

Aberdein’s essay in this issue, “The Fallacy Fallacy: From the Owl of Minerva to the Lark of Arete” reviews various conceptions of what people call the fallacy fallacy. It can be anything from mistakenly calling a cogent argument a fallacy to concluding that the conclusion of a fallacious argument is false. If we wonder where this enthusiasm for fallacy accusations comes from it can be related to what might be called the Owl of Minerva syndrome: reflection on our cognitive practices and standards can have the negative consequence that we misuse the techniques of maintaining the standards, in this case by over-using fallacy accusations, resulting in a new kind of mistake that may also be considered a fallacy. The solution advises us that the way to avoid this new fallacy fallacy is to double-down on commitments to be virtuous arguers.

It is well known that biases may dispose us to commit fallacies, but in her essay, “Social Justice, Fallacies of Argument, and Persistent Bias,” **Catharine Hundleby** takes up the other side of the question, namely whether argument evaluation by a fallacies method is an effective way of exposing biases, and she finds that, in general, it is not. Hundleby’s essay comes from the perspective of recent feminist epistemol-

ogy and social theory which does prioritize the exposing of biases. So, in her view, although a fallacies method may be useful, ultimately it does not go deep enough to serve the interests of social justice. In support of her argument the author illustrates her thesis by discussing ethotic and genetic argumentation and in particular *ad hominem* arguments: to dismiss such arguments when they are fallacy only touches the surface and leaves untouched the character and biases that lead to their utterances. Hundleby fears that for students to rest content with a fallacies approach to argument evaluation may in fact backfire because it will give them a false confidence that they are being objective in their evaluations. We may see in this observation an extension of the arguments that have been made by Hitchcock and Blair for resisting teaching the fallacies at the introductory level.

One of the ways in which the field of argumentation has grown in the last 25 years is that it has relaxed some of its central concepts, for instance, the concept of ‘argument’. Traditionally an argument has been thought of as a set of sentences or propositions with explicitly identified premises and conclusion related in such a way that the premises are intended to make the conclusion acceptable. Lately the concept has been extended to other modes of communication (e.g., the visual) and to other ways in which sentences can be supported through discourse, especially by narratives. In her contribution to this collection of essays, “What do We Mean by ‘That’s a Fallacious Narrative’?”, **Paula Olmos** considers also relaxing the concept of fallacy so that it does not apply only to arguments but also to beliefs as they are expressed in narratives. She finds that the accusation, ‘fallacious narrative,’ is used in a number of ways. One of them, found in a theological discussion, uses the accusation to say that a supporting narrative is just false and so not relevant; another, related to politics, claims that narratives supporting ideologies can rest on questionable tenets that invalidates the narratives; and, still another ‘fallacious narrative’ charge is found when narratives are invented that misrepresent the actual facts under discussion. With the increased interest in the intersection of arguments and narratives, Olmos’ essay opens the door to new explorations of how concepts of fallacy can further our critical understanding of texts.

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