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# MILL'S TREATMENT OF FALLACIES: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR MARIE SECOR'S ANALYSIS

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Professor Marie Secor's analysis of John Stuart Mill's treatment of fallacies promotes a rhetorical perspective that is well argued. As an extension of her earlier examination of Bentham's discussion of fallacies (1989), the argument that errors in reasoning can and should be analyzed as instances of rhetoric as well as logic is compelling. In the case of Mill, Secor also goes further than prior studies by Michael Schmidt (1987), Giora Hon (1991) and Hans Hansen and Robert Pinto (1995) in describing the taxonomy Mill offers and in analyzing the value of his contribution. In responding to her specific discussion of Mill, my purpose is not to contravene her analysis, but rather to offer some modest correctives to the conclusions drawn by both her and prior scholars regarding the nature and scope of Mill's examination of fallacious reasoning.

As Secor has noted, Hansen and Pinto (1995) argue that "there is for the first time the creation of a *category* of inductive fallacies, and the classificatory scheme is revised again to accord with Mill's attempt to treat the fallacies of induction on a par with those of deduction" (p. 16). They go on to argue that Mill's view is "decidedly undialectical" and that, as a consequence of his theory of induction, his account cannot be seen as "shallow and unoriginal" (pp. 17-18). In contrast, Hon (1991) argues that while "whoever is interested in the problem of error in experimentation will look forward to examining Mill's study" of fallacies, the "disappointment is, however, considerable" (p. 265). Schmidt's (1987) offers a brief synopsis of Mill's classification scheme as part of a larger discussion of the various means of classifying fallacies, but does not further characterize his contribution. Secor follows more closely Hansen and Pinto in arguing that Mill offers a "pre-dialectical" conception of fallacies. She goes on to note that while his scheme appears to eschew rhetoric, his actual discussion enjoins discursive analysis almost of necessity.

The observation that Mill's treatment has been ignored is true enough, though I'm not entirely convinced by the reasons Hansen and Pinto (1995) offer. They suggest that Mill's denial of deduction as a form of inferential reasoning has not been accepted, hence his treatment of fallacies has been ignored (p. 18). If that were true, one would suspect that his treatment of logic, on which inference is grounded, would also be ignored. Given the amount of scholarship on that larger issue, it would seem that his view of inference is not implicated as a rationale for ignoring Book V of the *System of Logic*. They also suggest, contrary to Hon's view, that perhaps his emphasis on science rather than on public deliberation may be a reason for some to ignore his view. That rationale as well appears weak, as one could dispute it on the grounds that science historians have not seen fit to analyze the contribution any more than logicians or rhetoricians, as well as on the grounds that the emphasis on science vs. public in the illustrations offered in Book V is overstated. Secor concludes that "Mill's treatment of fallacy has much to recommend it." While I agree with Secor's observation, I'm not as sympathetic to the reasons offered for its long absence from consideration. I suspect it has been ignored more because it is decidedly unremarkable than for any other reason.

How should, then, one characterize Mill's examination of fallacies? That it is unremarkable would seem contrary

to the prior evaluations, with the possible exception of Hon's (1991) analysis. Lest my own view seems to support Hon's, I will examine his perspective, then will deal more precisely with Hansen and Pinto's view before returning to Secor's analysis.

Hon (1991) indicts Mill for failing to follow through on his empirical orientation in handling the issue of fallacies: "Although Mill advocates an empirical doctrine, he nevertheless addresses himself explicitly to the problem of fallacy . . . and not to that of error, let alone experimental error" (p. 265). If Hon's account is true, one can still ask what he would expect Mill to do in the context of an examination of the principles of logic? The criticism bears more on Hon's misunderstanding or lack of knowledge concerning what one would reasonably expect to find in an otherwise relatively common treatment of fallacies. To critique one for not writing what one has little reason to expect in a particular context is a poor rationale in any case, and especially so in this one. The more critical point, however, is that Mill does focus attention on the outcome of science: the defeasibility of our judgments regarding any hypotheses. In concluding a discussion of "the principles of a philosophical language" just prior to embarking on the consideration of fallacies, Mill notes that "the general propositions of all other sciences [excepting geometry and algebra] are true only hypothetically, supposing that no counteracting cause happens to interfere" (Bk IV, C6, s6, p. 711).<sup>1</sup> While Hon recognizes Mill's point that errors are defeasible, he does not properly appreciate the general connection between Mill's observations concerning erroneous reasoning and the errors that might arise more precisely within scientific experimentation. That is to say, Mill does not have to address science per se to comprise its general tendencies in an analysis of the ways in which inferences go awry. After all, hypotheses and conclusions drawn from them are about the evidence generated to support the judgment, and fallacies are about the same class of relationships. Hon further draws the wrong conclusions about the general tenor of Mill's consideration of fallacies in claiming that "the underlying criterion for Mill is logical" and that there is an "imbalanced and predisposed [treatment] toward the ratiocinative element" (p. 267). Frankly, one wonders if Hon read Book V in arriving at this judgment, as the treatment of ratiocinative errors is only one of five subdivisions and is secondary to those fallacies treated together as inductive.

Hansen and Pinto (1995) provide a concise summary of Mill's perspective on fallacies. Whether it is fair to suggest that, as they say, "obviously, Mill sees himself as the first to give a systematic account of the fallacies from an inductivist point of view" is accurate is unclear. In his otherwise lengthy *Autobiography*, Mill only briefly addresses the composition of the entire *System of Logic*, and references the section on fallacies, which he refers to as a "Chapter" and not a full-fledged "Book" only twice. In noting that Whately had rehabilitated the study of logic and that Whewell had stimulated interest in induction, Mill goes on to suggest that he foresaw little interest in his work:

A treatise, however, on a matter so abstract, could not be expected to be popular; it could only be a book for students, and students on such subjects were not only (at least in England) few, but addicted chiefly to the opposite school of metaphysics, the ontological and "innate principles" school. I therefore did not expect that the book would have many readers, or approvers; and looked for little practical effect from it, save that of keeping the tradition unbroken of what I thought a better philosophy. (I, C7, p. 231).

While this does not prove the opposite case that Mill did not see himself in a particular way, it does lend some support to the possibility that Mill did *not* mark for himself, a specific or particular role in adding to knowledge about fallacies, much less claim for himself to be the first to systematically address it in inductive fashion. Considering the high repute he held Whately's *Elements of Logic* in, as clearly indicated in his *Autobiography* as well as in his 1828 review, it is more than likely the case that Mill did not see his contribution in anything other

than a perfunctory playing out of what was already logically required within his philosophical orientation. Mill's comments in reviewing Whately's *Elements* are instructive. Mill argues that, prior to Whately, fallacies had been treated rather shabbily by logicians as they neglected to devise

the means of distinguishing *what kind* of fallacy it was, in what *cases* such a fallacy was most to be apprehended, and by what previous habits the mind might be, with the greatest probable efficacy, protected against its approach. . . . [The treatment of fallacies] abounds with apt examples and illustrations drawn from almost all the most interesting subjects in the range of human knowledge, and is interspersed with many just and acute observations on the errors of controversialists, the mental habits by which the liability to be deceived by fallacies is heightened or decreased, and the general regulation of the intellectual fallacies. (V 7, pp. 29-30)

What I wish to claim, using this as evidence, is that Mill did exactly what he saw Whately doing in the earlier *Elements*—no more and no less. The specific phrase that is most important is "by what previous habits the mind might be . . . protected against its approach." If Mill's treatment is read from this description of what a section on fallacies should accomplish, it will suggest a much different reading than that provided by other theorists, and to a certain degree, by Secor's analysis. This reading does not single out the work as a special kind, nor does it grant Mill special status in writing on fallacies from within his inductivist framework. Further, it does not suggest that Mill invented anything new or unusual because of his inductive philosophy. The fallacies he treats exist where they are as a logical consequence of his philosophy; while Whately may treat the same errors of inference from the framework of deductive logic, Mill moves them to induction where they concern inferences from specific observation (or mal-observation) and generalization. He reserves them for what he refers to as *à priori* fallacies of simple inspection, of ratiocination, and of confusion when the primary emphasis in making the error does not admit of inductive explanation. What is clear is that Mill does see himself advancing on those who only treated ratiocinative fallacies, as he notes that he is among those "who profess to treat of the whole process" (Bk V, C1, s1, p. 736). As a final indication of his rationale, consider his opening remarks in writing on fallacies: "the practice is too well worthy of observance, to allow our departing from it" (Bk V, C. 1, s1, p. 735). From the perspective of "being the first" or of congratulating himself for a new approach, there is little evidence that this was a motivating factor in the classification scheme adopted.

As noted earlier, Secor and Hansen and Pinto characterize Mill as taking an "undialectical" approach toward the analysis of fallacies. In Secor's case, the argument is supported by what Mill claims in defining the arena to be covered. In responding to this argument, I will advance three observations.

First, as suggested above, Mill is concerned with the "habits of mind" that would allow an otherwise sincere and well-meaning person to reason wrongly. As Secor notes, he refers to the manner in which the mind is persuaded when there is little reason to support that persuasion. A distinction drawn by Stephen Toulmin is relevant to this discussion: the difference between mistaken and improper claims (1958). Mistaken claims are those which one could claim are defeasible: the evidence seems sufficient, and the process of justifying a conclusion is well handled. But the conclusion turns out wrong. Improper claims, on the other hand, occur when the evidence is not examined in the manner warranted by the context, or the processes that would normally be applied are not taken into consideration. I think that what Mill is saying with respect to being persuaded parallels Toulmin's distinction. Fallacies are those judgments arrived at improperly. This does not imply a formal set of logical rules for ascertaining judgment, though those could be implicated. Rather, it implies a set of practices, often conventional, which an otherwise well-intended person does not employ in arriving at a justified belief or action. Thus, the initial "set-aside" with respect to what will be considered are those beliefs which are the result of mistakes.

The second observation concerns the divorce of "moral" reasons for error, what Mill refers to more precisely one "branch of . . . the Philosophy of Error" (V, C1, s3, p. 737). He is concerned, in general, with these sources of error, but they do not, as he notes, pertain directly to the habits which cause errors in inference or reasoning. These latter are directed by the intellect: "every erroneous inference, *though originating in moral causes*, involves the intellectual operation of admitting insufficient evidence as sufficient" (italics mine; V, C1, s3, pp. 738-739). As this should suggest, Mill is not indifferent to morality or the ethical norms in arguing or persuading others; rather, he believes that his discussion of the intellectual operations encompasses the moral, and hence will ultimately culminate in a judgment that illustrates the property of the evidence that has been misused in fallacious reasoning (see his "Use and Abuse of Political Terms," Vol. 19).

The third observation brings us to the heart of the matter: Secor's claim that Mill, while taking a non-"dialogic" (and there is a difference between dialectic and dialogic that is conflated here without clear explanation) approach, does nonetheless "critique field-dependent practices and ideologies". Of course he does, as his approach, like Whately's, is intended to root out the sources of error, and those sources are implicated in a discussion of how people came to reason the way they did. In his review of Whately, and in his own defense, Mill takes pains to point out that his approach is not to be confused with arguing opinions for one specific belief or another. He notes in the review that Whately was accused of arguing for particular beliefs, and, in denying that on Whately's behalf, takes pains over a decade later to set himself apart from such criticism: "Logic is not concerned with the false opinions which people happen to entertain, but with the manner in which they come to entertain them" (V, C1, s1, p. 740). If what Hansen and Pinto mean by dialectics or dialogism is the argument over the truth or falsity of facts and opinions about facts, then Mill's treatment, as Whately's before his, is not intended to be dialectic, nor should it be expected to concern dialectic interchanges. That does not, in itself, mean that one does not discuss feelings, motives, morals, or other grounds for the adoption of a belief as one attempts to ferret out the "property in evidence" that warrants the error. Secor observes, correctly, that Mill's "separation of fallacy from dialogic argumentation" isolates it from discursive exchanges. True, but this is not a compelling rationale for criticism. What is conflated is the realm of "proper argument" and, given the skill to argue properly, the defeasibility of one's positions when taken into the marketplace of argumentation; it is the latter which is tested in the marketplace of ideas. The former is the means by which one approaches the marketplace with sound ideas, so far as one has had the opportunity to properly adduce their "truth." What one next requires is to check ideas against those held by others to ascertain their truth potential. These are separate processes, though not, as Secor has correctly noted, entirely capable of being separated in the examination of why judgment goes awry when taken to the marketplace. The dialectic tension in the first instance is between the mind's operation as it should occur in following established or reasonable practices, and the mind's operation in deviating from that path. As Mill is at pains to note, this is a common problem in everyday reasoning, hence one would expect to find it in the "give and take" of discursive practice. In focusing on errors, it does not follow that such focus means the process takes place "independently of rhetorical concerns." It may, given Mill's avowed separation between rhetoric and logic (a separation that follows Whately's belief that logic investigates while rhetoric manages the results of investigation). Separate treatment does not, in itself, allow the conclusion that the processes operate separately, as we know from reading Aristotle: to presume that ethics is not the concern of a rhetor, given its absence in the *Rhetoric*, is an insupportable presumption. Hence, while the focus is on procedure, the very use of examples implicates the processes of argument; in fact, Mill cannot avoid expression given his discussion of the relevance of naming to the process of thought. To illustrate non-observation, he must illustrate its absence in expression; to illustrate infelicitous phrasing in a fallacy of confusion, he must provide a "real" example of its occurrence. The distinction drawn by Secor, in my reading, is too fine a line to sustain.

Secor is on very solid ground in her detailed examination of the fallacies as classified by Mill. My slight deviations

from the overall characterization of Mill's purpose aside, the elaboration of Mill's definitions and illustrations is definitive in its comprehensiveness and astute analysis. My response to the fallacies per se will be neither as comprehensive nor as detailed.

The parallel between Mill's *à priori* fallacies and Aristotle's rhetorical enthymemes is well taken. The only additional point that might be made is that Mill's rejection of these arguments, indeed, his naming them *à priori*, is consistent with his own philosophy. Mill points out in his *Autobiography* that his *System of Logic* was intended to combat what he terms "the German, or *à priori* view of human knowledge" (Vol 1, C7, p. 233). Knowledge, for Mill, is derived from experience, not from *à priori* assumptions. Secor's point that Mill does argue from an ideological base at times is well taken, especially in discussing issues he feels strongly about, is well taken. The point to keep in mind is that his speculation on motive for argument is separate from the rationale he offers for designating a specific argument as fallacious. Thus, the motive for a belief regarding the argument differs from the criteria for judgment regarding its status as a fallacy.

The inductive fallacies depend on assumptions that, as Secor notes, Mill does not acknowledge. While he may justly believe that he is right in his analysis of economic theory, the positions he holds with respect to trade and other issues are subject to dispute. The only escape is into extreme relativism: what is a fallacy to one is not to another. Since Mill cannot take this position, his refuge from criticism will always be to experience: that his position is grounded on what experience teaches, and if one would only see as he sees, one would arrive at the correct conclusion.


In treating the fallacies of confusion, Mill is more heavily indebted to Whately than might be inferred from Secor's observation. To be precise, one might envision Mill writing this section with the *Elements* at his side, for in commenting on each type—ambiguity in language, on composition and division, circular reasoning and the appeal to ignorance—Whately is brought into the discussion.

In bringing this response to a close, the status of Mill's treatment of logic, and of fallacies in particular, needs to be clarified. While Secor does not label this a psychological-logic, her use of "mental universe" and "mental habits," as well as my own attention to "habits of the mind" may lead one to label his approach as mentalistic or vulnerable to a psychologistic fallacy. With respect to this issue, I would recommend Geoffrey Scarre's (1989) analysis of the reasons that while Mill's language leans in the direction of a psychological interpretation, the main emphasis of his logic is more complex. In Scarre's words: "In my view, he did *not* subscribe to psychologism in his philosophy of logic, and *a fortiori* did not attempt to conjoin psychologism with the idealist metaphysic to which at times he unquestionably did lean .... Mill's philosophy of logic is thoroughly realist, even though its realism is at odds with the idealist elements which also occur in his thought" (italics in original, p. 113). In my judgment, Scarre offers a compelling case for rejecting claims which place Mill's reference to intellectual operations within a psychologistic framework. The contradiction which Scarre rightly notes would not be perplexing to Mill: the world may be real and knowable, but our knowledge as derived from experience is so fraught with the possibilities of error as to make any claim to certainty outside the fields of geometry and algebra virtually impossible. Mill is sensitive to the influences that space and time have on the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn about, for example, economic theory and practice. His idealism, which Scarre sees in terms of the relativity of judgments about such issues, is drawn from experience, while his realism is drawn from his own commonsense observation that experience of the world is possible.

What, then, is our final judgment on the value of Mill's treatment of fallacies and its subsequent neglect since the

early 1840s? One of the reasons for its neglect may be, as Secor has so ably pointed out, that Mill is contentious in his analysis of what is and is not a fallacy. One might think otherwise: that if his analysis was in fact so contentious, there would have been greater commentary on the weaknesses of his judgments. It may also be that, once Whewell's response came out in 1850, the debate over the principle of induction took over the argumentative arena, and Mill's discussion of fallacies faded into the background. As implied earlier, it may also be that, Secor's analysis notwithstanding, the contribution was merely unremarkable. Nothing new was said that was not already known or believed by at least some of those inclined to read that section of the *Logic*. However one answers that question, Mill would not subscribe to the claim that naming an argument a fallacy is an invitation to argue, not its conclusion. He would accept a counter claim that renames the fallacy, but he would not accept the rhetorical position that Secor adopts in recognizing that fallacies are premised on standpoints, and if arguers are not embracing the same standpoint, naming the "other" as fallacious may stop the discussion, but it does not mean the argument has been answered. Recognizing Mill's discussion as rhetorical does not diminish his treatment of fallacies; rather, it deepens our understanding of the tension between naming an error in reasoning and commenting on the value of the position itself.

### *Note*

1. All references to Mill's *System of Logic* will be to Book, Chapter, Section and page; the source for pagination is the University of Toronto Press's *Collected Works*, Volume 7. All other references to Mill will be drawn from the *Collected Works*. 

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