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Commentary on Beam

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Commentary on: C. Beam's "The Fallacies of Pity and Fear: Logic, Sentiment, and Ethical Argument"

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Beam argues that in the domain of practical reasoning, and especially in ethical discussions, appeals to emotions play an important role. In his view, moral arguments often rely on different kinds of appeals to emotions:

- we appeal to pity if we want to suscite sympathy for human suffering;
- we appeal to fear if we want a person to realize that he should have prudential concern with how others will respond to his actions; and
- we appeal to authority and popularity in the context of law and democracy if we want to emphasize that the consensus of humanity should have a bearing on moral decisions.

The central problem for the the author is that, although appeals to emotions are considered as fallacies in traditional textbooks on logic and fallacies, they play a central role in moral discussions. So the question he wants to answer is when these appeals to emotions are problematic and when not.

The authors concludes that reliance on appeals to sympathy, prudence, or popularity is inescapable in moral argument, and can be perfectly valid. In his view, "there are subtle and crude versions of these appeals, but there is no purer, more rational and objective form of moral argument that transcends them." So, they are inescapable, necessary forms of arguing in moral discussions. Students should learn to critically assess why some are more cogent than others. Criteria of adequacy could be proposed. Students need to be warned that these appeals need to be evaluated critically in ethical contexts. Strategies should be outlined for arguing back against such appeals.

Critique and suggestions

I agree with the author that an appeal to sympathy, prudence, and authority or consensus of a majority can be an adequate way of defending a standpoint in certain contexts and that they can be fallacious in other contexts. I also agree with him that these forms of argumentation are no logical fallacies, but that it concerns forms of argumentation that can be correct or incorrect depending on the context in which they are used.

Therefore it is necessary to determine in which contexts such forms of argumentation are correct and contribute to a rational resolution of the dispute and in which contexts they should be considered as fallacious. In my view, with respect to this question the pragma-dialectical argumentation theory developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst in *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies* (1992) offers a systematic theoretical framework for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms of argumentation.

The pragma-dialectical theory considers fallacies as violations of a discussion rule, as

an incorrect discussion move, in a certain stage of a critical discussion aimed at the resolution of a dispute. A discussion move is incorrect if it frustrates in any way the resolution of the dispute. It does so if it violates a discussion rule which has the function of promoting the resolution of the dispute.

The advantage of this approach is that it makes it possible to distinguish between correct and incorrect forms of argumentation on the basis of a clear criterium: the question whether or not a discussion rule has been violated. Another advantage is that it can be explained why the discussion move is incorrect by explaining in which way it frustrates the resolution of the dispute.

Different forms of appeal to emotions amount to different violations of different discussion rules because they frustrate the resolution in a different way.

I will consider the different forms of an appeal to emotions discussed by Beam and explain in the context of which pragma-dialectical discussion rules they should be located. I will show that they can form violations of different rules of discussion and that they can frustrate the resolution in different ways. On the basis of this analysis it becomes clear that to be able to establish the fallaciousness of these forms of argumentation it must be determined in which context they are used and which common starting points and evaluation criteria are operative in a particular discussion.

Appeals to pity and appeals to fear

The first category described by Beam, the appeals to pity and fear, constitute a fallacy if they are a violation of Rule 4 that formulates the requirement that the argumentation in a critical discussion must genuinely pertain to the disputed standpoint:

Rule 4:

A party may defend his standpoint only by advancing argumentation relating to that standpoint.¹

Rule 4 can be violated when the standpoint is defended by means other than argumentation. If this is the case, we are confronted with nonargumentative means of persuasion.

The fallacy committed by using nonargumentative means of persuasion is that a real resolution of the dispute is prevented because the standpoint is not being defended by means of rational arguments. If there is no serious attempt to rationally justify or refute a disputed claim, the difference of opinion cannot be resolved in a rational way. These nonargumentative means of persuasion are often aimed at a third party, they are often used as rhetorical techniques to gain victory in the eyes of an audience of outsiders. This is often done when the protagonist plays on the emotions and prejudices of the audience.

Playing on the emotions of the audience can be appeals to 'positive' emotions such as feelings of safety and loyalty, and they can be appeals to 'negative' emotions such as fear, greed, and shame. Often it is enough to give these emotions 'presence' without linking them explicitly to the defended standpoint. The audience will itself make the desired connection with the standpoint at issue. By manipulating the audience in this way, the protagonist can try to get his standpoint accepted without really defending it.

So, these techniques can be fallacious if they take the place of argumentation. They can be correct if they are only used to emphasize certain common starting points when there is also argumentation put forward.

Appeals to authority and popularity

The second category described by Beam, the appeals to authority and popular opinion, constitute a fallacy if they are a violation of Rule 7 that formulates the requirement that a disputed standpoint can only be defended by argumentation that is based on an appropriate argumentation scheme:

Rule 7:

A party may not regard a standpoint as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied.²

In arguments from authority, someone's expertise or special position is treated as a sign that the proposition ascribed to him is acceptable. The proposition is regarded as acceptable because an authoritative source says it. To be able to use this argumentation scheme in the defense of a standpoint, it is necessary that the antagonist recognizes it as sound. If the protagonist chooses it even though he knows that this is not so, he is guilty of a violation of rule 7 known as *argumentum ad verecundiam*.

Another body of authority is the number of people who believe something: Something is so, or good, because everybody thinks it is so, or good. If it is inappropriate to adduce the premise that the mass of the people is decisive as an extra (so far unexpressed) premise to the argumentation, then the wrong argumentation scheme has been chosen. This particular violation of Rule 7 constitutes a variant of the *argumentum ad verecundiam* that is known as *argumentum ad populum*. Because of its appeal to the mass of the people, this form of the *argumentum ad populum* is also described as the *populistic fallacy*.

So, from a pragma-dialectical perspective both groups of fallacies addressed by Beam imply that the protagonist in a discussion wrongly assumes or wrongly pretends that he is using an appropriate form of argumentation. A violation of Rule 4 implies that there is no argumentation, a violation of Rule 7 implies that there is inappropriate argumentation.

As I have shown, the pragma-dialectical theory clarifies that there are various appeals to emotions, and that to establish whether they constitute a fallacy it is first necessary to determine what exactly happens in the discussion and whether the behaviour forms a violation of a discussion rule.

So, taking into account these pragma-dialectical insights, I think Beam needs to clarify certain points in his endeavor to develop a theory about certain types of fallacies of pity and fear in the context of ethical discussions.

First, he must clarify the common aspects of the two categories of fallacies that, in his view, appeal in some way to the emotions of the audience. As presented here, the two categories do not seem to have much in common, apart from the fact that they often occur in ethical discussions. As we have seen, the first category of fallacies that appeal to emotions, the fallacies of pity and fear, can be considered as a violation of a discussion rule because they do not constitute a rational method of convincing but play on emotions that are not relevant to the standpoint. The second category, the fallacies of authority and popularity, can be considered as a violation of a discussion rule because an authority or the *communis opinio* is, erroneously, presented as conclusive proof. Something is presented as a common argumentation method which is not so.

Second, he must clarify why the discussed argumentation techniques are correct in certain cases and incorrect in other cases. As I have shown, this can be done by explaining in

which way a particular discussion move frustrates the resolution of a difference of opinion. In this way, clear criteria for criticizing certain forms of these arguments could be developed and it could be investigated how incorrect forms could be refuted by counter-arguments.

The suggested additions also involve a critical analysis of actual moral discussions. With respect to rule 4 it should be investigated in which moral contexts reference to emotions is relevant as an argument for defending a standpoint. With respect to rule 7 it should be found out when authorities and the opinion of the majority can be an adequate argument for accepting a standpoint. On the basis of an analysis of the context in which the argumentation is used and on the basis of the evaluation criteria that are relevant in a specific context it should be established how these arguments are used and in which cases they form a constructive contribution and in which cases they obstruct the resolution of the difference of opinion.

Notes

1. See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992:132 ff.).
2. See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992:160).