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The Theory of Incorrect Reasoning in the Linguistic Philosophy of the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the mechanisms of incorrect and misleading reasoning described first by the Port-Royal authors and then by Locke in his *Essay on human understanding*. The analysis was conducted with particular reference to argumentative fallacies - which are widespread today in information and communication policies - and to the abuse of words, i.e., when the speaker uses a word by changing its meaning to suit his purposes. These strategies are used to influence people's behaviour and forge public opinion in ways advantageous to political power systems; identifying and explaining these strategies is one of the crucial tasks of critical thought today.

Keywords: Manipulation, Rhetoric, Political Communication, Fallacies

Introduction

One of the most representative works of 17th-century European linguistic thought is Antoin Arnauld and Pierre Nicole's *Logique* (1662). Springing from the Cartesian milieu of Port Royal Abbey, the text is a compilation and redevelopment of a set of themes and models: the parallelism between thought and language; language considered as an imperfect code - i.e., a communication tool that tends to evade the users' control -; and an admonition against possible abuses of language stemming from its vulnerability to all sorts of degenerations and fallacies (Auroux, 1993).

These last two points in particular pertain to a general position we call "communication scepticism" (Taylor, 1992, p. 42-45), which the *Logique* interprets and asserts. It entails a problematic conception of communication, viewed as an interactive process disturbed by various factors that make it a questionable and risky business with often-uncertain and contradictory results. In fact, it is rare, if not impossible, to find two human beings who use the same words and syntax to express the exact same things. In many cases, the semantic indeterminacy of words leads to misunderstanding, incomprehension and confusion, because each person has his own cultural frame of reference and his own private linguistic repertoire, which reflects his unique and irreducible identity. The problem is made all the more acute and pressing by the persuasive force that words can unleash - in other words, the effects

that words can have on our lives. The authors of the *Logique* rightly included an analysis of the power of words in a more general reflection on language and its role in the construction – and the disruption – of social ties. This reflection involves analysis of persuasive mechanisms and techniques at both the cognitive level, in terms of how words condition our expectations and beliefs, and the pragmatic level, when they influence our behaviour (Meyer, 2004, p. 115-24).

The question seems even more pertinent today if we consider the fact that the reasons put forward in support of a message intended to persuade determine the quality of the persuasion itself. More and more often we find that in public discourse, the reasons brought to bear to convince the listener regarding a given opinion – and to induce him to act in a given way – are qualitatively distorted. One example is the deceptive manipulation that distorts the listener's view of the world to induce him to pursue the manipulator's objective under the illusion that it is his own. In such cases, the manipulator makes use of argumentative fallacies, or arguments which, although incorrect, seem psychologically persuasive: they are psychological as well as linguistic in nature, and are generally expressed in a spirit of contradiction, or in exasperating discussion¹.

This matter is common terrain to both logic and rhetoric, identified and described in the foundational work on the art of speaking, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, to which Arnauld and Nicole repeatedly refer. Aristotle had written that both dialectic and rhetoric deal with the problem of clearly distinguishing "the real from the apparent means of persuasion" (*Rhet* 1355b), and thus have the common purpose of not confusing apparent syllogism with actual syllogism. For rhetoric, the means of distinguishing between the two types of manipulation - which tend to overlap in common usage, while they should in fact be carefully distinguished from one another – depends on the hermeneutical function which, along with persuasion, is its characteristic element (Reboul, 1991, p. 23-24).

The theory of argumentative fallacies

Arnauld and Nicole's work contains extensive and detailed examples of fallacies with which we may seek to win disputes by flustering our adversary, or by bringing listeners over to our side with reasoning and argumentation that varies from the captious and irrelevant to the incorrect and untruthful. These two chapters are central to understanding the overall purpose of the *Logique*: to construct a treatise that gives men the tenets of the most perfect form of communication possible. This work can thus be considered a true treatise on rhetoric and the sociology of communication. These incorrect forms of argument are important to study, given that the traps they lay can be better avoided once they are clearly understood. The Port-Royal authors' critical examination is worth pondering even today, since the fallacies

¹ There is ample, well-developed literature on fallacious argumentation; for this work we kept in mind two texts in particular now considered classics: Hamblin (1970) and Copi & Cohen (1964, p. 167-215).

they identified are still widely used in public discourse, tainting its credibility and usefulness. Consider, for example, the cases of the *Non causa pro causa* argument, and of “faulty generalisation”.

The first of these entails confusing something that is not the cause for the cause, or asserting that one thing causes another without sufficient reason. For example, the assertion that the increase in acid rain is due to the expansion of the “hole in the ozone layer” is unacceptable, because while it is true that acid rain is increasing, and it is also true that the “hole in the ozone layer” is expanding, acid rain is the result of industrial emissions, which are also responsible for the hole in the ozone layer – which does not mean that the hole in the ozone layer is the cause of acid rain. The fallacy can also take the form known as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, in which one takes for granted that a causal relationship corresponds to a temporal relationship, without giving any element of proof and actually pretending that the two types of relationships are interchangeable. “After which” is taken to mean “due to which” – for example, “Demades declared that the policy of Demosthenes was the cause of all the troubles, because it was followed by the war” (*Rhet.* 1401b).

The second example, faulty generalisation, entails a pseudo-inductive reasoning that uses one of the fundamental types of arguments identified by Aristotle, the example, considered typical of deliberative rhetoric and based on inductive inference, which in itself is one of the most frequently-used forms of reasoning on which much scientific research is based. In this case, however, it is unacceptable, because it draws a general rule from a single case, or from an inappropriate number of elements taken into consideration, so the conclusion claimed as general is in fact completely baseless – like, for example, if I were to claim that psychiatrists are inept and untrustworthy because I have known three of them and all three were terrible. This type of fallacious reasoning underlies prejudice and racism, as in the tragic case that occurred in Rome in 2007, when a Rom raped and killed an Italian woman, triggering a political and media campaign calling for the expulsion of Rom people, at least those who had recently immigrated. In this manner we sanction a principle of collective responsibility, in clear violation of one of the cornerstones of western civilisation, i.e. that responsibility is always personal, and if an individual commits a crime, he alone must answer for it, and not all those who pertain to his same ethnic group.

Also worthy of note is the discussion regarding the deceptive argumentative techniques of *ignoratio elenchi* and *petitio principii*. The first strategy consists of ignoring the question or the argumentation, attributing things to the adversary that are far removed from his actual opinion, or responding to an adversary’s criticism with an argument that is not pertinent. This argumentative technique is sometimes called a “red herring,” in reference to an old practice among hunters of using the odour of herring to pull their rivals’ dogs off the trail of the targeted prey. It fall within the sphere of what is known as distraction strategy, with which the speaker aims to shift

the audience's attention from the question at hand and the cogency of the reasoning expressed to elements that are irrelevant to the given context.

In the second strategy, the speaker introduces as a given in the premise of his argumentation the very thing he intends to demonstrate; in other words, something controversial is presented as if it were already settled and accepted. We have an example of this in Woody Allen's 1973 film *Love and War*, when a priest, justifying the existence of God, asserts that "It follows: God created the universe, then God exists." Or another, in which "a bank asks Mr. Smith to name a person who can guarantee for him; Smith names his friend Jones, and when the bank asks him for credentials on Jones' trustworthiness, he responds that he himself can guarantee for his friend" (Hamblin, 1970, p. 40). For Arnauld and Nicole, this means of argumentation is contrary to true reason, because in all reasoning, what serves as proof must be clearer and better known than what one wants to prove.

Petitio principii is not, in essence, an error of logic, since a declaration is always the logical consequence of itself. But it is an inadequate reasoning from the practical point of view, because by limiting itself to repeating what was already said in introducing the premise, it offers no informative contribution to the discussion (Rigotti, 2005). It may seem strange that the *petitio principii* is considered a fallacy of relevance, given that the conclusion is certainly relevant for the purposes of its reliability. But in this case we must distinguish between the act of enunciating a conclusion and the act of producing evidence relevant to the purposes of that conclusion, in the awareness that the former is not automatically equivalent to the latter.

Incorret use of words

Another manipulative technique (in the negative sense of the term) on which the authors of the *Logique* focus – in this case shifting their attention from *inventio* to *elocutio* – is the abuse of words that concerns all of those instances in which the speaker uses a word, changing its meaning based on expediency, but the listeners are unaware of this change; or, as in the case of euphemism (Prato, 2019), speaks of ignominious acts without portraying their horror, but rather depicting them as more pleasant than nefarious. Hence, in contemporary political language, systemic bombardments of villages are defined as "peacemaking operations," the destruction of cultivated fields and the forced relocation of villagers are called "border corrections," and the indiscriminate killing of civilians is called "elimination of unreliable elements" (Orwell, 1946, p. 179).

This propaganda operation is possible because, beyond the main idea considered to be their proper meaning, words also present other ideas that can be defined as supplementary, to which we often pay no attention, even though a listener's response may be greatly influenced by them. Some of these ancillary ideas are attached to words based on widespread, consolidated use, while others are linked to words solely by the individual act of someone who exploits them. This second category, which gives

rise to “dishonest words,” is the one that can cause damage, because it serves an exclusively subjective purpose that does not respect the preconditions for the establishment of signs. The question of the incorrect and mendacious use of words was very important for Arnauld and Nicole, who shared a belief in the principle expressed in Cicero’s *De oratore*, according to which if one speaks well, one also thinks well (Manetti, 1987, p. 202).

The theme is of great interest because deceitful manipulation inevitably leads to disinformation: playing with words, we can manipulate facts and, at the end of the chain, collective memory as a whole. The negative consequences of the distorted use of language are significant, given its bearing on the possibility of both the free circulation of ideas and the promotion of social communication. Systems of power have always needed to control the use of words and their distribution within instruments of information in order to attain control over opinions and orient them in the desired direction. Journalistic communication has often appropriated this need, in many cases becoming a prisoner of the language of power, to the point that its style has become increasingly similar to that of governing figures, and editorials, both in the printed press and in television formats, often sound like political speeches.

We can take an example from the annals of Italian political-judicial news: the case of attorney Mackenzie Donald David Mills, dealt with by the Court of Cassation in February 2010. Mills, who managed numerous foreign companies within the Fininvest group, had been accused of the very serious crime of judicial corruption in complicity with Silvio Berlusconi: the ex-premier was said to have bribed Mills with a payment of 600 thousand dollars to silence his testimony in the All Iberian and Italian Finance Police kickbacks trials in which he was an indicted figure. The court confirmed the prosecution’s argument, holding the English attorney responsible for the crime of corruption, and sentenced him in the initial trial and at the appeal to four years and six months in prison. In February 2010, the Court of Cassation confirmed the existence of the crime, but declared it statute-barred. News reports at the time, both in the press and the most-watched television newscasts, repeatedly stated that Mills had been acquitted and that his acquittal meant that Berlusconi would no longer have to present himself in court to defend himself, given that if there is no corrupted person, there can be no corrupter either. Clearly, there was deceptive manipulation of the language used to report the events, which considered the two terms “acquittal” and “statute-barred” as if they were interchangeable, when in fact the only thing they have in common is that the accused is not punished in the end, while they are radically different in every other way. An acquittal recognises that the person did not commit the crime, while in a statute-barred case, the existence of the crime is certain, but the time within which the punishment could be applied has lapsed, as it is maintained that after a significant length of time has passed, the State no longer has an interest in punishing that specific act. In other words, the statute of limitations implies as a logical and juridical premise that the crime involving both corrupted and corrupter does exist. This illicit use of the word “acquittal” gives rise to an untruthful narration

that aims to manipulate and falsify news – and ultimately history - , exploiting communications' capacity to create what we call reality (Watzlawick, 1976, p. 7).

So, the narration of events is never a neutral operation: depending on the words we use to construct it, we can elicit very different reactions from a part of our target audience, as is demonstrated by Loftus' 1979 research. In the experiment in question, a group of people was first shown a film of an automobile accident, and then divided into two groups; the first group was asked at what speed the cars were traveling when they "collided," while the second was asked at what speed the cars were traveling when they "smashed". The second group indicated a speed far faster than that reported by the first group. Later, the same participants were asked if they had noticed broken glass at the scene of the accident (there was none visible in the film), and twice the percentage of the second group, as opposed to the first group, indicated that they had. Thus, the use of these two different words in formulating the question stimulated different memories.

Language and reason in Locke

It was natural – and even foreseeable – that the *Logique's* ideas on incorrect reasoning would be welcomed and echoed in the linguistic philosophy of the Enlightenment and modern liberalism, particularly in Locke, one of the most emblematic authors of this line of inquiry. His *Essay on human understanding* (1690) is not only a key text in the debate on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs that distinguished Enlightenment philosophy¹, but also has the merit of having revisited and enriched the theory of argumentative fallacies. Reprising the central ideas of Aristotelian rhetoric, Locke identified other types of fallacies that later found widespread recognition in the critical literature: *ad hominem*, *ad verecundiam* and *ad ignorantiam* arguments, which fall into the category of informal fallacies of relevance because the premises of their syllogism present elements that prove to be irrelevant to justifying their conclusion.

Argumentum ad hominem makes reference to the character or qualities of a person - or the category to which a person belongs - to discredit that person's argument: we refute George's claim that the use of seatbelts is necessary by saying that George is a hypocrite and an adroit liar, ignoring the fact that what George says may be valid regardless of what we think of him. *Argumentum ad hominem* can also take the form of the *tu quoque* when, to demolish an opponent's argument, we underscore the fact that what he says is in contradiction with his own behaviour, or with the circumstances in which he finds himself: we contest Paul's assertion that smoking is bad for one's health by noting that he himself is a smoker. This is an incorrect strategy, because the fact that Paul does not "practice what he preaches" is not in itself a pertinent reason to deny the soundness of his argument.

¹ On Locke's theory of language and its centrality to Enlightenment linguistic philosophy see esp. Formigari (1988) and Yolton (1985).

The flip side of *ad hominem* reasoning is *ad verecundiam* argumentation: the expression means “(appealing) to modesty”, and exploits the common, widespread fear of questioning a source considered important and authoritative. The speaker who uses this type of fallacy aims to pressure the listener by asserting the validity of his or her argument solely by referring to what a powerful or influential person, like the Pope or the President, has said, e.g. when one maintains that embryos are already living beings, with no technical proof, accepting the view based solely on the Church’s prestige and authority. Schopenhauer (1830-31, p. 37) considered this argumentative strategy to be one of the most commonly used to win a dispute, given its capacity to inhibit the listener’s critical judgment. Its efficacy is demonstrated by the fact that speakers often go as far as to falsify or invent an argument from an authoritative source when one is not already available, confident that listeners will not have or take the opportunity to verify what they say. Again in this case, the elements brought into the discussion are not pertinent; rather than being used to discredit the adversary’s argument, as in *ad hominem* fallacy, they reinforce the idea that an argument is valid solely because it is recognized as such by a certain tradition, social custom or source considered important. The strategy thus breaks one of the fundamental rules of free discussion and debate, i.e. respect for one’s opponent and the admissibility of different points of view; attention is once again shifted from the soundness of the reasoning to elements extraneous to the argument. And we should be aware of the consequences of such methods: the balance between *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* on which Aristotle based the validity of deliberative speech (*Rhet.* 1358a, 1355a) is radically compromised, as is its quality, because the argument tends increasingly to slide towards forms of dogmatic reasoning.

Lack of consideration and respect for one’s opponent is also an element of the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy, which entails asserting that the adversary should accept the proposed argument if he is unable to counter it with another valid one, putting the onus of proof on him. Hence, if there is no definitive proof in favour of a given argument, one concludes that the argument is false, or vice-versa. Here again, the conclusion is illegitimate, because it does not follow from the premise, as, for example, when one asserts that if we have no certain proof that GMOs are harmful to health and to the environment, we can thus maintain that they are not harmful. This approach was opportunely defined as *dogmatismo ad ignorantiam*, since rather than seeking proof to justify our conclusions, or otherwise deferring judgment, we defend the argument *a priori*.

In addition to these fallacies of relevance identified by Locke, we have another that bears the name *argumentum ad populum*: in this case, the truth or falseness of an argument is held to be confirmed not by the fact that an authoritative individual or institution has made it – as in *ad verecundiam* fallacy –, but that an immense group of people believe it to be so, without considering that the truthfulness of a statement does not depend in the slightest on who or how many people believe it. For example, when the more conservative side of the political class maintains that the Fascists must

have achieved some positive results given the widespread consensus they attained among the populace at the time, they make precisely this type of error: the non-validity of the inference is proven by the fact that the conclusion can be false even if the premise remains true.

Locke was also well aware of the problem of the deliberate misconstruction of language found in cases of opaqueness or intentional incorrectness: grandiloquent words like “grace,” “glory” and “wisdom” are used without any connection to determined ideas, or – particularly in debates over controversial subjects – the same words (generally the most important ones, those that buttress the entire line of argumentation) are used once for a particular order of ideas, and other times with a completely different meaning.

Conclusion

The negative consequences of the distorted use of language are significant, given that they make the free circulation of ideas and the promotion of social communications impossible. Locke and the Port-Royal authors thus felt the need to suggest a normalising ideal to regulate our debate and discussion, one that could on one hand introduce procedures of control into parliamentary debate and public speech, and on the other, stimulate the general public to use critical thinking, reawakening our capacity to reason and reflect without biases or erroneous knee-jerk reactions. They understood the educational value of critical thinking, the only thing that makes man capable of mindfully using that most powerful epistemological and political tool: language. We should therefore continue the research that they thought was so important.

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