

The Ad Hominem Fallacy

Critical Thinking

The Ad Hominem Fallacy

- Where:
 - X is a person (or group, or institution),
 - Y is something that X claims, and
 - Z is a person that is an opponent of Y (X?!):
- Z commits the ad hominem fallacy when Z is trying to refute Y by saying something (usually negative) about X
- The fallacy is that by pointing out something about the *person* X, Z hasn't said anything about the *claim* Y!
- Ad Hominem: “To (against) the man”

Careful!

- Saying something negative about X does not automatically mean an ad hominem is committed: it is only an ad hominem if the point of attacking the person is to attack some claim (or argument) from that person.

Why is the Ad Hominem Fallacy so Prevalent?

- Most likely this is for the same reasons why we are so reluctant to be critical of our own beliefs:
 - We equate an individual with their beliefs, or at least see their beliefs as a large part of who they are. So, by questioning this person, or at least their credibility, presumably we would be questioning their claim.
 - Most arguments are about persuasion and winning, which is all about the person, rather than finding the truth.

Varieties of the Ad Hominem

- 3 main ones:
 - Abusive Ad Hominem
 - Circumstantial Ad Hominem
 - Inconsistency Ad Hominem
- Some others:
 - Poisoning the Well
 - Guilt by Association
 - Positive Ad Hominem

Abusive Ad Hominem

- The Abusive Ad Hominem is how most people think of the Ad Hominem:
 - An attempt to refute what someone is claiming by saying something bad about that person
 - This is why this type of Ad Hominem is sometimes called the Personal Attack Fallacy.
- Example:
 - “We can’t believe what he is saying because he had sex with a prostitute”

Ad Hominem in Politics

- Is mud slinging in politics an abusive ad hominem?
 - Sometimes, but actually often the attack is a character attack only. And (maybe unfortunately), in politics one's character counts, i.e. it is the point. So, no ad hominem in those cases.
 - Again: just because someone is saying something bad about a person doesn't mean that an ad hominem is being committed!

Circumstantial Ad Hominem

- A type of ad hominem that is far less recognized as an ad hominem (but probably just as common as the abusive one) is the circumstantial ad hominem.
- A circumstantial ad hominem is made when one tries to refute a claim on the basis of how that person came up with that claim or what consequences that claim may have for that person (and hence what interest that person might have in that claim being true).
- Example:
 - “Of course he is opposed to rent control: he owns 6 apartment buildings himself!”

Explaining Away

- The circumstantial ad hominem is a kind of ‘explaining away’ technique:
 - ‘Of course he would say that, because ...’
 - Thus, the suggestion is that this person is *only* saying this because ..., i.e. that the person either really has no good reason to believe that or, maybe more to the point, has a circumstantial reason to believe this, rather than any actual reason

Why It is a Fallacy

- First, just because someone has a circumstantial reason to believe something, doesn't mean that this person doesn't have any (other) actual reasons
- Second, even if this person doesn't have any actual reasons for the claim they are making, it still doesn't mean that their claim is false (which is of course the whole point!)
- Thus, while the circumstances may dictate that we shouldn't trust what someone else is saying, this is not the same as that claim being false.

Some Strange Circumstantial Ad Hominems

- Sometimes we start to confuse circumstantial reasons with prudent reasons:
 - “Of course he would say that $1+1=2$. He is a math teacher!”
- The Psychological Ad Hominem:
 - “Oh poor Nate! His father died when he was young, and so his only parent he knew was his mon. But, she was rather, eh, chubby. And so now Nate is really quite sensitive to negative remarks regarding fat. So no wonder that Nate is fighting tooth and nail against the whale hunt. Poor, poor Nate!”

Inconsistency Ad Hominem

- The most common (but probably least recognized) ad hominem is the inconsistency ad hominem, where someone's claim is being attacked based on that person being inconsistent.
- Examples:
 - “Pay no attention to her arguments against abortion. I happen to know that she had three abortions herself!”
 - “So, now you're saying ...? Funny, you used to believe the exact opposite!”
- Notice how the inconsistency can be between what the person is saying and what the person is doing, or between what the person is saying now, and what the person was saying before.

Inconsistencies

- What makes the inconsistency ad hominem so effective, is that being inconsistent is under many circumstances a bad thing. However, this badness of the inconsistency does not automatically translate into badness of the claim:
 - Just because the person is doing something that goes against what the person is saying, doesn't mean that what the person is saying is false.
 - Same for claims now and then.
- Another appeal of the inconsistency ad hominem is that, by being inconsistent, the person seems to refute him or herself.
 - This is why this fallacy is sometimes called a Pseudorefutation: many people regard this as a perfectly good refutation! But it isn't.

“You’re a Flip-Flopper!”

- Are the ‘flip-flop’ attacks in politics an example of inconsistency ad hominem?
- Again, hard to say, and it really depends on how this is being used.
 - For example, when someone says “Your position on the war in Iraq is mistaken as you have been a flip-flopper about it”, then it is certainly an inconsistency ad hominem.
 - On the other hand, “You make for a bad president because you are a notorious flip-flopper” has a point: this person is not following through on the values and promises which, supposedly, that person was elected for. And so in that case it is not an inconsistency ad hominem.
 - Then again, sometimes beliefs and values can, and should, change as a function of the changing times and circumstances.

Inconsistency, Credibility, and Trust

- Another way in which the inconsistency ad hominem is so effective is that in pointing out that someone is inconsistent, that person is losing some credibility and trust.
- Thus, the thinking goes: “You’re inconsistent. Therefore, you are not a credible person, and what you’re saying can’t be trusted and is therefore false.”
- The fallacy is committed at the very end: Just because someone has little credibility or can’t be trusted doesn’t mean that what they are saying is false: it only means that we shouldn’t blindly accept what they are saying. But not accepting claim Y is not the same as rejecting claim Y, which is what the Ad Hominem is trying to do.
- Also note that when a person makes an argument, then that argument can be evaluated on its own terms, and at that point any loss of credibility may not be a factor at all anymore!

Tu Quoque

- A particular (and particularly effective) instance of the inconsistency ad hominem is when someone speaks ill of someone else, but is then pointed out to do just like them ('you're another')
- Example:
 - “You’re saying that I should clean up my room? But you never clean up yours!”
- But, just because the pot is black, doesn’t mean that the pot is wrong in calling the kettle black, since it is perfectly possible for the kettle to be black as well, in which case the pot is right in calling the kettle black even though the pot is black itself!

Poisoning the Well

- An interesting ad hominem is when someone's claim is refuted before that person has even said anything!
- Example:
 - “Don't believe anything you read in that newspaper!”

Guilt by Association

- This is when someone's claim is refuted simply by association of that person to something negative (other than that person him or herself)
- Example:
 - “I don't believe a word of what Hillary is saying; didn't her husband have sex in the White House?!”

Positive Ad Hominem

- Kind of the opposite of the ad hominem:
- Examples:
 - “I believe him. He’s done great work for charities” (Positive character ad hominem)
 - “Professor X’s arguments for putting a cap on professor’s salaries can be believed, because why would she argue against her own interests?” (Positive Circumstantial Ad Hominem)
 - “He must be right if he keeps saying the same thing” (Positive Consistency Ad hominem)

Connection with Emotional Appeals

- Negative Ad Hominems make us angry or indignant with someone. Boo!
- Positive Ad Hominems make us look up to someone. Yay!
- Appeals to the Masses (and its variants) can be seen as Positive Ad Hominems

War in Iraq

- “How can our leaders say they are going to war in Iraq to create a democracy there when they won't listen to the majority who are against this war?”
- “I am fed up with anti-war protest groups who moan about war and wish for peace, failing to recognize that their brothers in North Korea are supplying chemical weapons to terrorist groups.”
- “These people banging on about "Rogue nations with weapons of mass destruction" make me laugh. What is a rogue nation? Presumably a nation that decides to act on it's own without the backing of any major world organisations. In other words, the U.S.!”

Interesting One

- “Those Occupy People are just protesting because they don’t have a job. If they had worked hard and gotten a good paying job, we wouldn’t be hearing a peep from those bums.”