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THE NATURE OF THE ARGUMENTUM AD BACULUM

GARY JASON

Students are rightly puzzled by the explanations of the *argumentum ad baculum* they meet in many logic texts. They are told “The *argumentum ad baculum* is the fallacy committed when one appeals to force or the threat of force to cause acceptance of a conclusion”, and that “the use or threat of ‘strong-arm’ methods to coerce political opponents provide contemporary examples of this fallacy.”¹ The student is often given examples of this sort:

I have exhausted my patience with you, Mr. Findley. I have done all I can to persuade you that selling the plans for the bombsight to my government would be the right thing for you to do. I’m afraid you now leave me no choice. **Let me tell you this, if you do not give us the plans, your crippled wife, your blind daughter, and your poor bedridden mother will be — shall we say — sent to happier place.** Now what do you say, American pig?²

But such explanations (and examples) are puzzling. How can physical force or the threat thereof be an argument? What are the premises? And if an argument, why a fallacy? If someone “argues” that I should turn over the plans to a bombsight or else he will kill my family, why would it be illogical for me to do so?

In this paper I will defend the view that there is indeed a fallacy *argumentum ad baculum*, but that its nature has been misunderstood. It has been misunderstood because people have focused upon what I shall call direct threats rather than indirect scare tactics. I want to clarify the nature of this fallacy, as I believe it is more prevalent and more insidious than most logicians suspect.

I will begin by reviewing a few basic concepts. None of the definitions I give are very novel or controversial; they are all straight out of mundane logic texts.

An argument is a set of premises together with a conclusion. A fallacy is just a logically flawed argument. Any argument is either logically

good or else it is fallacious. (By “logically good” I mean either deductively valid or inductively strong. If the reader wishes to add a third type of evidential relation, such as “retroductive-plausibility” he is free to do so.)

Arguments are used to do various things. The paradigm use of an argument is to persuade the listener that the conclusion is true. But one can use an argument to explain why a certain conclusion is true (where the listeners are antecedently convinced that the conclusion is true). One can use an argument to joke, as Lewis Carroll was wont to do. And one can use an argument to cause the listener to act.

Of special importance for our discussion is the so-called practical syllogism, which can be roughly formulated as follows:

- (1) Act A would accomplish X’s goal better than the alternatives open to X.
- (2) X wants to accomplish his goal.

X ought to do A.

There is some controversy about the logical status of the practical syllogism. In order to avoid begging some important questions, I will assume that the practical syllogism is logically good. But I will insist that we recognize how uninformative this argument is. The “ought” in the conclusion is simply the prudential “ought” not “ought” in any moral sense. (You morally ought not murder people even if it benefits you.) With practical syllogism, one should pay close attention to detect any equivocation in the use of the word “ought”.

Quite often, life is logically sweet: we attempt to cause action by persuading with a logically good argument. But also quite often, we use nonarguments to cause action. By “nonargument” I mean anything from pushes and shoves to shouts to statements. For example, I may stop my child from reaching for an electric cord by pulling her away from it, or by shouting “No!” at the top of my lungs, or by making the statement that electrical current can hurt her.

Using a nonargument to cause (or stop) action is good or bad depending upon motives and circumstances. I don’t want to spend more time on ethical issues than is necessary; however, clarity about these matters will prove useful in what follows.

Using a nonargument is morally justified only if certain obvious conditions are met. First, the harm done must be commensurate with the good which results from the action. Thus, a slap may be justified to stop my child from swallowing a tack, but striking her with a stick

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wouldn't be. Second, my motive must be to help her, not hurt her. Third, there must be no less harmful device which can be employed to equal effect. Slapping my child to get her to not swallow the tack would be unjustified if I could stop her action by simply shouting.

That third condition has an important consequence. In most cases, if a logically good argument can be used instead of a nonargument to cause an action, then the argument should be used instead. When logic is as effective as nonlogical devices such as physical coercion, logic should be employed. This seems clear, at least if we assume that other people are rational agents, whose actions should grow out of their own free deliberations as opposed to external compulsion or manipulation. Such an assumption seems part of the whole idea of treating others as ends rather than means. Of course, the key clause in the claim "if logic is as effective as nonlogical devices in a given situation, then logic should be employed" is the antecedent. If danger is imminent, we may not have time to argue, so arguing may not be as effective as (say) physical intervention. For example, it would be rather silly to try to argue the merits of stepping out of the roadway to a man who is two seconds away from being run over by a truck. And, of course, on many occasions the agent involved is not fully rational, and argument may not be very effective. This, I take it, is why children are ordered about so much. But the general point still holds: if logical persuasion is as efficacious as anything else in a given situation, it should be used.

Having thus become clear on the use of nonarguments to cause action, we can be equally clear about using fallacies to cause action. There are occasions when the use of fallacies is justified, but those are occasions when the harm is commensurate with the goodness of the action caused, when the arguer is trying to help rather than hurt the listener, and where there is no other logical way to get the job done.

One last preliminary point. A fallacy is just an illogical argument. But as a matter of pragmatics, we usually add the condition that there be something persuasive or plausible about the fallacy. Since some precision will be required in what follows, however, I will mean by "fallacy" only an illogical argument. a fallacy is persuasive to X if it gets X to believe the conclusion. By my definition, very likely most fallacies are unpersuasive.

Let us now turn to the topic at hand. The usual definition of the *argumentum ad baculum* is that it is committed when the arguer uses threats to get his point accepted. Let's consider some candidates for this fallacy.

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- (a) Give me your money or I will blow your head off.
- (b) I'm sure that you'll agree that our bill deserves your support, Senator Jason. Don't forget that our organization has over one million members, all of whom vote the way we tell them to.
- (c) Do you want to die a horribly painful death? There is no more painful death than Beri-Beri, where your gums rot and your bones crumble, which you can only scream and scream again in desparate pain. This disease is caused by vitamin deficiency. Protect yourself. Buy these vitamin supplements.

In example (a), it isn't clear that there is even an argument given at all. Probably the most accurate way to represent the situation is as a nonargument (the gun, to which the mugger's statement draws your attention) is used — quite effectively — to cause an action.

Still, we might say the mugger has an argument, something like:

- (1) If you don't give me your money, I will blow your head off.
 - (2) You don't want your head to be perforated by a bullet.
-

You ought to give me your money.

This argument is logically acceptable, if we avoid equivocation and view the "ought" as purely prudential. The mugger is not arguing that your act would be somehow morally correct, only that it would be prudent.

In the case of a direct threat like (a), either there is no argument involved or else the argument is logically good. Either way, no fallacy is committed. So no *argumentum ad baculum* is committed.

Now look at (b). One way to view this passage is to view the lobbyist as merely a polite mugger, and accordingly either view him as using a nonargument or else a straightforward practical syllogism. But a second way to view the passage is to view it as expressing the argument:

- (1) Our members number a million.
 - (2) They vote as we tell them to.
 - (3) We support this bill.
-

This bill is meritorious.

The difference here is that instead of the conclusion being (as in the practical syllogism) "You ought to vote for this bill", the conclusion is a statement to the effect that the bill is a good one.

What is odd about that second construal of the argument? Simple: it

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is such an obvious non-sequitur, such a howler, that nobody could be persuaded by it. The support of a lobby is simply no evidence at all that the bill supported is a good one.

The upshot of our examination of (a) and (b) is that direct threats may not be fallacies at all (since they are often either nonarguments or practical syllogisms about how the listener should act), and to the extent they can be viewed as fallacies, they are utterly unpersuasive.

But the writers of logic texts only deal with fallacies which are persuasive — so should we not just drop *argumentum ad baculum* entirely?

Let us hold off drawing such a conclusion until we examine example (c). The argument here is curious. There seems to be a practical syllogism involved:

- (1) You are in danger of acute vitamin deficiency.
- (2) Taking vitamins is the best way to prevent acute vitamin deficiency.
- (3) Acute vitamin deficiency causes a horrible death.
- (4) You don't want to die horribly.

You ought to buy vitamins.

This argument is quite different from (a) and (b). Those other arguments involve direct threats, whereas (c) involves only an indirect threat. A *direct* threat is one in which the person articulating the threat would be involved in carrying it out if it is indeed carried out. An *indirect* threat is one in which the person who articulates the threat would not be involved in carrying it out if it is indeed carried out.

The logic of the above argument is acceptable, and premises (3) and (4) are clearly true. But where do premises (1) and (2) come from? Why accept them? The threat here is indirect, i.e., the listener's refusal to buy the vitamins will not cause the seller to cause him (the listener) to have such a deficiency. And in reality, very few Americans are in danger of acute vitamin shortage, because whatever else is wrong with the American diet, vitamin shortage is not a problem. Here is where the fallacy comes in: scare tactics (the loaded language) are used to incline the listener to accept the dubious premises (1) and (2).

That the scare tactics are essential can be seen by comparing (c) with this example:

- (d) Studies have shown that 90% of all Americans have acute vitamin deficiency, in spite of an adequate diet. Acute

vitamin deficiency can lead to terrible diseases, and vitamin supplements can cure that deficiency. So you ought to buy some supplements.

In (d), actual, genuine evidence (which is of course in fact false) is presented to show that the threat of vitamin deficiency really is a threat to the listener. In (c), only scare tactics are used.

These examples suggest a better definition of *argumentum ad baculum*. All the examples involve threats. But in (a) and (b), the threats are direct — the arguer directly causes the threat to apply to the listener. And in (d), evidence is presented which shows that the threat does indeed threaten the listener. In (c), which alone seems clearly a persuasive fallacy of *ad baculum* reasoning, the threat is based solely on scare tactics. Thus we might try this definition: **an *argumentum ad baculum* is an argument in which the arguer attempts to get his point accepted on the basis of scare tactics.** *Scare tactics* are statements or other devices (such as verbal imagery, sounds or pictures) which make the listener feel threatened, but which don't actually constitute evidence that he (the listener) is in fact threatened to any great degree.

Let's consider an actual case, and see if our analysis helps clarify things. There is a movie (produced in England) which is intended to convince people to not smoke cigarettes. Perhaps you have seen this movie — it is remarkably powerful. It has pictures of and interviews with people dying of lung cancer, mainly cowboys, in an ironic counterpoint to those Marlboro ads which pictured handsome cowboys smoking. So, for instance, you see one poor fellow riding the range with oxygen bottles strapped inside his saddlebags and the tube up his nose.

I take this case as significant, and so does the American tobacco industry, which has protested vociferously against attempts to get this movie shown on the major American networks. What are we to make of this case? **I will consider two questions: first, does it involve a fallacy; and second, if so, is it justified in doing so?**

As regards the first question, the answer is clear on my principles. The argument presented in opposition to smoking is:

- (1) If you smoke, you run a dangerously high risk of lung cancer.
- (2) Lung cancer is a horrible way to die.
- (3) You don't want to die horribly.

You ought not to smoke.

But insofar as most of the scenes are of the misery of lung cancer, either

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we view the thrust of the movie as ignoring the issue (arguing the unquestioned premises (2) and (3)), or else — more likely — trying to prove the key premise (1) by scare tactics.

Sound arguments against smoking can be formulated, of course, but their formulation requires rather subtle decision theoretic analyses.³ The bare statistical facts alone are not compelling:

Percentage of American Men Aged 35 expected to Die Before Age 65

Nonsmokers	23%
Cigar/pipe Smokers	25%
Cigarette Smokers	
Less than ½ pack per day	27%
½ to 1 pack per day	34%
1 to 2 packs per day	38%
2 or more packs per day	41%

From these facts alone, the average person might well conclude that cutting down on his cigarette usage or maybe switching to cigars is the appropriate action to take.

Indeed, the failure of the “dry facts” to persuade most smokers to quit is what inclines some groups to favor the use of scare tactics. Is the use of *ad baculum* argumentation to get people to “kick the habit” justified?

There is no question that those who use *ad baculum* arguments to persuade smokers to quit intend to help rather than harm the smokers of the world, but it is still an open question whether or not the rational case against smoking can be made more effectively than it has heretofore. Unless we are prepared to assert that smokers are such hopeless nicotine addicts that they are not rational agents, it seems that continued attempts at rational persuasion are to be preferred over scare tactics.

Moreover, it is also unclear whether — even granting that rational argumentation has been shown not to work against smoking — the harm caused by *ad baculum* tactics is proportionate to the good produced. Clearly, deaths due to lung cancer and other smoking-related ailments are a tremendous evil. But there are several evils attendant upon the use of scare tactics in lieu of facts. First, of course, is the fear produced in the people subjected to such tactics. This is not inconsiderable. We are daily bombarded by warnings against salt, cholesterol, sugar, alcohol, and low fiber in the diet. People are now quite worried that what they eat is killing them and that fear is quite inordinate. Also to be figured in is the loss of confidence in the

government and/or the news media experienced by people subjected to such scare campaign. When emotional appeals are substituted for rational arguments — even in a worthy cause — the level of public dialogue is lowered.

Even more troublesome is the possibility that those who employ scare tactics in a good cause may get used to such tactics, and may later use them in less worthy or even bad causes. This is a danger especially to modern democracies, in which the daily lives of citizens are affected as much or more by bureaucratic decisions as by the decisions of elected representatives. To use scare tactics is to manipulate rather than persuade, and when bureaucrats get used to manipulation, they may well keep it up in those situations in which the reason they can't logically persuade the public is not because the public is less than rational (say, because nicotine addiction has dulled the senses), but rather because the evidence is not compelling.

Examples are depressingly common. Foreign policy decisions are made behind close doors, and then "justified" by scare tactics ("if we don't send arms to Nicaragua, the communists will soon be at our border!" cry the conservative policy makers; "if we send arms to Nicaragua, we will be in another Vietnam!" cry the liberal policy makers.) Domestic policy is also set bureaucratically and justified by scare tactics. For example, in the U.S. today, there is a governmental campaign to get people to obey the 55 MPH speed limit. The 55 MPH law was passed a decade ago as a measure to lower gasoline usage during the energy crisis. The public, through their representatives, voted the law in. However, long after the energy crisis ended, the Department of Transportation has pushed to keep the law enforced, and has put messages in all the media to the effect that the 55 MPH limit saves lives. Their messages invariably show horrible automobile accidents and other such frightening scenes. Yet the statistical evidence for the claim that the lower speed limit does indeed save lives is absolutely insufficient. The scare tactics are used precisely because the evidence is lacking for a policy the bureaucrats wish to keep in place.

I have argued that the real nature of *ad baculum* arguments lies not in the real of direct threat, but rather indirect scare tactics. The possibility (by no means a fact) that there may be situations in which scare tactics are morally justifiable does not make those tactics less fallacious.

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NOTES

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- ² Munson, Ronald. *The Way of Words: An Informal Logic* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976, p. 270.
- ³ See for example, Richard Jeffrey *The Logic of Decision* (2nd Ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 11-12, 21-22, 42-44. The facts cited are taken from page 11.

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