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Ad Hominem Arguments, Review

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Douglas Walton, *Ad Hominem Arguments*, Studies in Rhetoric and Communication (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1998). 315 pp. cloth \$34.95.

Donald Wayne Viney

C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), the great American philosopher and logician, complained that the writers of logic books in his day were “men of arrested brain-development” and that they were with rare exceptions, “shambling reasoners.” Judging from Douglas Walton’s analysis of treatments of *ad hominem* arguments in logic textbooks, Peirce would have little reason to change his judgment. Walton’s survey of logic texts (especially in chapter 2), reveals a variety of conflicting accounts of the nature of *ad hominem* arguments.

Walton’s own careful categorization and formalization of the various kinds of *ad hominem* arguments brings clarity to the subject. According to Walton, the generic form of *ad hominem* argument is: *P* is a bad person; therefore, *P*’s argument *A* should not be accepted (113). The author identifies three basic subtypes of this generic form, each of which gives a different reason for the premise that *P* is a bad person: *direct* (which questions *P*’s character), *circumstantial* (which alleges an inconsistency between *A*’s conclusion and *P*’s real commitments), and *bias* (which identifies extra-logical motives for why *P* defends *A*’s conclusion). Other well-known versions of *ad hominem* argument—for example, guilt by association, the two wrongs fallacy, *tu quoque*, and poisoning the well—are classified as specialized versions of the three basic subtypes (see Figures 6.2, 261).

While some logic texts define *ad hominem* arguments as fallacious, others recognize exceptions on the grounds that, in a court of law, a witness’ character is directly relevant to whether his or her testimony is judged reliable. Walton takes this idea a step further and defends the thesis that no *ad hominem* argument is inherently fallacious but that it is good or bad depending on the argumentative context. He emphasizes that *ad hominem* arguments are “inherently weak and fragile forms of argument” (231), however, they can be warranted when morals and politics are at issue. If Bertrand Russell gives advice on how we should manage our lives it is reasonable, says Walton, to ask how Russell managed his personal affairs (121).

Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of an actual debate over a certain politician who argued against tax loopholes while using them for his own benefit. The debate concerned the consistency of the politician’s position, his hypocrisy, and the credibility of the party that supported him despite his behavior. Walton believes that his analysis of the debate illustrates the

kinds of moves that can be made in such a controversy and the ways in which character can play an important role in political debates.

The most troubling aspect of Walton's case is that he never adequately distinguishes between attacking a person's *argument* and attacking a person's *testimony*. This is most evident in his discussion of the *credibility function*. Walton believes that *ad hominem* argumentation can best be modeled by assigning to participants in the argument a credibility function that raises or lowers the plausibility value—Walton does not say probability—of “the proposition (or the argument) advocated by the person in a dialogue” (237). Note that, for Walton, the credibility function may affect either a proposition or an argument. It is understandable that a person's credibility could affect the plausibility value of his or her *testimony* (which is a proposition, or series of propositions claimed to be true). What is not clear is how the person's credibility could affect the *arguments* he or she proposes. This seems no less true in the realm of morals and politics than in the realm of science. It would be as absurd to discount Isaac Newton's arguments about gravity on the grounds that he was a scoundrel as it would be to dismiss Simone de Beauvoir's argument against marriage on the grounds that she had lesbian affairs. Testimony, on the other hand, may be believed or disbelieved based on the trustworthiness of the one testifying, especially on matters of which we have no other means of knowing. If a person's testimony plays the role of a premise in an argument, then the person's character is relevant to whether we accept the premise as true. In this case, however, questioning the person's character no longer fits the generic *ad hominem* argument schema.

It is a fair question whether, keeping clearly in mind the distinction between criticism of an argument and criticism of testimony, there is a single example of *ad hominem* argument in Walton's book that could classify even as a “weak and fragile presumptive form of argument.” Despite this weakness, Walton's book can be recommended for its plethora of interesting examples, its historically informed discussion, and its useful typology of *ad hominem* arguments.