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The Art of Argument

Fallacy 2: Ad Hominem Circumstantial

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Ad Hominem Circumstantial

CHAPTER

1

DEFINITION: Arguments that try to discredit an opponent because of his background, affiliations, or self-interest in the matter at hand.

The *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy does not abuse the personal character of an opponent as the *ad hominem* abusive fallacy does. Instead, it criticizes something about the circumstances of an opponent—things such as the opponent's place of birth, educational background, job experience, family, friends, and the associations and organizations to which he belongs. For example, does it make sense to reject a person's argument because she is from the northern part of the country? Should we reject the argument of a person because he did not attend college or because he did attend college?

Consider the following examples of the *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy.

Example 1

You can't accept her argument against abortion—she is a Catholic and the Catholic Church opposes abortion.

Example 2

You can't accept his argument favoring legalized abortion—he is a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, which supports legalized abortion.

Example 3

That is a typical argument from someone who was raised in a wealthy family—of course you want to reduce taxes for the rich!

Example 4

He worked for thirty years as a prison guard—that's why he wants the government to build ten more prisons we can't afford.

Whether someone is a Catholic or a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, as in examples 1 and 2, should not be a cause for rejecting that person's argument about abortion. The argument itself needs to be heard and stand or fall on its own merits. Notice that in examples 3 and 4, the critic seems to think that the person whose argument is in question is seeking his own personal benefit. In other words, the man raised in a wealthy family is accused of making an argument to reduce taxes for the wealthy only because he and his wealthy family members would benefit from such a reduction. The prison guard seems to be accused of supporting the construction of more prisons only because it would benefit other prison guards such as himself. In these cases, we would do well to separate the argument from any benefits that may come to the person arguing. Simply because you are interested in, and will benefit from, the thing for which you argue does not automatically discredit your argument. These people may have strong arguments, so let's hear them.



Ad Hominem Circumstantial

Genus (general class): An argument to the source.

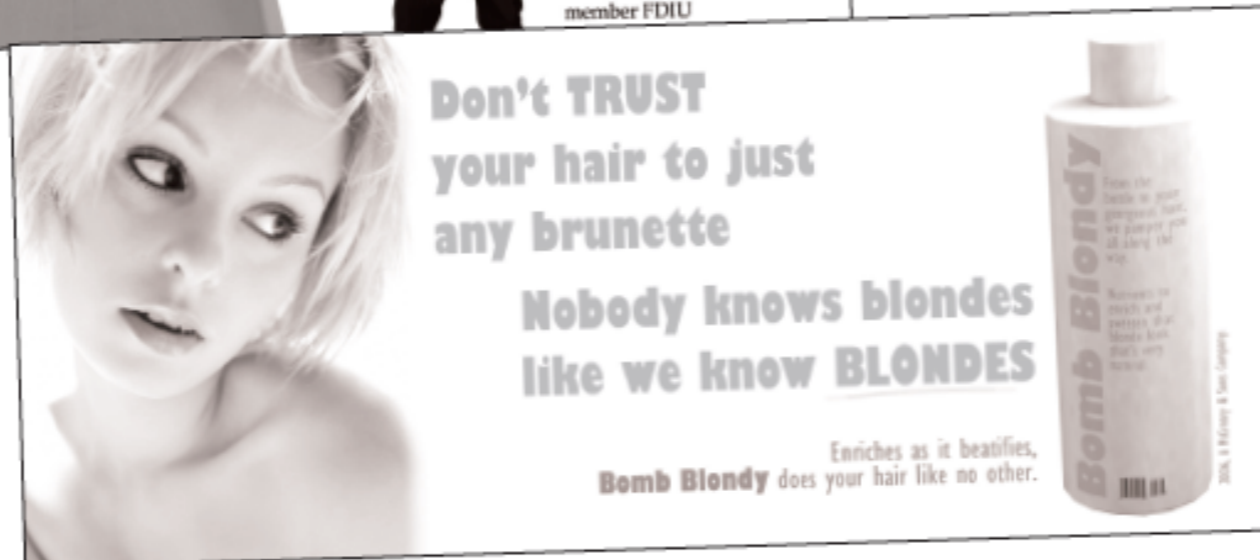
Difference (specific trait): An argument directed against the circumstances of the speaker's rival. (Not necessarily or obviously abusive.)

Ad Hominem Circumstantial

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Ad Fontem Arguments | Arguments that distract by focusing on the source of the argument rather than the issue itself.
(Arguments against the source)

Ad Hominem Circumstantial | *Ad hominem* arguments that try to discredit an opponent because of his situation.



Ad Hominem Circumstantial

A cell phone
designed by teens for teens.
Not made by the big companies your parents work at.

Hmmmm, let's put this phone
on a hinge of sorts. That way
when you stick it inside your
bookbag it won't dial the
CD store without you knowing it.
Oh, and maybe we should be
able to slap the phone shut when
the call is over. I like that!

Fill it with loads of games
MP3 files, instant
messaging, funky cool
ring tones (and not those
dorky one's that Betty
uses), also maybe put on it
something that will help
with homework.
Yeah, I like that!

The case should be hard.
That and well protected 'cause
when I'm shredding it up on my platter
I don't want to bust my new Horizontal
phone - no way! Good stuff!

How 'bout a
Scripting language
so that when school
gets lame I can
program my own games?!

Give me a display thing-a-ma-bob that
tells me who's calling so I can "forget"
to answer it when it's my Probation officer.

Dude, the camera thing rocks!
That way I can photograph the shirt I
want at the store and use it for santa's
wish list - especially when santa got
me that pink shirt last year, ack!



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Socrates: If you answered that the example was, indeed, committing a fallacy, you were right! This sort of approach is actually quite common in the public sphere. When listening to arguments relating to politics and policy, one frequently hears a speaker attempting to refute his opponent's argument on the grounds that his opponent has some sort of self-interest involved. This line of argument fails on more than one level.

First, it unfairly imputes motives to the person involved. Because of this, it fails as an explanation for why the person is making the argument that he is making. Remember that it is always a tricky business to judge someone else's motives because no one can judge the heart. After all, it could be that the military man involved has dedicated his life to the military precisely because he has always been convinced of its vital importance from the beginning. (Thus there could be a "common cause" for both his being in the military and his thinking that we need a larger one.)

Of course, even if his motives for wanting a larger military are entirely noble, it still doesn't necessarily follow that a larger one would be better. However, explaining the speaker's motives for advocating a course of action is never the main point of an argument at all! That's why these sort of arguments are so misplaced; even to allow ourselves to be drawn into the tricky quagmire of ascertaining someone else's motivations is allowing ourselves to be drawn into the wrong debate. The best response is to return to our old standard response to all fallacies of relevance: "true or not, it's irrelevant."

