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The Persuasive Force of the Ad Baculum

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Abstract: Standard accounts of the ad baculum locate its fallacious either in irrelevance or dialogue shift. Such accounts, however, fail to explain its persuasiveness. This paper offers a new account where the real target of an ad baculum is an audience downstream from the initial ad baculum exchange. This means that the ad baculum consists in misrepresenting the quality of evidence by means of the forced adoption of a particular standpoint.

1. Introduction

Suppose you and I are having an argument about whether p. You hold that p; I hold that not-p. You adduce a series of arguments, so do I. We get nowhere, but, because I'm persistent, I say: "if you continue with this p business I'm going to punch you in the face." Were I a more subtle person, I might have achieved the same result by suggesting that continuing to assert that p might occasion the revelation of some embarrassing personal fact about you. My arguments are ad baculum—appeals to the force. Commonly, a fallacious ad baculum argument is one where an arguer uses a threat to induce someone to draw a particular conclusion irrelevant to threat (Van de Vate 1975: 43; Walton 2014: 296). At first pass, it's somewhat baffling that anyone ever thought that the ad baculum was ever, as they say, a thing in argumentation studies. For, it would seem to be blindingly obvious even to the least competent of arguers that no amount of force is going to make someone *believe* something. Beliefs, by most plausible accounts, are involuntary and do not respond to commands, bribes, or other inducements (Cohen 1992**;** Woods 1998: 496). If that were not bad enough, the threat of force, even if subtle, would seem to call attention to the lack of rational grounds for the arguer's conclusion. Since fallacies are supposed in some sense to appear to be stronger arguments than they are, it would be odd that in the case of the ad baculum there is no deception. Indeed there cannot be any, because if the threat is going to have any force, it needs to be recognized for what it is.

Despite this massive plausibility problem, one still finds accounts of the ad baculum in popular critical thinking or introduction to logic texts (I'll discuss one below). This is somewhat surprising (but only somewhat), because the comparatively extensive scholarly literature on the subject has essentially pronounced it not to be anything like what these texts describe. Naturally, I'm speaking generally because I don't have a lot of space, but even the most ontologically generous accounts barely leave it standing (Van de Vate 1975; Brinton 1992; Walton 2000). Many deny that the common account is any kind of argumentative scheme at all (or that if it is a scheme, there is nothing logically wrong with it) (e.g., Wreen 1989). For Pragma-dialectics, the ad baculum breaks a rule of behavior rather than any kind of logical rule (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 180). More recently Budzynska and Witek (2014) have suggested looking beyond the inference-schematic features of the ad baculum to appreciate it as a "complex

rhetorical technique" where the ethotic components of the person making the ad baculum argument are central to understanding how it works.

In this paper, I am going to argue that the ethotic features of the ad baculum arguments can explain the most baffling feature about them: how do you get someone to believe something by force. The answer I will give, in short, is you don't get them to believe it, you get them to adopt it so that other people believe it. My argument relies on the oft-overlooked distinction (at least in argumentation studies) between beliefs and commitments (Paglieri & Castelfranchi 2006; Godden 2012 and 2015). You can get someone to adopt a commitment through force because you adopt commitments voluntarily. Beliefs, by contrast, are involuntary, and mainly responsive to evidence. Since I am arguing that the approach to the ad baculum has been inadequate, I will argue my thesis through an analysis of two famous cases of this approach. I'll follow this with some observations and conclusions.

2. An (in)famous account of the ad baculum.

I want to start with a well-known account of the ad baculum, Hurley and (new this edition) Watson's widely used *Concise Introduction to Logic,* as of 2016 in its 13th edition. It is noteworthy that this text, which has changed little across its many editions, has already been subjected to detailed (and scathing) critique in the ad baculum literature.[1] I don't mean to pile on or even duplicate that work. I think rather that there is something of value in Hurley and Watson's attempt that the critique has missed.

Hurley and Watson begin their discussion of the fallacies of relevance with the *argumentum ad baculum,* or the "appeal to the 'stick.'" This fallacy, they write,

> occurs whenever an arguer presents a conclusion to another person and tells that person either implicitly or explicitly that some harm will come to him or her if he or she does not accept the conclusion (p.129).[2]

People familiar with the Hurley and Watson text know that, broadly speaking, it takes an informal logic approach to the problem of fallacies, viewing them as commonly deceptive argument schemes where the premises do not provide adequate support for the conclusion. This means that they focus their analysis on the schematic features of the argument, how the premises fail or succeed in supporting the conclusion. This, I think, is part of the reason their account of the ad baculum is a mess. In the next section, we will look at an alternative to this.

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[1]Their analysis of the ad baculum is not all that different from what one would normally encounter in general texts of this sort. A thorough review of the relevant introduction to logic-type texts would be a waste of time, so let this brief survey suffice. Copi and Cohen (1998), the ur-text for this kind of approach to fallacies, says "the appeal to force, to cause the acceptance of some conclusion, seems at first sight so obvious a fallacy as to need no discussion at all" (get P# in full edition). Baronet's (2013) definition is virtually identical: "the threat of physical harm, an appeal to force, can sometimes cause us to accept a course of action which otherwise would be unacceptable" (p.123). He puts the ad baculum in the fallacies of relevance, claiming that the threat is not "objective evidence" for the conclusion (p.124). A very recent handbook to fallacies, *Bad Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Fallacies in Western Philosophy* (2018) replicates the same basic form: "An argument that appeals to force or fear attempts to make the audience feel fear at the threat or possibility of harm in order to get them to accept a conclusion" (p.98).
[2]Interestingly, Wreen (1989) discusses Hurley's text at length. What's surprising is that the definition has not changed from the 1985 edition. The examples have also barely changed. By contrast, scholars of argumentation, e.g., Groarke and Tindale (2012) and Bailin and Battersby (2016), have no account of the ad baculum.

As Hurley and Watson describe the ad baculum, the reasons given for the conclusion are an implicit or explicit threat of some harm.[3] This brings us back to our key question: how can we *force* or *threaten* someone into *accepting* a conclusion? Their answer to this is somewhat surprising. First, the examples.

> *Child to playmate: Sesame Street* is the best show on TV, and if you don't *believe* me it, I'm going to call my big brother over here and he's going to beat you up.

> *Lobbyist to senator*: Senator Casey, of course you support our bill to reduce inheritance taxes. After all, you wouldn't want the press to find out about all the contributions you receive from the Ku Klux Klan. (Emphasis added p.129)

Before adding other comments, it ought to be said that these examples are not implausible. In my day, kids used to fight over which kind of food tasted best (or worst in some cases). Kids are not all that great at argument, but adults don't necessarily fair much better. I was once threatened (certainly only rhetorically I hope) in an argument over who liberated Italy in World War II. So it's at least plausible that people threaten each other this way. The question, however, is what they want to achieve. One can see that there is something of a confusion here as to whether one forces another to believe or to accept or, as in the last case, merely to do something. The conclusion of the second example is, or at least seems to be, an action: Senator Casey (no relation) is meant to do something by expressing support for some bill—probably voting or speaking in favor of it in the Senate chamber. The conclusion of the first example is that the playmate ought to *believe* something. These are certainly different things. They're also different from *accepting* something, which was mentioned in the introduction. I am going to return to this below.

Now let's turn to their analysis. They write:

> The appeal to force fallacy usually accomplishes its purpose by psychologically impeding the reader or listener from acknowledging a missing premise that, if acknowledged, would be seen to be false or at least questionable. (p. 129)

This is a puzzling claim. Their general analysis of a fallacy of relevance, of which the ad baculum is the first example, is that the premises are psychologically but not logically relevant to the conclusion (p.129). In the ad hominem, for instance, the bad character of some arguer is not relevant to the non-character dependent arguments they make. We think it is relevant, in other words, when it is not. In the case of the ad baculum, however, the appeal to force *impedes* recognition of the questionable premise, rather than seeming or appearing relevant when it isn't. Hurley and Watson, somewhat admirably, hereby offer an attempt to explain why someone

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[3]I should note that much of the literature on the ad baculum has focused on the passive construction—some harm will come to him or her—makes this overly broad and so generates many obvious counterexamples. Arguments from consequences have the same structure. For instance, one might argue that drinking water from a certain source will lead to sickness. The fear of the sickness in this case is the harmful consequence that will be visited upon their head. More pointedly, threats in the course of negotiation also have the same structure. For example, "if you do no accept our demand that you raise salaries, you will face a strike." Clearly, in this case, the pressure of the strike is the reason offered for accepting the conclusion (the higher wage). These are exactly the same because the threat will be enforced by the person doing the threatening, whereas the first case the treat will be realized as a matter of fact: if you drink dirty water from the river, nature will enforce the threat and make you sick.

would be duped by an ad baculum: they are duped because they're afraid. If they were not afraid, one might imagine, then they would notice how bad the argument is. Fallacies, if they're going to be fallacies, ought to be *deceptive*. I am going to argue a bit later that the ad baculum is indeed deceptive. It's just not deceptive here. And it's not even supposed to be. It wouldn't work if it were so. More on that later. Let's look at the reconstruction:

> If my brother forces you to admit that *Sesame Street* is the best show on TV, then *Sesame Street* is in fact the best show.

> If I succeed in threatening you, then you support the bill to reduce inheritance taxes (p.130)

The reconstruction, they argue, makes it clear that the premise—which is the force—does not imply the conclusion. It's worth noting that the reconstruction is different in a few important ways from the original arguments. The original arguments had two different conclusions. In the first case it was the belief that *Sesame Street* was the best show; in the second, the willingness to support the inheritance tax bill.[4] The term "support" is notoriously vague in this context. It can mean that one merely favors something (I support the new President) or that they will engage in certain actions. The ambiguity of the term makes this somewhat maddening. The first version of the *Sesame Street* case has the kid believing that it's the best show as the conclusion. I think, in other words, Hurley and Watson have missed what is interesting about their cases. Part of the reason for this is their informal logic approach: the failure needs to be captured in a scheme and the scheme is a sorry method for capturing this sort of failure. Another reason they miss what is interesting about their cases is that they're unclear as to whether they mean to explain the why ad baculum arguments are persuasive as a psychological matter, or how they fail as a logical matter. The very idea of fallacy theory is that these failures match up—something that fails logically happens at the same time to succeed psychologically.

The main reason, however, is that they didn't ask themselves what the cases are about. I mean, why would someone threaten someone in order that they believe something? That's psychologically impossible (or at least very difficult) and, as argumentative matter, pointless. The *Sesame Street* enforcer, we have to imagine, must know this fact about beliefs and so have some other scope in mind. Given the limited nature of the example, it's hard to see what it might be. But one thing that would make sense is that the addressee's acceptance of the proposition has some kind of value. Our interests, after all, in having our conclusions accepted by others is not limited to those with whom we directly interact. Argument is a great way to spread the word. What is curious about the ad baculum, as the present cases might have shown, is that we can convert non reasons (threats) into reasons. This is clearly the case with Senator Casey. There is value in his action of supporting something. Another less obvious, but equally valuable outcome is the ethotic character of his supporting something. In other words, the fact that the esteemed Senator Casey deems some bill worthy of his support is a fact an onlooker might take into

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[4]For what it's worth—and this has been noted by Wreen neither of these so reconstructed are arguments, at least according to the criteria laid out by Hurley and Watson—they're conditional propositions. The second argument, moreover, such as it is, seems perfectly fine. If indeed they succeed in threatening the luckless Senator Casey, then he's going to support the bill. Supporting is an action, again, like voting, or uttering other sentences to the effect the bill ought to be passed. It's worth noting in passing that the first example, by contrast, makes a rather different claim from its reconstruction. The idea now is that *Sesame Street* is in fact the best show, not merely that the poor bullied kid must believe that.

account when thinking about it. In other words, the mere acceptance of the proposition, which the Senator is able to do under compulsion, has potential epistemic value for someone else. The same could be said of the *Sesame Street* case, even though it's harder to imagine who the audience might be. Perhaps the addressee's supporting the superiority of *Sesame Street* has some significance to playground fence-riders or *Sesame Street* skeptics. Knowing (or rather believing) that the addressee is a supporter might make the difference in their reasoning. They, after all, won't know about the forced nature of the commitment, so it will seem to them like plausible ethotic evidence. Whatever the case, the scheme framework employed by Hurley and Watson make this kind of analysis very difficult.

3. Dialogue Shifting

It's seems obviously true that there exist cases where someone tries to force another to adopt a standpoint. It seems also plausible to say that one reason they do this is to achieve some argumentative purpose. I propose that this argumentative purpose is to make their view more acceptable in the minds of another audience. But, as we've seen, it is difficult to see this in a schematic account such as the one offered by Hurley and Watson. In order to see this, we have to have a view to the purposes of exchanging reasons. For this reason, Walton and Krabbe's concept of dialogue shift offers, I think, an interesting way to represent what is going on dialectically with the ad baculum. Since dialogues are normative models for conversation, i.e., for how conversations ought to go as defined by their purposes, errors will occur when participants illegitimately (i.e., without permission or warning) shift from one kind of dialogue to another. Walton and Krabbe envision dialogue shifting as a model for characterizing informal fallacies (1995: 2). One answer to this question is that there has been a dialectical shift that has gone unnoticed by the participants (1995: 114-115). The second factor leverages the shifting context to explain the success of the fallacy deployment. Because fallacious moves are sometimes legitimate, an interlocutor may be duped into taking them to be valid. Critically, in its fallacious use, the shift is *covert, unilateral, or not agreed upon.* The heart of the deception, on this new account, is to shift the context of the argument in a way that the interlocutor doesn't notice. This feature—the deception feature—which is a central part of the traditional account, retains its place in this dialogical account. The interesting thing about the ad baculum, I shall argue here, involves the blending and confusion of dialogue purposes over time and space. So, roughly: A and B have one kind of dialogue, then B and C have another on the basis of the original dialogue.

An enlightening comparison case to the ad baculum is what Walton and Krabbe call the "Fallacy of Bargaining." This happens when one attempts "to replace an offer for an argument" (1995 p. 104). In a very general sense, the fallacy of bargaining occurs when a critical discussion illicitly slips into a negotiation. Given a dialogical approach to fallacies such as that of Walton and Krabbe, the most direct way for this to occur is when one participant in a critical discussion demands of the other that they meet half-way, or compromise, on some standpoint. Consider the following example:

> Brava: We're not getting anywhere by arguing like this and it's impossible that both of us are right. Since I argue the cause of the war was states' rights and you slavery, why don't we compromise and say it was partly states' rights and partly slavery?

Brava's offer to split the difference constitutes a dialogue shift. Her approach misunderstands or twists the purpose of a critical discussion, where the aim of each participant is to persuade the other of the truth or correctness of their position. The aim of the negotiation, in contrast, is to make a deal, and making concessions such as these is critical to that. Brava's move wouldn't be out of place in a negotiation over the price of something, for example. So this seems like a clear instance in which an argument is suitable in one context but not in another.

While dialogue shifts by participants of dialogues within dialogues are certainly common, as we have seen, they are easily detectable by minimally competent participants. Consider again Brava's attempt to shift the dialogue to negotiation. If Abela has any sense, she will notice the attempt "to trade an offer for an argument." Such shifts are indeed comically obvious. Imagine a case where an atheist is in a disagreement over the number of gods with an Olympian polytheist; they can hardly split the difference at 6 gods.[5] Let's see how this might work in the case of an ad baculum. Take the following for example between Frank Forthright, chief of compliance department at the Globex Corporation and Assistant Divisional Chief, Mr. Malafide.

> Forthright: Mr. Malafide, I'd like to show you some of my lab results. As you can see from the chart, there is a high presence of estradiol—known to cause deformities in frogs—in our plant's waste water discharge. I have concluded that we are to blame for the recent deformities discovered in the frog population.

> Mr. Malafide: I don't agree with your reasoning, Frank. Left out of your analysis are the deep cuts we will have to make to this department if we have to comply with the law. Further, you're not considering the financial hardship your family will face should this information get leaked to the public.

Malafide's attempted ad baculum is, like all ad baculums of this sort, a strategy to change what ought to be an epistemic question about the cause of frog deformity into a practical discussion of Forthright's future at Globex Corporation. What is crucial is that the success of this strategy *relies* on Forthright's recognition of the changing context. If he didn't notice the shift, a clueless Forthright might puzzle over how Malafide means to offer a meaningful objection and fail to see that Malafide means to coerce him to take a particular *course of action*. Far from being an unannounced shift in dialogue with the intent to fool its victim into taking the bait, the ad baculum is patently obvious shift in dialogue.

Another feature of the exchange that reveals the obviousness of the offer-for-an-argument ploy is the actual target of the offer. As we have discussed above, central to the conception of dialogue at issue here is the concept of commitment. Dialogues concern commitments or standpoints of the participants. Commitments are not psychological entities and are freely adopted and abandoned, though they have logical properties (Hamblin 1970: 264; see also Walton & Krabbe 1995: 21). Commitments are central to the concept of a dialogue theory in part for this very reason. You can move them like pieces in a game. Crucially, you can adopt commitments that you do not believe. In other words, the notion that commitments can be traded freely in an argument is a feature, not a bug, of dialogue theory.

By contrast, no party to a dialogue about *beliefs* is able to negotiate them because beliefs are involuntarily held. While it is true that beliefs can be occasioned by deviant causal chains, where they are brought about indirectly, in general beliefs track *reasons* or at least *the*

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[5]This is Scott Aikin's joke.

appearance of reasons. In trading an offer for an argument one is not tracking reasons and this is plainly obvious. Mr. Malafide knows that Forthright isn't going to change his mind. It doesn't matter anyway, because all Mr. Malafide needs is for Forthright to change his public commitments. This would mean that Forthright ceases to claim that the frogs have been poisoned by Globex and, among other things, to stop using this claim as a premise in other reasoning (Cohen 1992: 4).[6] The upshot of this is that while Malafide cannot directly cause Forthright to change his belief with an inducement or threat, he can more directly control the beliefs of others further down the conversational chain. In the present case, it's likely that people who become aware of Globex corporation's malfeasance will respond accordingly. But if Malafide deprives of them of the opportunity to respond to the evidence, then he has effectively controlled their beliefs. In effect, Malafide's ad baculum is not directed at Forthright so much as it is at other potential participants in their extended dialogue. It is directed at them by excluding them. Crucially, they are not observers or witnesses, as the ad baculum would then prove equally ineffective.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I've approached what I take to be an underappreciated problem with the ad baculum fallacy, namely the fact that you cannot force an interlocutor to believe something. The existence of ad baculum cases, however, cries out for some kind of explanation. I've argued that the ad baculum stratagem (maybe we should call it a gambit) should be understood in light of its broader dialogical purposes. This means that the ad baculum actually involves three parties: the two just mentioned and the audience of (B), the respondent. While the respondent can never take force as inducements to *believe* p, they can take them as reasons to *commit* to p. Their commitment to p may then seen by their audience as evidence for p—the fact that Joe Schmo supports the bill is good reason to think that the bill is a good one.

A second consequence is that force, threat, sanction is not the operative feature in this scheme. This three-party scheme works just as well with bribery or arguments *ad carotam* (as Bermejo-Luque 2008 has suggested). The key fact this that someone can voluntarily trade their commitment to some proposition to avoid harm (in the case of the ad baculum) or for some gain (in the case of the ad *carotam*). This is why Walton and Krabbe assimilated ad baculum arguments to "the fallacy of trading an offer for an argument." The trick of the ad baculum gambit (after all it could backfire) is to convert a negotiated or purchased commitment into evidence.

The expanded conception of the ad baculum has another consequence. Most accounts of the ad baculum focus on the irrelevance of the threat of force to the truth or acceptability of some claim. This is certainly true, but the broader goal of the ad baculum is to misrepresent the dialectical state of play. It means to give the impression that a certain standpoint has more (or fewer) true adherents than it actually does. A broader view of the ad baculum, if anything, shows that the inadequacy of the two approaches we have discussed to represent it. As Wreen's many detailed analyses of ad baculum argument have shown, if you consider the ad baculum as an argument scheme, you will never capture what is attractive about it. It will always turn up as a

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[6]This passage captures the distinction between beliefs and commitments succinctly: "To accept the proposition or rule of inference that *p* is to treat it as given that *p*. More precisely, to accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that *p*—i.e., of including that proposition or rule among ones premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, *whether or not one feels it to be true that p*." (4; emphasis added).

perfectly reasonable means-end piece of reasoning. Walton's dialogue approach fairs no better at capturing it, because the real target of the ad baculum is not, indeed, cannot be there.

If I've made any worthwhile points here, and I have my doubts, it's that sometimes the approach to argument analysis in informal logic suffers from what we might call methodological individualism. Even dialogue theory, with its deeper reach into the structure and purpose of persuasive communication, stops its analysis at the end of individual argument encounters. Argumentative exchanges are not necessarily exhausted when the addressee has received the message. To explain the effect of the ad baculum, it would have to construct a new encounter where the defect is the insincere commitment—the ad hominem does just this. But that doesn't do justice to the strategy of the one who employs the ad baculum. I think our arguments are fundamentally meant to outlive our encounters. And I don't think, this is unique to the ad baculum. Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse have made a similar case with regard to other fallacies (such as the ad hominem), arguing that even the dialectical model, itself an expansion, incompletely represents the dialectical situation (2019: 181). With the straw man, for example, the purpose is to misrepresent the quality of an addressee's argument to an onlooking audience. In contrast to the ad baculum, however, it is most effective when the addressee is absent and so not able to defend themselves. For the ad baculum, a critical part of the strategy, however, is that the target audience isn't there.

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