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Multiple Fallacy Disorder – Equivocations in Theological Arguments by Ara 13

Atheists are usually quite aware of the straw man fallacies perpetrated when being likened to anarchists, nihilists, or common amoral thugs; but recently theists have been using a subtler error of reasoning in support of their position – a combination of two prominent fallacies of logic: tu quoque and equivocation.

Arguments which unabashedly attack the person can be clear in their misdirection, like with the ad hominem abusive, in which a person may retort, "What do you know; you are stupid." The arguer misdirects the argument from the strength of another's words and confuses the issue with an attack on his opponent's character or such. Like the ad hominem, the tu quoque fallacy ignores the original argument and challenges the person's credibility, but in a more conspicuous way.

The tu quoque or "you too" argument, attacks the person by saying, "You have no right to challenge me because you have validated my position in the past yourself." It avoids the argument by implying its validity through the opponent's complicity. An example is when a kid tells his parents they have no right to ground him for sneaking out at night, drinking, etc., as they have done so themselves when they were kids. Though, most adults would respond, "and it was wrong of me then, too," later, they may lie in bed and contemplate the hypocrisy of their justice – a consequence of the tu quoque's toothy bite.

But the theist's tu quoque is not accusing atheists of committing acts that shouldn't be defended like staying out late drinking as a teenager. They are making tu quoque arguments, accusing atheists of having "faith" in reason and devoting themselves to the "religion" of science. Theists often argue that atheists are avoiding the terms "faith" and "religion" when it comes to the atheist's actions because it would give credence to the foundation of theism. Therefore, theists believe atheists are ignorantly avoiding the tu quoque argument. But here is the problem: the argument is faulty because the theist's tu quoque incorporates another fallacy of logic – equivocation.

An equivocation occurs when the conclusion of an argument relies on words which can be understood in more than one sense. A blatant example would be to say that the legislature creates "laws" and therefore can repeal the "law" of gravity. This is an obvious equivocation of the term "law" which in one sense is statutory and another is natural. They are in essence two different words. The fact that they are the same in origin, spelling and pronunciation is a linguistic choice not an unequivocal axiom. It would be just as foolish to use "right" as in ethical and "right" as opposed to left, in any way other than a comical sense. This juxtaposition is the foundation for puns. For example: Is it "right" that she yelled at me? No, it is left. (Groan here.) In fact, there is a whole series of lame jokes along this line relying on homonyms --

words with the same spelling and pronunciation but different meaning: What do you call a man with no arms and no legs in the water? – Bob, . . . on your wall – Art, etc. (If you think these are bad, you'll hate Oscar Wilde's decision to name his play "The Importance of Being Earnest.")

One can even go so far as to pun homophones (same pronunciation but different spelling and meaning), as in: why do they call them nuns? Because they get none. Or: You can tune a piano but you can't tuna fish.

Yet, equivocating homophones or homonyms and not meaning to be humorous, results in miscommunication. In English, there are notorious homophones that trip up new grammarians like "its and it's, brake and break, new and knew, site and cite and sight; but few would make the argument that the words can be used interchangeably and expect discourse to be taken seriously.

Another group of words are homographs – words with the same spelling but different meanings and pronunciations, like "bass" fish and "bass" guitar, in the "lead" and "lead" bullet, "dove" of peace and "dove" into the water. We can even see that though many homographs are not related in meaning, some are and begin to blur their distinctions like with "live" it up at a "live" concert. We can see gradient relations. And as the meanings get more similar, even a different spelling and pronunciation doesn't protect users from confusion, like with "lie, lay" and "affect, effect."

The problem with theological equivocations is they not only have the confusion caused by kinship of meaning, they are spelled and pronounced the same as well. The only difference between the two terms is a semantic shift which varies upon environment of application. An example would be, "It's not 'right' for you to lie to me because the Constitution protects my 'rights.' One use of "right" is in a legal sense and the other is in an ethical or cultural sense. The ambiguity happens because the legal sense likely came about due to the cultural understanding of rights. The words are closely related, but one can still see they make a departure when used with precision. There is certainly a distinct difference between the two as there was with my earlier example of "laws." These type of words are called polysemes. They are nearly identical excepting a semantic shift, as in the legal verses ethical denotations of "right." The problem with theological arguments is that the arguers aren't using the precision associated with an applied field (like science or law) that atheists often adhere to when distinguishing between polysemic definitions.

Case in point is the term "theory." IDers use the tu quoque as an equivocation ponsi pit when they switch competent scientists' precision term and all the requisites for "theory" with the more conversationally casual term synonymous with "supposition" or general "idea." When the scientific community claims a "theory," they are not simply saying, "Chew on this idea for a moment."

Imagine turning the tables and using the IDer's argument against them:

I have a "theory:" all Intelligent Designers are child molesters. The logical response would be to refute my use of the word "theory" on the grounds that it doesn't meet the scientific criteria for rating such a specific term and stopping me from baiting and switching with an equivocation. But in doing so, IDers would have to rely on the same refutation that makes their bid as a scientific concept worthless. To adhere to the conceptual rigors of the term "theory" would truly negate my own "theory" about the IDers and their propensity toward indecent acts with children, but it would also make futile the IDer's bid for acceptance in the scientific community as their own polysemic "theory" has not stood before peer review (and cannot which on its face should disqualify it as science). Hence, any complaint about my lax criteria for meriting such a precision term would be an acknowledgement of the propensity for "theory" to be equivocated. My guess is IDers will not refute my "theory" claiming equivocation.

The alternative for the IDers is to accept my (concedingly) hasty "theory" as a viable scientific probability and spend precious man-hours, money and resources (like hairs as yet

pulled from their head in frustration) refuting it, along with any other whimsical declaration I may make about their proclivities. In short, they should give my words credence just because I put them in print.

But while they toil fighting my paper tiger, they should also have to fight the accusation suggested of my "theory" on the political and judicial front as well. Before reason prevails, the IDers should have to appear in front of a host of committees (preferably comprised of non-subject-matter experts, but rather those representing specific communal agendas) and courts to refute my capricious allegation made legitimate due to the foresighted wording of myself, having made full use of the equivocation of "theory" as a scientific bedrock and "theory" as a casual conversational term.

Hopefully, by the time the IDers win their case (and I hope they do, because it would be all too disheartening to learn that there is genuine credence to IDers being child molesters), maybe by then, the competent scientists, after having observed things like viral adaptation and studied stem cells, will be left uninterrupted long enough to cure AIDS, cancer, Parkinson's or something stupid like that.

After this short ad absurdum example, it is easy to see the chaos of ignoring blatant equivocations. But as stated earlier, the problem arises as the equivocation becomes subtler. First, one must acknowledge the existence of degrees of equivocation as displayed earlier with examples from homophones to finer bait-and-switch polysemes like "theory." But now, let's examine equally subtle terms, such as "religion" and "faith."

An example of a discussion with a theologically minded person would begin with them asking if one "believed" in science. Immediately, the atheist's cackles are raised waiting for the tu quoque argument of, "Well, since you have a 'belief' in science why can't I have a 'belief' in God?" The equivocation is evident to the atheist, for again, their concept of "belief" is more precise than the theists. The atheist uses "belief" in God as one "in lieu of evidence." But "belief" in science is an equivocation he would never make, for science is grounded in evidence. One might as well ask him if he has "belief" in evidence; which is exactly the next step theists make. They ask how one knows their senses are accurate. To believe that one can accurately siphon through material information is to have "faith" in one's senses. Isn't it?

But the term "faith" is being used equivocally. The atheist uses "faith" as the non-proof belief-system often employed when defending a religion. To have "faith" in one's senses is to suggest one can acknowledge his senses outside the purview of reality.

Relying on sensory data is the exact opposite of a belief system "in lieu of proof." The proofs are accumulated with the senses. One must assume reality before using it as proofs for anything. This is why Ayn Rand calls reality or existence axiomatic. Without an assumption in the validity or reality, there would be no way to verify anything. To nihilistically deny reality is naïve, for that would in turn cause one to deny simple things like eating and avoiding falling from great heights. (Try living on a diet of rocks if you disbelieve me.) It is true that on a quantum level reality gets trickier to understand, but this does not negate the knowability of reality, for we all must concede that one needs to eat and not fall off of cliffs in order to survive, as well as make other cause and effect generalizations. And once one uses their sensory data,

they are taking strides away from "faith." Want proof? Imagine using your powers of sight to see God. Now, God is of this reality and subject to verification – the tools of proofs, i.e. sense of sight. Once one sees him, they no longer need "faith." The proof cancels it out. That's why the necessary "Leap of Faith," in religion. It is contrary to proofs. Hence, "faith" and proof are antonyms. (Which, by the way, makes futile any theistic attempt at proving God and retaining credence in the doctrine of "faith.")

One can pick the bone even finer by suggesting that one's senses can be impaired (psychosis) or fooled (dream state or some "The Matrix"-like alternative reality.) Does this mean that those of us who choose to think this reality is the wake state and we are unimpaired

thinkers are also taking a "leap of faith?" Again, no. We are using whatever information we can collect by our senses to make a determination about our existence. Whether we are fooled or not is irrelevant. Our ambition is to use sensory data as proofs and acknowledge lack of contrary sensory data as less probable. Being in error does not thrust one into the realm of "faith," rather faulty proofs which are often prone to be replaced by legitimate ones as more information is collected, like when one wakes up or acknowledges a relativity of position to observable phenomenon; thus only deferring Rand's axiomatic reality not negating it.

(One can take this discussion into a deterministic arena, but that tangent is best for another discussion.)

Inversely, if the senses are the tools for accruing proofs, one begs the question as to the tools for accruing "faith." It's a good question. It is also why so much effort is given toward the mind/body dichotomy or a self other than the material; and due to this ambiguity, it is a fountainhead for further equivocative terms such as "soul" and "spirit;" and for irrational concepts that attempt to bridge the gap between the conceptual term and fabricated pseudo-material one – as with "miracle." "Miracles" are false bridges attempting to obfuscate the realization of an equivocation between words that use sense data and those that do not. A "miracle" is self-contradicting in that it is an event that occurs in reality as proof against the natural cause-and-effect sequence. And because "miracles" take place in reality, they should be contrary to "faith," for again, experiencing the "miracle" of a burning bush and a conversation with God (how one would prove it legitimate, I don't know) is to no longer need "faith" in God. One has proof. Hence, the "miracle" bridges conceptually one from proofs to "faith" by being neither and both. Confused? You should be. (Incidentally, theists aren't the only ones to get muddled in equivocations, as science has enough ambiguity with terms like "ideas" and "consciousness." Surely, a future understanding as to the origins and existence of these concepts will begin with absolving any equivocations so that we are all talking about and looking for the same thing.)

Understanding the precision term "faith," one can appreciate the equivocation in a statement like, "Do you have 'faith' that a certain big-league pitcher will get the save?" Here, "faith" can be diluted depending on the amount of reliance one makes on evidence. If the pitcher has a great track record, then in essence, it takes little "faith" to "believe" in his ability – for it has been tested and the likelihood of success is revealed by the history along with any other mitigating or supportive factors – i.e. his present health, who he is facing at bat, etc. To have "faith" would be to assess the data and then declare contrary to their suggestive probabilities. To root for the unlikely or never-as-of-yet, takes "faith." To rely on likelihood is not "faith;" it's pragmatism; it's a scientific declaration based on evidence. One can be wrong, but he chances that in accordance with the probabilities. Hence, it currently takes more "faith" to be a fan of the Chicago Cubs than the New York Yankees. It also takes a degree of "faith" to

invest in a start-up.com company or to buy a non-returnable wedding present in Hollywood.

There is no doubt that "faith" can be fun. It's nice to root for the underdog; but when the big money is on the line, the bookies are hoping fans will do just that, bet with their hearts and not their heads. That's why casinos do so well: People retain their "faith" in lieu of the odds.

So again, "faith" in science is contradicting. And a version of "faith" that incorporates a track record or any other sensory data is an equivocation of the specific "faith" meaning "a conviction in lieu of proof," commensurate with the "leap of faith" and switching it with a conversational "faith" diluted with degrees of evidence and part-time attention to probabilities. When one bandies "faith" casually, he is really asking, "Are you going to stick with your understanding of the odds on this one?" Fortunately for science, the odds are greatly in their favor for explaining natural phenomena compared to attempts by whimsical fantasy. Additionally, to compare science to a "religion" is one of the more common, yet easier equivocations to refute. To claim that one pursues science "religiously" is to equivocally use

the term in a loose social sense and pretend it too applies in a technical sense. Again, demands toward linguistic precision make the fallacy apparent. One can use the adverb "religiously" to mean "diligently," "avid," "conscientiously" or even simply "often," as in one watches the Denver Broncos "religiously" or one washes their hands "religiously." It is a metaphor for comparing the attention one gives to a subject to the often single-minded devotion one gives to the Torah or to God, etc. To choose another synonym and say scientists perform science diligently or with devotion to their work would be void of the theists' derision, as it avoids the metaphoric analogy to "religion."

In turn, atheist use the term "religion" when speaking of Christianity or Buddhism, etc. in a non-metaphoric sense, avoiding slipping in and out of an equivocation. They acknowledge here that "religion" is being used not as a synonym for diligent behavior, but as a technical linguistic term centering on supernatural beings, otherworldliness and ritualistic behavior (not to be confused with repetitive behavior which can be ritualistic). Surely, it is evident that scientists don't practice paying homage to these concepts as per their field (though they can choose to do so outside of the field of science), as considering supernatural attributes to natural phenomenon is self-contradicting and negates purpose. Again, the tools of science are the senses which operate in reality, making the field the antithesis of other-than-reality pursuits.

Lastly, when atheists occasion to use the term "God" with respect to a conceptual supernatural being, they are doing so aware of the semantic shift between the precision term and the metaphoric. When on the verge of ecstasy (I'm sure you can think of an example), an atheist may yell, "Oh my 'God!'" but he is using "God" as an emphatic metaphor, just as if he said "Oh shit," without any intention of actually incorporating scatology into their lovemaking. In short, atheists can understand God as a concept and use it as a metaphor without being a hypocrite just as one doesn't need to be on death row to confess to a "killer serve," or have all their affairs in order before eating "death by chocolate." One of the great privileges of being an atheist is that words are not taboo; they just have denotative and connotative qualities, the intricacies, when respected, allow one to navigate beautifully in the world of subject-matter experts.