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Getting Personal

Fallacy Number Three

AD HOMINEM

THE CLASSIC example of this fallacy is a scene in a British court of law. As the attorney for the defense takes the floor, his partner hands him a note: "No case. Abuse the plaintiff's attorney."

If you can't shake the argument, abuse the person who advances it, and so discredit it through the back door. Go from facing the issue, which jurists call *ad rem*, to the man, *ad hominem*.

A story is told about Lincoln as a young lawyer.[1] In one of his first jury cases, he showed his political shrewdness by an adroit and quite non-malicious use of *ad hominem*. His opponent was an experienced trial lawyer, who also had most of the fine legal points on his side. The day was warm and Lincoln slumped in his chair as the case went against him. When the orator took off his coat and vest, however, Lincoln sat up with a gleam in his eye. His opponent was wearing one of the new city-slicker shirts of the 1840's, which buttoned up the back.

Lincoln knew the reactions of frontiersmen, who made up the jury. When his turn came, his plea was brief: "Gentlemen of the jury, because I have justice on my side, I am sure you

[1] Mary Alkus in *Coronet*, September, 1953.

will not be influenced by this gentleman's pretended knowledge of the law. Why, he doesn't even know which side of his shirt should be in front!"

Lincoln's ad hominem is said to have won the case.

This fallacy, like over-generalizing, has been around for a long time. The Sophists must have used it freely, and I suspect it goes back to the dawn of the race.

First cave man: "Heard the latest on old man Fist Ax? He's putting feathers on his arrows. Says they go straighter."

Second cave man: "Forget it. Nobody who's such a wife-stealer could come up with a decent idea."

Not every personal attack, however, can be classed as faulty logic. When the scandal of Grover Cleveland's illegitimate son was used against him in the presidential campaign, the argument had some point. Did Americans want a President of such a character? (The sovereign voters decided that his virtues overrode his defects.) If, however, Cleveland's enemies had introduced the natural son as an argument against his tariff policy, then a true *ad hominem* would appear. In the first case, Cleveland himself was the issue; in the second the tariff was the issue. When a man is running for office, or being chosen for any position in government or elsewhere, his personal behavior is always relevant. A corporation would naturally hesitate to hire as treasurer a man who had been convicted of embezzlement.

The health of President Eisenhower was an important consideration in the nominations of 1956. Was he well enough to serve out another four years in the toughest job in the world? Similarly with Franklin Roosevelt in 1944. But when the enemies of Roosevelt charged that a given government policy was wrong because it had originated with "that cripple in the White House," they were practicing a particularly vicious kind of *ad hominem*.

IF THE PREMISES ARE SUFFICIENT

"If the premises are sufficient," said Morris R. Cohen, "they are so no matter by whom stated." A person's unreliable character may weaken his credibility as a witness when reporting what he himself has observed. But in an objective argument his character, and even his motives, should be ignored.

Cohen cites a number of examples. When an attempt was made to refute Spinoza's views on the nature of matter because he had renounced Judaism, lived alone, and was considered queer, we have a pure case of *ad hominem*. Galileo's theory of the tides was independent of his motives in advancing it. The peccadillos of Gauss as a young man had nothing to do with the validity of his proof that every equation has a root. "The evidences for a physical theory are in the physical facts relevant to it, and not in the personal motives which led anyone to take an interest in such questions."

The theory of evolution developed by Darwin and Huxley a century ago demonstrated, among other things, that the biblical date of creation, 4004 B.C., as worked out by Bishop Usher, was too recent. The world was a good deal older than that. Not thousands but millions of years were needed to evolve the various species we know today. Many religious people were shocked, among them Bishop Wilberforce. In a famous public debate he asked Huxley with suitable irony: "Are you descended from a monkey on your mother's side or on your father's?"

The *ad hominem* of course brought down the house. The worthy bishop evaded the scientific issue by resorting to a wise-crack about Huxley's family tree. In the 1860's this seemed the height of wit and wisdom. Today it sounds remarkably silly.

ARE YOU A TECHNOCRAT?

Some years ago I was asked by a committee of citizens to testify in a legal action in a nearby Connecticut city. I had recently made a study of population trends in the U.S., and the committee wanted me to apply the formulas to forecast the growth of the city. The legal case concerned a new private reservoir for the municipal water supply. I presented a careful report, with a number of charts and tables, and when I finished the lawyer for the other side began his cross-examination by questioning my figures. This was right and proper. Finding no serious discrepancies there, he shuffled his notes, took a step in my direction, looked me sternly in the eye, and demanded: "Mr. Chase, were you ever a Technocrat?"

Though this had no connection with the future population of western Connecticut, I saw that it was intended to discredit me as an expert witness. (Today, of course, he would have asked me if I had ever belonged to any organization on the Attorney General's list.) Technocrats were then popularly supposed to be crackpots, incapable of giving reliable figures. I looked him back in the eye and said that I had never been a Technocrat. At the height of the craze, I said, I had written a pamphlet about Technocracy, containing several severe criticisms. If learned counsel would like to see a copy, I said, I could probably find one in my files.

That was the end of that; I had managed to counter the *ad hominem*. Many other witnesses in recent years have not been so fortunate.

Moving to a broader political level, we recall the attacks on Dean Acheson during his last year as Secretary of State. Any policy or proposal of his, or of his department, was denounced as the height of folly, if not worse, by many citizens, led by the majority of the nation's newspapers. Some of

Acheson's proposals were excellent, some not, but the critics did not look at the proposals. They looked only at the man who sponsored them. By temporarily discrediting the man, they effectively weakened and confused the foreign policy of the United States. Any top politician runs this risk; it may await the present Secretary.

"POISONING THE WELL"

Another name for the *ad hominem* fallacy is "poisoning the well." In recent years, the poison has been applied to books, paintings, works of art, in the great Communist spy hunt here in America. The hunters did not open the books or inspect the paintings; enough that they were the work of somebody who had been accused by somebody of being soft toward Communism. Thus *The Thin Man*, an excellent detective story, was forced off the shelves of libraries maintained by the State Department overseas, because its author had plead the Fifth Amendment before a Congressional Committee. The same book, word for word, written by an author not involved with the Committee would not have been censored, for it had no political implications.

This kind of censorship became so common at one time that it received the special name "book-burning." President Eisenhower assailed the book-burners in a forthright speech at Dartmouth College. Any book by an author who had ever been charged with subversive ideas — or indeed with having any ideas at all — was likely to be hidden under the counter, or thrown out altogether.

An official censor in Memphis, Tennessee, forbade the showing of an ancient film by Charlie Chaplin, a satire on Carmen. The censor threatened to send the police if it was exhibited at the First Unitarian Church as advertised. Chaplin was then under a loyalty cloud, but not *Carmen*. The church called off the public showing as ordered, but a private showing was

staged before the church trustees, who of course could find nothing subversive in *Carmen*. So the Rev. Richard Gibbs, pastor of the church, exhibited the film to the public at the next regular meeting, saying: "We feel that a principle is at stake here, whether a group of mature people shall be told what is morally fit for them to be associated with in their church life."

In 1956 the Museum of Fine Arts in Dallas undertook to exhibit "Sport in Art," a series of paintings by celebrated artists, collected by *Sports Illustrated*. The Dallas County Patriotic Council attacked the exhibit, saying that four of the artists had once been members of so-called Communist front groups. The Council said that art is used by Communists to "brainwash and create public attitudes that are soft toward Communism." The four paintings at issue showed, respectively, a winter scene, a baseball game, an elderly fisherman, and a group of skaters. It is pleasant to report that the trustees of the Art Museum supported their right to exhibit the paintings, and denounced the Patriotic Council's intervention. The *New York Times* said editorially, on May 27, 1956: "The Dallas Museum permitted the pictures to be shown without, so far as we can tell, creating a single new Communist vote in Dallas County."

IN REVERSE

Senator Wayne Morse provides us with a case from the other side of the fence. When the Senate was considering the funds for various investigating committees, the Senator was bombarded with telegrams and long-distance telephone calls from liberals, urging him to vote against the appropriations. Why? Because of the record of the men who headed the committees. "They wanted me to assume," said Morse, "that the appropriations would be misspent. . . . I resented this because these people were dealing in *ad hominem* attacks."

Senator Morse did not approve of the tactics of certain com-

mittee chairmen any more than did the telegram writers, but he saw the real issue far more clearly. The real issue was the power of the Senate to investigate, not the character of the men who, from time to time, depending on the party in power, and on seniority, might chair the committees.

Ad hominem is used by liberals as well as conservatives, and is likely to be used by anyone who wants to put over a fast argument, or save himself the mental effort of examining a given issue. We have all heard the complaint that Smith's ideas for the new high school cannot be any good because Smith never got a degree. So we need spend no time studying his plan. We all know the father who laughs off his young son's explanation why the family car coughs like a wounded gorilla. The idea must be worthless, the father thinks, because Junior is still so very junior — he never picks up his things. But Junior, like thousands of American boys, may have such a passion for internal-combustion engines that he understands their various indispositions — and this is the real issue.

Once grasped, *ad hominem* is easy to identify — in oneself as well as in others. Presently we find it snarling up radio discussion programs, news stories, editorials, political speeches — especially political speeches. Is the speaker sticking to the issue or is he attacking the character of somebody who defends the issue? Because most of us tend to think more in terms of personalities than of issues, *ad hominem* is often very tempting. But, like Ulysses, we must resist the siren call.

In the prologue to *Fanny's First Play*, Bernard Shaw presents a drama critic who, after a private showing, complains that the playwright's name has been withheld. "How can I tell whether it's a good play," he demands, "unless I know who wrote it?"