

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Bad Reasoning, Good Humor



This paper focuses on the rhetorical-hermeneutical aspects of production and understanding of a text containing fallacies generating humor. My emphasis is on deceptive or misleading discourses as a means of creating witty remarks. Humor certainly involves a mistake or deviation, a vice or a flaw; but the error involved is not censurable or damaging, but harmless and good.

In working on the theme of that which is comical in rhetoric and about rhetoric, I noticed how the possible classifications of fallacies, that is to say forms of reasoning which despite being logically unacceptable appear to be persuasive and efficient, are similar or can be juxtaposed with the possible taxonomies of those mechanisms which generate humor. There are at least as many types of humor as there are bad arguments, that is fallacies. And perhaps it is no coincidence that for this very reason there is no satisfactory theory of fallacies, not even a satisfactory theory of humor.

The first sketches of a theory of humor used in conversation and of humor understood as wit (humor as it is used by an orator and humor as it is studied by a rhetorician) can be found in Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian.

Hilarity that sparks off a fallacy is not something to be ignored; the jibe, the jest, the comical element all have their use in disputes, because, as Gorgia rightly advised, “we should kill [or confound] our opponent’s seriousness with our ridicule and his ridicule with our seriousness” (Aristotle 1924: 1419b 3-5). In this same context Aristotle observes that “the majority of jests arise from metaphors and from being able to surprise through the use trickery” (Aristotle 1924: 1412a, 18-19). Such trickery can come about in three ways:

- with single words (words used with a different meaning from that which is expected, as in play on words, double meaning);
- with unexpected actions (surprising developments);
- with speeches which create an illusion which induces the belief in the reality of something which in fact does not exist (as in the case of what we call fallacies).

It is possible to distinguish three types of humor:

1. the humor added as something which “ornates” ideas,
2. the humor inherent in the theme considered and
3. the use of humor introduced in order to divert attention away from the argument.

Rhetoric is, as a matter of fact,

1. an art of ornate speech,
 2. an art of funny communication
- and
3. a science of persuasive communication.

Further support and sympathy for the ancient idea of solidarity between humor and fallacies can be found in Cicero: “Serious thoughts can also nearly always be drawn from the same source of laughter, of whatever kind it may be” (Cicero 1920: II, 248. See also: II, 216-219) and in Quintilian: “All loci offer proof of an equal opportunity [for jests].” (Quintilian 1949: VI, 3, 65).

The idea that all jests and jokes are, on close inspection, imitations of serious operations is given further support by Richard Whately: “Jests are fallacies ... palpable enough to fool no-one, but characterized by that similarity of argument needed, by contrast, to amuse There are different kinds of jokes and railleries which, as we will see, correspond to different kinds of fallacies.” (Whately 1975: ch. III, § 20; footnote on p. 202).

In short, as the austere Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked, “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes” because, in his words, “humor is no mood, but a world-view”. There is however no need for authoritative quotations to realise that fallacies can also be fun. A great deal of plays on words, of witty remarks and of humor in speech derives from deliberately misleading arguments.

1. The fallacy of humor

In the same way as Groucho’s jokes also infect the investigator of nightmare, Dylan Dog, similarly humor is appreciated even in a serious debate. But when it is used to divert attention and with the intention to mislead it can become a dangerous fallacy, because it is difficult to confute a relaxing smile or a laugh which involves you. At the very most, if one is strong and able, one can control its effects.

A famous example is the exchange of witty remarks between the bishop Samuel Wilberforce, a resolute opponent of Darwinism, and Thomas Huxley, a tireless

advocate of the theory of evolution (1860): “Is it through your grandfather or your grandmother that you claim your descent from a monkey?”

The prompt reply Huxley gave was: “I have no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for my ancestor. I should feel ashamed if my grandfather were a man like you, who, despite your learning, plays relevant scientific questions down by means of inopportune rhetoric and digressions.”

In creating controversy with a detailed project proposed by the American president Th. W. Wilson at the Paris peace conference (1919), Georges Clemenceau sarcastically cried: “Fourteen points, fourteen points! Why the Lord Almighty had only ten?”

Possible reply to the “why?”: Ten Commandments were enough for the Lord, for the very reason that he is omniscient as well as omnipotent. Clemenceau’s joke nevertheless leaves a mark, a sign of hilarity on the faces of those participating in the conference and the impression that Wilson came across as being pretentious and full of himself.

Humor is a weapon to use when in public. You enjoy the jest and forget the argument for a while, or even definitely. It is however important that the audience you are addressing is already well predisposed towards the person who makes use of such jests, otherwise you run the risk of having the witty remark interpreted as mockery and it could turn against you.

Moreover a sense of limit and of opportunity is important, a sense which comedians often lack, to stop the speakers from exploiting the clash between the seriousness of the argument and the lightness of tone as a sign of indifference and lack of care: “I don’t know to what extent his wit will be appreciated by those present” (protesters, rioters or dissenters). Those who wish to acquire the skill of this kind of fallacy can study the speeches of the slyest politicians.

The reply of a singer to a critic who asked her, in an insistent manner, to name a person she considered to be vulgar: “Sorry, what did you say your name was?” – The irrelevance here is more in the question of the interviewer than in the prompt reply of the person questioned. The first woman member of the English parliament, Nancy L. Astor, obtained this right also because of her ability to face diversionary moves with even better and fitting ones:

“My dear viscountess, what do you know about agriculture? How many toes has a pig?”

“If you want to know, take off your shoes and count them!”

A bystander is more impressed by this kind of reply than by any reasoned explanation.

Simple figures of speech, such as irony, can also stand for irrelevant humor. Napoleon the Third, who was ridiculed by Victor Hugo in the libel entitled *Napoléon le Petit* (1852), didn't reply with another libel, but with a simple: "Napoléon le Petit par Victor Hugo le Grand". Beneath the game of wit and words, we sense the presence of an argument that tends to minimise, through irony, Hugo's value and consequently the value of his libel. (see Reboul 1991: 138-39)

2. *The humor of fallacies*

I don't know whether there are practical textbooks by inventors of jokes, but no doubt there are techniques the most common of which are precisely those based upon an infraction of the rules of correct reasoning. Someone rightly said that which infuriates and makes a pure logician cry, makes a natural logician laugh. Firstly, words can be worked upon so as to exploit their natural ambiguity. For example: If aesthetics is the study of what is beautiful, anaesthetics must be the study of what is ugly.

This is the same phenomenon that gives rise to the formal fallacy known as "the four terms" or the informal one of ambiguity. Another method consists in inverting or overturning a link: "Why did you put your foot under mine?" - asked to the person whose foot has been trodden on.

Or a causal link can be pushed to the extreme:

"It's true that worries make you grow grey much quicker. I know someone who is so apprehensive that even his wig turned white." "She's so hopeless at gardening that even her silk flowers wilt."

Finally, pseudo-logical reasoning can be constructed, as in the following argument where a combination of sense and nonsense is obtained by associating a plausible finalistic explanation with an implausible definition.

"The desert: sand is laid on the ground so that the camel, an animal that is unstable on its legs, cannot acquire new humps when it falls."

"It has been ascertained that the elderly first begin to lose their memory and then their sexual desire. One thus concludes that an eighty-year-old can make love, but without recalling who he is making love to."

In order to examine how a taxonomy of fallacies can be used as a sketch for creating a joke, transgressing the etiquette of sound reasoning, let us introduce

an operational -didactic classification and distinguish between five kinds of fallacies:

I. Formal fallacies

II. Informal linguistic fallacies

III. Informal fallacies due to the omission of relevant elements

IV. Informal fallacies due to the intrusion of irrelevant elements

V. Informal fallacies due to unwarranted presuppositions.

I. Formal fallacies

Some reasonings seem like valid arguments, but in reality the consequential chain is interrupted or broken. Typical examples of fallacies which contain an error in their logical form consist in *affirming the consequent or denying the antecedent*.

The delightful joke of the novice logician is based on this kind of vice: the logician explains to a friend the meaning of logic by deriving, in the following order, from the fact of owning an aquarium, the love for fish, the love for the sea, the love for free, easy, naked women. The friend takes the consequential reasoning to heart and starts to have doubts concerning the sexual habits of a third friend who doesn't own an aquarium. Here humor arises from the incorrect use of a syllogistic concatenation distorted by the negation of the antecedent.

II. Informal linguistic fallacies

The generating mechanism of this kind of humor is quite simple: a term that has several meanings is used as though it had only one. Example:

Inflation has been arrested. The accomplices must be found. He is clearly ambitious and wants to go a long way. We can help him by giving him a transfer as far away as possible.

Another example of a fallacy of ambiguity associated to one of composition is the witty question and answer: "Why do white sheep eat more than black sheep?" "Because there are more white sheep than black ones." The answer is funny because in playing on the possibility of referring to all sheep as a whole instead of referring to one, the expectation of those who instinctively gives an interpretation in the latter sense is immediately deviated.

III. Informal fallacies due to the omission of relevant elements

"Daddy, Daddy, I don't want to go to Ireland! "

"Shut up and keep swimming".

Here the relevant information appears at the end. The technique used is known as "derailment": the sentence runs smoothly until we are unexpectedly informed that

father and son are swimming across the channel.

IV. Informal fallacies due to the intrusion of irrelevant elements

Examples:

A verbal agreement is not worth the paper it's written on. People think the tobacco business is easy. That all we do is use ads to create addicts. But what other industry could show a profit after killing 400.000 customers every year? (Wasserman)

V. Informal fallacies due to unwarranted presuppositions.

The guest, turning to the English baron who has just confessed to having only played polo once and to having found it boring, to having only watched a play once and to having found that boring too...: "I assume, baron, that you have an only child". This is a good example of analogical fallacy and of dry British humor.

Another example of the presence of fragile assumptions which tamper with the conclusion turning the implicit reasoning into something witty, is the rebuke that Gogol puts in the mouth of one of his characters in addressing a subject, a rebuke which could have easily been pronounced by an Italian judge of our day: "You steal too much for a functionary of your degree". The error and humor rest on the untenable parallel created between the professional hierarchy and the hierarchy of crimes.

Needless to say an error in our reasoning, a blunder, is not by itself sufficient to generate comical effects: $2 + 2 = 5$ makes no-one laugh; $0 + 0 = 8$ can make us smile when we realise that the two 0 symbols can be combined to form the number 8 by a gestalt switch. An error can become comical when it is really deviating, surprising, not common and flat -astonishment is the source of knowledge and surprise is the essence of humor - and secondly, not censurable or in any case harmless.

Everyone knows that laughter is a distinguishing mark of humanity; laughter is in the first place the distinguishing mark of rationality, insofar as it is a consequential reaction and an inferential logical elaboration, and secondly, insofar as it denotes behaviour that presupposes an act of creative reconstruction. As a matter of fact, in all reported cases of humor, the fallacy rooted in the reasoning must be appreciated if laughter is to be triggered off. This can only happen thanks to the creative integration that no machine and calculation can and will ever be able to perform. Inverting the title of a collection of jests of a philosophical nature, edited by John Allen Paulos (1985), *I think, therefore I*

laugh, we could equally and more aptly say: I laugh, therefore I think.

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